# "All over again": Form, Subjectivity and Desire in Neil Bartlett's *Mr Clive & Mr Page*.

**"But in the fairy-tale world, what appear to be the personal choices of the characters are really the strategic choices of the storyteller, for within the tale the future is predestined." (WH Auden, Brothers & Others)**

**"Imagine if somebody read that" (Bartlett [1996],153)**

Rock Hudson never starred in a film directed by Alfred Hitchcock, but if he had, Neil Bartlett's *Mr Clive & Mr Page* (1996) would almost certainly have made some use of the historical coincidence. Bartlett's novel uses the 'case' of Rock Hudson to frame a narrative which is, among many other things, a fairy tale, of the unsanitised, pre-nineteenth century kind, laden with Hitchcockian significance, not least in the novel's overt allusion to *Rebecca*. The reader is spun a yarn which embraces, challenges and finally disorients conventional positionality, forcing a reconsideration of the import of the narrative which extends beyond the narrative's immediate frames into an intertextuality which adumbrates the novel's political interventions. The novel is one of a number of English novels of the eighties and nineties which explore, in order to critique and occasionally demolish, the persistence of historical vision which permeates ideologies of Englishness at the end of the twentieth century.[1] The 'fairy-tale' reactionary vision of England is insistently probed by Bartlett's novel, which, through the persona of its narrator, reveals the English social values and moralities of perseverance, endurance, respectability and reliability to be so many shams, so many ritualised

[1] See, for example, Graham Swift, *Last Orders* (1996), Julian Barnes, *England, England* (1998), Jonathon Coe, *What a Carve Up!* (1994), Meera Syal, *Anita and Me* (1996), AS Byatt's *Babel Tower* (1995). Steven Connor has examined some of these novels; see *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*.

displacements which conceal and evade a seething repressed anger and resentment, but the novel does more than serve as an outlet for repression. *Mr Clive & Mr Page* also offers a series of figurings of the psychic distortion that English cultural repressions create and perpetuate, in order to assert with varying degrees of directness, through the symbolisation which the narrative effects, that what Englishness represses returns, within the sanctioned identities and ideologies of Englishness, to haunt and, implicitly, subvert the conventions of English social decorum. That which is critiqued, in this novel, is precisely that which becomes reiterated - repeated - in that which it excludes, so that repetition becomes a structure through which identity is undermined. While the novel necessarily foregrounds its sexual politics, my reading will take this dimension as one aspect - the dominant one - of a wider, more extensive critique of the society which penalises certain sexual identities, including the ones represented in Bartlett's writing.

Neil Bartlett's novel comprises the narrations, delivered during a five-day Christmas break, of Mr Page, who tells us he is a Banking Clerk at Selfridges in London. He resides in a 'bachelor flat', alone and lonely, and recounts a sequence of events from 33 years earlier in 1922-3 concerning his meeting with a Mr Clive Vivian, wealthy resident of no 18 Brooke Street and, in all respects except his wealth, the living image of Mr Page. The narrative recounts Mr Page's visits to Mr Clive, the latter's house and in particular his young Latvian servant Gabriel, and the events that ensue, particularly a disastrous twenty-first birthday party at which Mr Clive announces his impending bankruptcy. Mr Page fantasises a passionate affair between Mr

Clive and Gabriel, the details of which comprise much of the novel, but this fantasy is eventually revealed to be the encryptment and evasion of a closer, more personal narrative of love, loss and death which took place two years prior to the narration of the novel. The narrative is interspersed with excerpts from memoirs, art history textbooks and newspaper cuttings which map out a cultural history and context to the events narrated by Mr Page, and which provide the parameters of the novel's meditation on the condition of being gay in the repressive climate of 1950s England.

## 1. Beginning (again).

Superficially drawing on the fireside Christmas "ghost" story genre, in which the "ghosts" are figures from thirty three years ago who return in dreams, *Mr Clive & Mr Page* is also clearly indebted to the Beckettian monologue addressing the absurdity of the masquerade of existence-as-ritualisation, and the tragicomic tension between the pseudo-Dickensian touches of Christmas sentimentality and the brutal self-exposure that the monologuist insists we must endure goes largely unrelieved for the duration of the novel. Instead of relief, the reader is offered extended contemplation which evolves through the relation of events and emotions into a monumental speech act, an act of confession which both seeks (and perhaps fails) to absolve the confessor even as it struggles (and perhaps succeeds) to construct grounds on which to indict an entire society. It is in this conflict the

first question that the novel poses emerges - in an act of confession-as-indictment on such a grand scale, where does one begin?

Mr Page, who narrates the bulk of the novel, is self-conscious about beginning his narration. “Does that sound like a proper first sentence?” (Bartlett [1996] p. 21 - all subsequent references by page number only), he asks (us) of his first sentence, which is in fact the third “beginning” of the novel. He follows this by offering two other first sentences, one of which - “He seemed at first sight quite an ordinary man” - is abandoned in the narrative’s first clear moment of refusal, and the second of which - “Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again” - provides the generic and ideological ground upon which Mr Page’s narration constructs itself (21). The opening of Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938) exemplifies precisely the ambiguity which Mr Page’s narration will go on to exploit to the full. Articulated by an unnamed narrator (Mr Page later confesses that this is not his real name), introducing a narrative of Gothic romance, class transgression and the insistent repressed of history (versions of which will resound in Mr Page’s narrative), and inaugurating a fundamental ambiguity which will constitute the driving tension of Mr Page’s narrative, “Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again” is, in Mr Page’s words, “exactly the sort of effect I should like to begin with” (21). In foregrounding the ambiguity between the return to Manderley, and the return of the dream about returning to Manderley, *Rebecca*’s opening sentence

affords for Mr Page an intertextual reference which will resonate throughout his narrative at a variety of levels.[2]

Manderley, the fairy-tale house so powerfully evoked in Du Maurier's novel and in Hitchcock's film of *Rebecca* (1940), finds its symbolisation in Bartlett's novel in no. 18 Brooke Street, the house which Mr Clive inhabits, a description of which opens the novel, and to which Mr Page's unconscious - and now his conscious, narrating self - repeatedly returns. Stojan Pelko, discussing Hitchcock's *Rebecca* as the enactment of a "game" of "deception", asserts that "the key dimension of the whole game is inscribed precisely through *repetition*".[3] In *Rebecca* every visit to Manderley is always already a return, because the unnamed narrator is structured into a narrative of repetition - of historical reiteration (she is the second wife of Maxim de Winter, the second mistress of Manderley) and of unconscious reworking (she is not Rebecca, but Rebecca *becomes* her life, and the name 'Rebecca' imposes itself on the gap left in the narrative by her lack of a name) - from which the only escape is though Gothic tragedy (burning down the house of patriarchal memory), into a future in which repetition is repressed into the unconscious of dreams, but revealed in the act of narration / recollection.

However, as Pelko argues, repetition in this case - as in all cases - is a repetition with some variation (the narrator is not Rebecca, Rebecca is not present in the novel / film) - a repetition with difference (Pelko cites the title of

[2] For a discussion of *Rebecca*, see Alison Light, *Forever England - Femininity and Conservatism between the Wars*, pp 177-181.
[3] Zizek (1994), p 110.

Deleuze's dissertation, *Difference et Repetition*[4]). If "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again" is, for Mr Page, the ideal opening - the dream opening - of a novel, it is because it has already been so, and his task as a narrator is to find an equivalent to, while at the same time reconstruct the "effect" ("That's exactly the sort of effect") of, Du Maurier's sentence. His narration achieves its effect through repeated repetition - the reiteration of Du Maurier's opening sentence, the triple opening of (Bartlett's) *Mr Clive & Mr Page*, the repetition of Mr Page's opening sentence ("The first time I ever went to number eighteen Brooke Street it was in the snow", stated twice on p21), the narrative is structured by the recurring dream Mr Page experiences (of which more below), and is as a whole an attempt to re-inscribe that which has already been experienced (as all narratives, in some way or other, are). Further repetitions include the doubling of Mr Clive and Mr Page, the doubling of the narrative itself in its using one level to mask another, the doubling of the addressee of the narrative as implied reader and as personification of the 'Law of the Father', the novel's emphasis on recurrent ritualised events like Christmas - it is clear that the novel is obsessed with the structure of repetition as a formal mode in which its themes can be symbolised and, perhaps, worked out. Of course, the psychic function of narrative in its insistence upon repetition is surely to compensate for the impossibility of repetition or the inevitability of difference, a compensation that is articulated in the lack (encoded as loss) experienced by the narrating / narrated subject. Mr Page, writing of his unnamed lover (who, we later learn, is dead), states: "I would like him to come back just for one more dinner" (113), and in this tacit

[4] Zizek (1994), p 111.

acknowledgement both of desire and of the impossibility of its satisfaction we can detect the motive for the significance of repetition as a structure in Mr Page's narrative. Repetition compensates in symbolic form for that which has been lost, and enacts in ritualised form the encounter with lack that constitutes the subject-in-desire. Similarly the "difference" which is made by such a novel, in its insistence upon repetition, demands to be read in terms of identity politics, and in relation to what Jonathon Dollimore calls "that dubious category, the homosexual sensibility" (LT 555); *Mr Clive & Mr Page* insists upon itself as fairy-tale but also as an attack on the prejudicial structures of differentiation that operate oppressively and repressively in English society, and that force particular identities into generalised, concealed categories while at the same time tolerating the masquerade of ritualised repetition that manufactures a dominant discourse of sameness.[5]

Repetition lies at the heart of the relationship between Mr Page and Mr Clive. They are, as we have noted, near double in everything except wealth and class position, and Mr Page, later in the narrative, dreams of the kind of wealth Mr Clive presumably takes for granted: "What I would really like this morning would be to write this in bed for a bit, then to get up, go next door, and discover that the bathroom had been done up in the night. Brand new." (112) Mr Clive embodies the "fairy-tale" aspect of the narrative, just as the dream of a "brand new" bathroom represents the desire for difference which is frustrated by sameness - the inverse, in socio-economic terms, of the frustration of sameness by difference which characterises the psychic level of

[5] For an extended discussion of repetition, see J Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition*.

the narrative. The doubling of Mr Page and Mr Clive exemplifies this structure of inverse trajectories, in that it represents the logic of identification delineating itself in the insistence on differentiation. Their visual resemblance, and, Mr Page imagines, their shared sexual orientation, finds its mirror image in their class difference; Mr Clive, despite his bankruptcy, embodies precisely the class values of wealth and luxury that lie beyond the means of Mr Page, the department-store clerk, but which constitute a major factor in the channels of desire that flow through Mr Page's descriptions of the fixtures and fittings of no 18 Brooke Street. In his oscillation between sexual desire and class envy, Mr Page constructs a narrative which unsettles any attempt to pigeonhole it generically through its transcendence of the limits of any conventional generic framework. Instead, Mr Page's narrative becomes, at its most expressive moments, a howl of outrage against *all* injustice, figured in the structures of sexuality and class which he finds so restrictive.

The first conversation between Mr Page and Mr Clive (which is their third meeting) takes place in the street, and Mr Page describes the strangeness of the situation:

> You might have wondered what on earth we could have had in common. [...] But if you overlooked the way we were dressed, then of course, well, it was obvious what we had in common. I noticed it straight away, even the first time.
>
> Because you see Mr Clive and I looked exactly the same. [...]
>
> All the time we were talking, I could see the two of us reflected in the shop window opposite. If we'd ever gone to the baths together, if we'd

> sat on opposite benches in the steam room for instance, or if we'd lathered up or oiled up together, we would have been twins. (31)

Identification here functions at the level of the gaze, the imagined onlooker, whose line of sight is subsumed into the gaze embodied in Mr Page, who can see the reflection in the shop window - the double doubled - in perceiving which, he encodes the symbolic centre of the novel. Later, he watches himself in the mirrored lifts at Selfridges: "There is Mr Page, Banking, and there face to face with him is his double, the other Mr Page - sometimes I think I can even see him smiling." (65) And later, Mr Clive draws attention to this doubling: "'Of course, I told them at once that you were my long lost twin [...]. Only joking, Mr Page. But you could be, don't you think? [...] There you are you see, I thought so. Quite remarkably alike - *uncannily* alike is how I'd put it." (91) With his marked self-confidence, Mr Clive puts his finger on the uncanny or *unheimlich* quality that pervades Mr Page's narrative, and points towards the fictional doubling that the narrative effects, which is only revealed at its denouement. At the same time, Mr Page's positioning of the "other Mr Page" in the lift mirrors, draws attention to the doubled status of the narrator himself, and the permanent act of dissimulation that is required of his identity.

## 2. ". . . I went to Manderley again."

The note with which *Mr Clive & Mr Page* ends, addressed to a fictional traveller on the No 29 bus but also to the implied reader and to the various personifications of the implied reader offered in the novel, is an appendix to a

text which constructs itself as entirely comprised of appendices, in which the entire 'action' (as much the act of narration as the action narrated) appends to the substance of the novel, which is in turn refined almost to non-existence, being gleanable from chance asides and a climactic concluding revelation which retrospectively transforms one's reading of the novel. Where does the novel end? Not with the closure of Mr Page's narrative, not with the supposed return to the normality and ritual of work, not with the note appended on the end, but instead in a convolution which returns us to the body of the narrative in order to re-read with different eyes, and to reconsider the implications of the massive act of narrational evasion that Mr Page has achieved despite our critical attention to his words and to his tale. Narration, in this novel, is an act parallel to the confessional mode of discourse through which it is articulated, but resides somewhere textually 'apart from' its discursive mode, just as the body is inhabited 'at a distance' by the self-conscious subjectivity that inhabits the material body. The procedure of writing, and Mr Page's self consciousness concerning rules of appropriateness in terms of initiating (and concluding) his narrative, become an allegorical dimension of the thematic of the novel, and their analysis suggests ways in which this thematic can be understood.

Neil Bartlett has commented on the project that he undertakes in *Mr Clive & Mr Page*, noting "an intense desire to manage the body" experienced by gay men under the legislative gaze of heterosexual culture. The implicit construction of the body as something separate from the subjectivity that experiences it or inhabits it lies beneath Bartlett's comments: "for most gay

men the body is experienced in writing before it's experienced physically", "our body is forever betraying us", "to have a body is necessarily to be theatrical".[6] The separation of the body, as a material entity existing in contradictory discursive contexts (desire and legality, ownership and dispossession, visibility and secrecy) from the consciousness it contains is a standard ideological manouevre identified by Foucault and others as characteristic of the repressive regimes of capitalist society.[7] Bartlett's novel explores the effects of the experience of this separation through its own formal structure - the body of the text - and the processes of repression, concealment and eventual revelation which are contained within the formal constraints selected by the narrating consciousness - the formal constraints of the confession, the first person reminiscence, the intentional catharsis expressed through the generic conventions of erotica and romance - all of which are expressed in a narrative voice which vacillates between insecurity and self-assuredness, thus dramatising the psychological tensions within the narrating consciousness.

The novel constitutes itself architecturally - through, among other things, the metaphor of the house - in order to elaborate an architectonics of desire-in-narrative, in which the subject encounters its own lack and conditions of being within the narrational frameworks through which it seeks to overcome them. This is to say that the formal problems (of beginning and ending, and, as we shall see, of address) are embodiments of the problems of experience - coded as emotional and physical, in the novel, but theorisable

[6] Bartlett, *Critical Quarterly*Vol 37 No 4 pp 67, 68.

in terms of the conditions of subjectivity - encountered by the narrating consciousness, and are symbolised within the novel in the labyrinthine structure of no. 18 Brooke Street (with its concealed corridors, double ceilings, hidden doors and network of underfloor heating pipes). The house *embodies* the formal anxieties of the narrative, and, of course, acts as metaphor for the action of and on the body itself, so that the dream return to the house is always, in the language of the unconscious, a return to the body contained by the house.

The novel invites a psychoanalytic reading at a very simple level, being comprised in great part of repeated narrations of this recurring dream to which Mr Page is subject, and of his imaginings of events that took place in no.18 Brooke Street after his morning visit there. In this sense the novel emphasises its action as events constituted by the conscious and unconscious elements of its narrator - its own narrational unconscious being the narrative which is repressed throughout the novel except in moments of direct address, brief recollection and the aforementioned concluding revelations. Mr Page's description of his dream emphasises its recurrent nature - "for about three months now it has been the same every time. Every night" (44-5) - but also stresses the change that, he tells us, has inspired his desire to write it down: " And then last night, at this point, which is why I'm writing it down, at this point in the dream, just as I was looking at him, the date and the time when this is happening came to me exactly. I heard it. Heard it as a whole sentence, like in a book or on a guided tour." (45) The

[7] See, for example, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*.

transformation of the dream from indeterminate memory into determinate history is the motivation for the transcription of the dream, a transcription already inscribed in the similes Mr Page uses to describe his experience - “a whole sentence . . .” (45). The “whole sentence” of the dream, in terms of the dream’s repetition, corresponds to the “whole sentence” by which Mr Page is condemned in the eyes of heterosexual society. It is the sentence he implicitly imagines being uttered by the various personifications of “the Law” (34) which populate the audience of his narration, a sentence which, in the act of recording the date and time of the act of seeing in the dream, encodes the dream in the symbolic of memory as an event rather than a fantasy, with all the risks that accompany the recording and confession of the event. Like the desired “opening sentence”, it has the right “effect”, situating dream and dreamer in relation to discursive frameworks (the Law, literary conventions and traditions, social time existing outside the ‘holiday’ period in which the narration takes place) that are external to and yet internalised within Mr Page’s narrative.

The significance of the dream in Mr Page’s narrative, its recurrence and reiteration, and the realisation that it masks another experience, suggest that the logic of the unconscious and particularly of repression and the mechanisms of the return of the repressed are powerfully at play in Bartlett’s novel. While Bartlett has stated his desire to “write” (about / of) the body in this novel, it is clear that the body is, to a greater or lesser extent, both the object of knowledge and that which must be repressed through internal and external legislation. Mr Page’s narrative is a neurotic re-enactment of two

traumatic experiences, one of which (the major element of the novel) acts in terms of superimposing itself over the other so that it comes to correspond to and stand for the other, in the internal logic of the novel. Mr Page remarks of Mr Clive that he "was very good at that trick of talking about one thing and meaning another, or thinking about something else entirely" (123) - a capacity which, given the identification of Mr Page with Mr Clive, suggests that this description provides the means by which the reader is to renegotiate the defences set up by Mr Page's ego in the act of telling his narrative. In Book III of the Seminar, Lacan talks of the processes of repression that constitute neurosis, and offers an interpretation of the Freudian definitions of neurosis as distinct from psychosis:

> When we speak of neurosis, we ascribe a certain role to flight, to avoidance, in which conflict with reality plays a part. Attempts have been made to designate the function of reality in the onset of neurosis by the notion of traumatism, which is an etiological notion. This is one thing, but another is the moment in neurosis when a certain rupture with reality occurs in the subject. What is the reality involved? Freud stresses from the outset that the reality sacrificed in neurosis is in part a *psychical* reality.[8]

Neurosis, in Lacan's argument, involves a process of evading an aspect of psychical reality which nevertheless persists in symbolic form, that is in the symbolic. The neurotic subject is torn from this aspect of psychical reality,

[8] Lacan, *Seminar III - The Psychoses*, pp 44-5.

only to experience its symbolic return in the subject's attempt to invest some kind of meaning in the rupture. As Lacan goes on to argue, in neurosis, "the subject attempts to make the reality that he at one time elided re-emerge by lending it a particular meaning, a secret meaning, which we call symbolic".[9]

The function of the dream, and by extension of the act of narration, in *Mr Clive & Mr Page*, can be read in terms of this psychoanalytic insight. The structure of repression enacted by Mr Page, and its architectural embodiment in no. 18 Brooke Street, to which his unconscious repeatedly returns in dreams, finds its expression in the symbolic form of the dream - of returning to the house, of seeing Gabriel naked at the window, and of hearing the "sentence" which fixes the date and time of the dream, lending it symbolic weight. The metonymic transference between house, male body and date / time functions to delineate the structure of repression through which the 'real' narrative of the dream is gradually revealed to the reader. Each metonym finds its correspondence to another aspect of a different narrative - a different house, a different naked body, a different "two o'clock on the afternoon of March the fourteenth" (193) - the one which the novel struggles to repress but cannot avoid articulating, the narrative of a 'real' (as opposed to 'fantasised') love affair in the narrator's recent past. The "sentence", in this reading, constitutes the major element which asserts not only correspondence between the two narratives, but also coincidence (in its trivial but remorseless specificity) and, consequently, the possibility of the elision of the two narratives into the symbolic structure of the dream. Thus the dream

[9] Lacan, *Seminar III -The Psychoses*, p 45.

articulates the repression which Mr Page, in telling the dream, is undoing, and consequently it allows the representation of the repressed to occur within a symbolic framework.

3. Intertexts

Of course, there are more than two narratives in *Mr Clive & Mr Page*, and more possibilities for the novel's interpretation than the psychoanalytic framework outlined above (I haven't, for example, addressed the symbolic function of the Brueghel print in the novel, or the philosophical exploration of the relations between knowing and feeling). The structure of temporal displacement which organises the novel's form (from its publication in 1996, to its narration at Christmas 1956, to the events described which occur in 1922-3, to the history of the house which frames the narrative formally and historically) suggests an insistence on temporality which provides important clues to the political significance of Bartlett's novel. While the insertion of the film star Rock Hudson into the narrative clearly lends the novel historical import and authenticates in some way or other the novel's attention to the politics of gay identity, the narratives of AIDS and the respective repressive cultural climates of the twenties, fifties and eighties / nineties, it is possible also to read this insertion in terms of the Hitchcockian "MacGuffin", as an object of exchange which circulates in the novel between subject positions (narrator, narratee, implied author, implied reader) and discursive formations (film, popular media, newspapers, gossip, personal experience) in order to

map out the ways in which these formations impinge upon the textual mapping of the unconscious.

The intertextual frames upon which the novel maps its own project are diverse and challenging, if only because they draw the reader into a 'tradition' which cannot be categorised in terms of any simple or reductionist notion of identity politics. Likewise, intertextuality unsettles the conventional frameworks of narration, and its overt employment by a narrator as uncertain and tentative as Mr Page draws attention to the provisional and derivative status of his narrative, which becomes in turn one of the features by which Mr Page's character is mapped out. We have already noted the novel's use of Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* and the genre of Gothic romance, along with its Dickensian and Beckettian themes and structures, but there are other reference points which map out the literary precursors of Mr Page's narrative, and serve to adumbrate its theme of desire and loss and its internalisation in his subjective examination. For example, the name of the Latvian servant of Mr Clive, Gabriel, clearly (and overtly) connotes his angelic function in the narrative, but it also contains echoes of other 'Gabriels', notably the Gabriel Lake in Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (where it is eventually revealed that the murder has been committed), and Gabriel Conroy, the central character of James Joyce's 'The Dead' (in *Dubliners* [1915]), who discovers his wife's love affair with Michael Furey, and is forced, romantically and politically, to rethink his position. Indeed the tone of Joyce's story, in particular the closing paragraphs, are echoed in Mr Page's descriptions of the snow falling over London. In a different way, the temporal arrangement of *Mr Clive & Mr Page*

echoes that of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), which is also narrated in 1956 concerning events in 1922-3, and which deals with a repressed, guilt-ridden narrator struggling to articulate a love affair from thirty-three years ago that never actually happened.

What these intertextual reference points demonstrate is that Bartlett's novel enacts in a variety of ways its representation of the compulsion to repeat in narrative form. In internalising within the 'body' of the text a series of narratives about lost or doomed love, *Mr Clive & Mr Page* appropriates the forms and the traditions of romance and realism, and reworks them into a complex response to the ways in which romance and realism have been harnessed within English culture in order to regulate and codify subjective desire. The formal and generic pre-occupations and choices evident in the novel, both within Mr Page's self-conscious uncertainty as a narrator and at the level of the novel's structure, suggest that the political concerns of the novel are made manifest in ways that transcend any simple thematic or representational mode. What Fredric Jameson has called "the politics of form"[10] assumes a position of significance in any reading of *Mr Clive & Mr Page* when we consider that repetition, doubling and the dream can be read as so many various internalisations - in the narrative an in the narrator's psyche - of the external culture's oppressive structures and processes. Repression, in the sense of an internalised denial, enacts in this novel the oppression to which the novel responds, in an ideological manouevre which addresses English cultural attitudes by - to use an older typology - perverting,

[10] See Jameson, *The Political Unconscious - Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act*.

inverting, and finally subverting them. Mr Page's emphasis on social formality (indeed he epitomises in many ways the 'mild-mannered clerk' of popular film), in contrast with Mr Clive's disarming and occasionally alarming informality, offers another configuration of this fictional strategy, mirroring the novel's formal architecture as formality repeatedly threatens to ooze or slip into informality, or the *informe* of its own repressed affect.[11] It is in these moments that the coincidence between the politics of sexuality and the politics of class is most in evidence, in which formality becomes a recourse for class defensiveness as well as for the concealing of sexual desire - moments where Mr Page's narrative threatens to evade his policing of it. Incomplete or unformed sentences, italicised moments of direct address to the narrator's covert implied reader, the dead lover, therefore signify moments in which fictional form itself is threatened by precisely the dissolution - sexual, aesthetic, political - that Mr Page imagines wreaks havoc in no. 18 Brooke Street after the party.

House, narrative and body therefore interlink to formally represent the effect of oppression as repression - as the creation of a repressed which, the novel's political utopianism asserts, will return, in the act of confession (after all, this is, like Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, a confessional text), to subvert the decorum of official cultural identities. *Mr Clive & Mr Page* offers formal solutions to a set of ideological questions, and constructs a narrative in which symbolic forms express the effects of very real political situations.

[11] For an extended discussion of the *informe*, see Rosalind Krauss, *Formless*.

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CRITIQUE
Heldref Publications
1319 Eighteenth Street, N.W.
Washington DC 20036-1802
USA

March 14th 2000

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