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“He Was Struck Out. Deleted”: We Need to Talk about Wesley in Nicola Barker’s *Behindlings*

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a poststructural reading of the character of Wesley in Nicola Barker’s 2002 novel *Behindlings*, which is broadly informed by Jean-Luc Nancy’s thoughts on being and community and Jacques Derrida’s thinking on *khōra*, as well as other established poststructural paradigms. It contends that the novel simultaneously engages with these ideas and exceeds them. Wesley is the void-at-the-heart of his own “philosophy”: ‘He was hollow. He was empty [...] He was a vacuum. He was struck-out. Deleted. He was nothing’. And he is everything as well at one and the same time. It is the classic poststructural paradox – receiving everything while possessing nothing – that makes meaning possible. And that is the argument: the signifier, the empty sign for some, the palimpsest for others, here is simply Wesley. However, my argument is that the characterization of Wesley challenges and complicates such readings, deliberately. This article will demonstrate how the novel repeatedly sullies the theories it implicates by introducing a persistent taint to the main vehicle used to articulate the theory, the protagonist himself, that “puerile [...] shithead”, Wesley.

Article

In Mark’s Gospel, the relationship between Jesus and his disciples is described in the following way: “And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach” (Mark 3 14).¹ Further to this verse, Bishop Philip North has argued that the suggestion that the disciples should first and foremost “be *with* him”, that they only *might* preach, is significant because the emphasis is clearly on the being with. His view is that being with, belonging to each other, is “a huge feature of Christian education” and is crucial for building intentional communities of love.² Yet Jean-Luc Nancy sees being with as not only implicated in community, but as inherent to being itself: “if Being is being-with, then it is, in its being-with, the ‘with’ that constitutes Being; the with is not simply an addition”.³

The disciple motif and Nancy’s understanding of being as being-with are both useful for reading the character of Wesley in Nicola Barker’s fifth novel, *Behindlings*. However, before any misconceptions arise, despite this article’s opening quotation from Mark, Nancy’s preoccupation with love and community, even Barker’s own Catholicism, Wesley is no anodyne Christ figure. He is described as “a shithead and a fathead and a peacock”⁴ by one character and an aspect of the novel’s plot hinges on whether or not he calls another character a “cunt”. This article will read Wesley’s character alongside some key ideas from some notable poststructural theories because there is a certain *awareness* to the writing that suggests the pertinence of such an approach. Poststructuralism in fact suggests itself as an approach early on in the novel when, Arthur Young, the same character who describes Wesley as a shithead, states dismissively: “he’s certainly taken the opportunity to read up on a little bit of

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pretentious French philosophy” (14). And the framework here, adopting poststructural ideas to interpret Wesley’s contradictions, deliberately mimics such pretention. This article utilizes two useful concepts from “the two Jakes”,⁵ Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida: specifically *objet petit a* and *khōra*, respectively. There are traces of both in the complex characterization of Wesley, but *Behindlings* itself is not a pretentious novel. Instead it sends up pretention, for example, one character remarks without irony: “Philosophy [...] is like history but without any dates. And like geography but without any places”.⁶

In a review, Ali Smith described *Behindlings* as “a new kind of book”. This ambiguous comment could mark it as “experimental”, *excessive* even, as she goes on to clarify it as “an intense kind of joy” too. Other reviewers said it was “insanely inventive”, “surreal”, “weirdly brilliant” “a cult novel and not just a very good novel about a cult”.⁷ But the hard truth remains: *Behindlings* is an extremely challenging read. It moves beyond confusing into entirely baffling and offers no help to the reader, initially in particular, in terms of understanding setting, character or story. And since it *is* an experimental novel, this article is an experimental response; for example, this article’s recourse to critical theory is tacit and eclectic because the novel itself is not trying to articulate anything approaching a coherent theory either. The methodology is light touch, nothing is an especially good fit, and, in fact, Barker has said that if the novel is about any-one-thing, it is an exploration of the nature of charisma and its effects. And yet the novel *does* make plain some of the more complex ideas underlying poststructuralism, and, in that sense *Behindlings*, and this account of it, can help readers unpack some of the more challenging features of these composite theories. But it is important to note at this early stage that, in this case, the fiction definitely *exceeds* the theory: in the hands of a writer like Barker, fiction simply blows theory’s mind.

In previous work, I have advanced the possibilities of the “ellipsis” for deconstructive practice by considering the resistance of certain fictions to any conceptual solidity.⁸ This article examines instead how some established poststructural ideas are *played with* in one novel that is “self-consciously textualized as a text searching for a full stop”.⁹ Ultimately, Nicola Barker has the mind of a poststructuralist – nothing is taken for granted – but she is certainly a novelist, not a theorist. Therefore, the way she experiments with these self-same ideas in *Behindlings* is freer, less coded and consequently both more expansive and more entertaining.

It is an oversimplification, but even the most glancing analysis of Wesley standing for nothing-and-everything simultaneously, describes the void-at-the-heart of several accepted poststructural theories.¹⁰ Consider, for example, Derrida’s definition of *khōra*, taken from Plato, as a place (or a she) that receives everything while possessing nothing:

Khōra receives, so as to give place to them, all the determinations, but she/it does not possess any of them as her/its own. She possesses them, she has them, since she receives them, but she does not possess them as properties, she does not possess anything as her own. She “is” nothing other than the sum or the process of what has just been inscribed “on” her, on the subject of her, on her subject, right up against her subject, but she is not the subject or the present support of all these interpretations, even though, nevertheless, she is not reducible to them. Simply this excess is nothing, nothing that may be and be said ontologically.¹¹

Yet does this passage not also describe Wesley? Consider now, this alternative version with some names changed: *Wesley* receives, so as to give place to the Followers, all their determinations, but he does not possess any of the Followers as his own. *Wesley* possesses the Followers, he has them, since he receives them, but he does not possess them as properties, he does not possess anything as his own. *Wesley* “is” nothing other than the sum or the process of what has been inscribed “on” him by the Followers, on the subject of him, on his subject, right up against his subject. This excess cannot be said poststructurally. Why cannot it not? It cannot because poststructural paradigms are always very clean and tightly controlled. The poststructural text tells you, calmly, that everything you ever thought solid is slip-sliding-away, while the poststructuralist themselves appears at-a-remove, both from this harsh process of realization (having always *already* known) as well as its consequences. This two-fold distancing amounts to *the* core criticism of poststructuralism: inherent superiority. And Wesley is

hardly immune from this flaw either, as Katherine Turpin notes he may not have *said* he is better than everyone else, but he “certainly *thinks* it” (256). Yet he is also gloriously messy and unsanitized, truly excessive in a way that poststructural theory simply *cannot be*. Wesley says, misquoting the Vic Chesnutt song “Replenished”, “Nothing is immaculate [...] until it is consumed or distressed” (256) and this consumption and distress is a crucial part of the work of the novel that cannot be mimicked by theory.¹² After Arthur Young, Wesley’s second antagonist, Dewi, seemingly characterizes the process of *khōra* from the perspective of consumption and distress when he sees Wesley as a monster: ‘He was a Shape-Shifter. He was a Changeling. He was a Centaur [...] He was the anti-everything. He was the unthinkable [...] He was lost. He was damned. He was hollow. He was empty [...] He was a vacuum. He was struck-out. Deleted. He was nothing’ (100). This hollowness, or emptiness, this apparent vacuum simultaneously describes the place of exchange of the sign: to borrow from the language of Stuart Hall, Wesley is the empty sign, the floating signifier.¹³

*

To take a step back: first, there is time and place. *Behindlings* is set over two days on Canvey Island.¹⁴ However, small periods of time are occasionally repeated from the perspective of different characters.¹⁵ The novel concerns the misadventures of the maverick Wesley¹⁶ and his Following made up of various individuals he refers to as the Behindlings. The main thrust of the plot is the unraveling of a treasure hunt, or Loiter (one of Wesley’s words) organized by Wesley through an unnamed major confectionery company (the clues form epigraphs to some chapters) which has gone horribly awry. During the staged Loiter, the son of one of the main Behindlings, Doc, has drowned. This tragedy is causing problems for the company because of adverse publicity and, more importantly, it spoils the prize – Goodwin Sands – infamous for shipwrecks and drownings. The company hire Arthur Young¹⁷ an alcoholic ex-employee with an ambiguous grudge against Wesley¹⁸ and several other spies to try to avert disaster and discover Wesley’s motives since he broke off communications with the company. But Wesley has been to Canvey before and included in a book of his adventures a discussion of some graffiti on its sea wall that suggests that Katherine Turpin, a local girl, aborted her own father’s child – her father being headmaster of Canvey secondary school. Josephine Bean, seemingly a Behindling, but actually a disguised local, arrives on the scene to set the record straight out of guilt. It was partly a case of mistaken identity, Ted, a boy Katherine and Jo went to school with, walked into the headmaster’s office and thought he saw Katherine’s long hair when in fact it was Jo’s. Or at least Ted *said* it was Katherine afterward, when she was working hard to cover up the affair and save her father’s career. It transpires Katherine actually wrote the graffiti herself, refreshing it over the years dutifully every time the paint faded.

There is also a bizarre incident involving Wesley, the local librarian, Eileen, and an elderly heron; a fight in a bar called Saks, during which Dewi, Katherine’s heartbroken ex-boyfriend, lays into Wesley and is only stopped by Jo dramatically breaking a glass bottle and slashing her own wrist; and numerous tales from Wesley’s colorful past, including when he was publicly ostracized for sleeping inside the body of a dead horse. Furthermore, Wesley’s ten-year-old daughter, Sasha, whom he has never seen, escapes from the reindeer farm where she lives with her grandparents¹⁹ accompanied by a reindeer called Brion and in pursuit of her father. Arthur discovers her on board the craft he is using, a boat on stilts that once belonged to Wesley’s own father, which has unfortunately been sabotaged.²⁰ After a very long, unstable night, Sasha and Arthur are eventually rescued, after a fashion, by Wesley: the craft perishes, but the deer saves Arthur and Wesley. At the close of the novel, there are some complex revelations about the Behindlings website (which is run by Arthur, but has very unexpectedly gone down due to a virus) and its connections with Gumble Inc and Wesley. The important point though is that ultimately Wesley keeps going, out of Canvey, and that he is “un-stopped” (534).

This synopsis simplifies a fragmented narrative that persistent readers of the novel piece together like so many riddle-clues from Wesley’s Loiter. As a whistle-stop through the plot, it also clarifies why,

despite a reference to this being his Second Coming to Canvey Island, the relationship between Wesley and his Behndlings is an inversion of that of Christ and his disciples. It is a being-with of *antagonism*, not love, or rather love *as* antagonism. Moreover, this antagonism extends beyond the hostility between Wesley and the Behndlings – holding them in place and defining their identities – to an enmity between and among the Followers themselves:

“There are many – especially since the big confectionery Loiter – who Follow him mostly at the weekends or perhaps for a day or two when they’re on holiday, and others who simply turn up, at the drop of a hat, whenever the fancy takes them. We call these people,” Doc allowed himself a wry smile, “we call such people *Fleas*, because their ... because their *infestation* is almost always very temporary” (27)

Wesley despises the Behndlings ergo the Behndlings despise the fleas. And this choice of metaphor, infestation, also articulates Nancy’s understanding of being-with included earlier: that of difference, discomfort, exposure. He said of community that the only common property people have in common is that we have *no common property*, and by placing the emphasis on no-common-property as unifying, he inscribes this *lack* with possibility and potential.²¹ The being-with of Wesley and his Behndlings is defined by a distance, a holding or a keeping at bay, which is maintained by an antagonism, or *lack*, but a lack that is shared, thus becoming a common property. It is therefore an inversion of Christ’s being-with his disciples, which is figured straightforwardly as love, being-with and belonging to each other. Yet love is also a holding at bay, or even a lack, and Christ is similarly at-a-distance from the twelve. As stated in the abstract for this article, the Behndlings cannot *know* Wesley, but similarly the disciples cannot “know” Christ either. The basis of the relationship is not knowledge, but faith. And there is certainly evidence that within the disciples’ love is a kernel of hate, since it is a disciple who betrays Christ, which itself suggests the possibility that antagonism too can harbor within it something that differs from itself. Toward the end of the novel, a spy from the company says of Wesley’s attitude to Doc’s grief: “Whatever impression he *likes* to give, he’s as concerned for Doc’s feelings as the rest of us” (476). There is an honesty, even an integrity to Wesley’s antagonism, which means any betrayal it spawns cannot have the devastating impact of a betrayal born from love.

Not long after joining the Behndlings, Jo observes of the Following: ‘She’d presumed some invisible rule-book. She’d anticipated complex codes of practice, margins, restrictions, limitations. She’d expected *restraint*’ (43). And there are “rules” in a way, one is antagonism, another is naming – Behndlings, Fleas, Loiter. But these behaviors are all intuitive not systematic in the way the word “rule” implies. Wesley is more a Lord of Misrule and his “misrules” are: always use people’s first names, which he might have written in his book about Canvey because other characters adopt it as a practice too. He also believes in putting yourself first and owning your selfishness; respecting animals, especially if it is necessary to kill them; and taking your time. This last point about time is particularly important, informed as it is by the work of Alvin Toffler, American futurist and writer on modern technology, who Barker explicitly acknowledges at the end of the novel²²:

“People no longer have any concept of real time, Ted. You must see this every day in your own particular line of work; the breaking of appointments, the financial overstretching, the desire to represent self through the conduit of property [...] Never lose the sense of how long something should be in *actual* time, Ted. A death. A dream. A meal. A transaction. To wait well is to truly express your lack of alienation from what is *actual* [...] We have wrung the neck of time, Ted. And in the process we have asphyxiated *our own reality*. Urban man lives only in dreaming” (258-259)

Wesley is talking to Ted, an estate agent. He is describing Toffler’s notion of the alien sense of time from his seventh book, *The Third Wave*, published in 1980. Even in this edited extract of a much longer conversation, Wesley uses Ted’s first name three times. It is the rhetoric of the evangelist, as is the repetition, “*actual* time”, “what is *actual*”, and the over-use of emphasis, “*our own reality*”. Wesley wishes to live authentically: why use a refrigerator to chill food in the middle of winter, he scoffs in Katherine Turpin’s kitchen.²³ However, time also concerns being, not only in the Heideggerian sense, but to be, to exist, *in time* constitutes another being-with.²⁴ Wesley demands

we never lose the sense of “how long something should be in *actual time*” – that is *be* in actual time, rather than *take* in actual time. It is a significant distinction. The antagonism that Wesley creates by making people wait, making them “take pause”, is a mask for love, he wants them not to dream but to wake up and *live, breathe*, and he insists his lateness is “like a giant bear-hug from an alternate time-frame” (both 259).

Since these are “misrules” though, they are bent and broken too. Consequently, instead it would be more accurate to describe Wesley as operating within the parameters of his own unique moral compass, like Odysseus, Captain Ahab²⁵ or even Christ. When Ted thinks of Wesley he considers him quasi-spiritually, “*I need to believe in someone – So let it be him*” (425–426). If the novel is an examination of charisma, as Barker has claimed, many iconic literary protagonists and antagonists are charismatic. One key example is that famously charismatic bastard, Sherlock Holmes. And Wesley’s incredible powers of observation are strangely reminiscent of Holmes: “Plus you have two strange calluses on your index fingers. It all seemed pretty . . . well, pretty conclusive, really” (51). Like the Loiter, these intertextual references are clues to the riddle of Wesley. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the older theological meaning of charisma is a “free gift or favour specially vouchsafed by God; a grace, a talent”. It was only later it came to mean a “gift or power of leadership or authority (see quot. 1947); aura. Hence, the capacity to inspire devotion or enthusiasm”. The 1947 quotation is from the third volume of Max Weber’s *Theory Social & Economic* and reads: “The term ‘charisma’ will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, super-human, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities”.²⁶ Note, this individual is only “*treated* as endowed” and their “exceptional powers or qualities” are not defined: again, it seems that charismatic people are mere vessels or blank pages into or upon which others can pour or project all they, as an individual, consider exceptional themselves. And yet Wesley perceives himself as both exceptional and *moral*: “How could a fundamentally decent and honourable man ever really seriously regret his past actions?”²⁷ Is he “fundamentally decent and honourable” though? Despite his manifold faults, he rescues his daughter, attempts to free Arthur and feels Doc’s loss and guilt.

But whether he is decent and honorable or not, he definitely represents desire in the text, since Wesley is desired by many key characters in the novel, the Behindlings, Jo, Katherine, Ted, Eileen. Even for Arthur and Dewi, who hate him, he is the focus of their obsessive fascination. Therefore, such desire is not merely operating as attraction; this is Lacanian desire, the *objet petit a*, or desire, not in relation to an object, but in relation to a “lack”. Wesley is the unattainable object of desire, the void-at-the-heart, and he knows this of himself as shown by his cruel dismissal of Jo at the end of the novel: “D’you think we should move in together? That I should get a proper job? Settle down? Get serious?” (532). These ordinary objects of desire, cohabiting, working, settling down, are just as unattainable for Wesley as Wesley is unattainable for others.

Like much of Lacan’s work, his definitions of the *objet petit a* were as shifting as they were elliptical, which make it oddly symbiotic with *Behindlings*. Take, for example, this translator’s note on the term in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*:

The ‘a’ in question stands for ‘autre’ (other), the concept having been developed out of the Freudian ‘object’ and Lacan’s own exploitation of ‘otherness’. The ‘petit a’ (small ‘a’) differentiates the object from (while relating it to) the ‘Autre’ of ‘grand Autre’ (the capitalized ‘Other’). However, Lacan refuses to comment on either term here, leaving the reader to develop an appreciation of the concepts in the course of their use. Furthermore, Lacan insists that ‘objet petit a’ should remain untranslated, thus acquiring, as it were, the status of an algebraic sign.²⁸

In many ways, such elusiveness not only resonates with the characterization of Wesley but also with his philosophizing. Thus, “leaving the reader to develop an appreciation of the concepts in the course of their use” is reminiscent of the practical application of the pragmatism Wesley so admires. And, as already seen via *khōra*, Wesley himself is nothing other than the sum or the process of what has been inscribed on him by the Followers. Plus, Lacan’s insistence that the *objet petit a* “should remain untranslated” is like Wesley’s statement at the conclusion of *Behindlings*: “Things can’t always fit

together like a jigsaw, Bean. And nor should they” (531). Elsewhere in *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, Lacan equates the term obliquely with an interruption to his seminar: “I dedicate this poem to the nostalgia that some of you may feel for that interrupted seminar in which I developed the theme of anxiety and the function of the *objet petit a*” (17). This interruption is an ellipsis, and these unexplained notions of nostalgia, anxiety and interruption also trace Wesley’s walking and re-walking of Canvey:

“Something bad’s happening here,” Doc said ominously, his shoulders hunching up, glancing around him. “He keeps walking the island, and walking, and *walking* . . . like he’s . . . like he’s *locked*. Like he’s *stuck*. I’ve never seen it before. Never. Something’s missing. Something’s gone *wrong*,” he gazed straight at her, “and now you’ve become party to it . . .” (451)

And something *is* rotten here. It is literally inscribed on the palimpsestic sea wall in the form of the forever resurfacing graffiti: “KATHERINE (*whore*) TURPIN ABORTED HER OWN FATHER’S BASTARD” (364). This graffiti epitomizes the return of the repressed as well as an ongoing repression *through* its return, since however repeated, it remains a lie that *represses* the truth. Wesley keeps “walking the island, and walking, and *walking*”, looping around and around it, forcing the Behindlings to follow, until Canvey Island is as traced and outlined as a huge algebraic sign. Like the contradiction of love expressed as antagonism, this marks a paralysis paradoxically articulated through movement. Yet, like all paralysis, it prefigures a breaking free, which is made possible by another piece of writing, carved into the sea wall: “I AM THE FUCKING” (439). The significance of this ambiguous, perhaps unfinished statement, will be explored at the end of this article, however, it is important to note here because when Wesley finally *unlocks* himself, it is with these words: “I AM THE FUCKING.” [...] He was un-stopped. He was begun’ (534). The rawness and possibility of such blunt language counteract the lie and offer a new, untranslated site for the *objet petit a* at the end of this non-sentence where there is no noun.²⁹

A full examination of Wesley needs to consider both Wesley *and* how others perceive him, as well as, more specifically, how different characters pour themselves into the “lack” he represents. When the novel opens, he reflects on the Following: “They were a bane. Yes. A bane. But only so long as they followed him (and this had to be some kind of compensation), only so long as they stalked, surveyed, trailed, pursued, could he truly depend upon his own safety. They were his witnesses’ (2). This early disclosure reveals a co-dependence beneath Wesley’s antagonism. However, the words used to describe the Behindlings and Wesley throughout the novel are incredibly rich and varied. The Following is a pilgrimage, alien, fucked-up, a disease, a punishment, complicated. Wesley from the perspective of others is a magpie, plagiarizer, joker, maverick, shadowy, temporary, incomplete, free, a manipulator, a schizophrenic, a fun-fair ride. Yet from his own point of view he is a reaper, a vessel, flotsam, redundant, surplus, debris. These clashing registers suggest that Wesley is like dark matter: he is not straightforwardly detectable or visible, rather it is only possible to gain awareness of his presence through the observable effects on what can be seen – those around him. This parallels the dictionary definition Katherine reads of the word “pragmatic”, itself one of Wesley’s annotations in his copy of Bernd Heinrich’s *Ravens in Winter*: “*doctrine that the conception of an object is no more than the conception of its possible practical effects*”.³⁰ Again, it is the practical, or noticeable, effects that are important, not the object itself.

What is more, Wesley’s very physicality is marked by such present absence. Thus, Sasha’s mother, Iris, describes Wesley as having “two personalities”, and that these are represented by the relationship between his “good” hand and his “bad”. Wesley explains the missing fingers of his right hand to Ted: “I fed them to an owl,” he said, matter-of-factly, ‘an eagle owl. Years ago. In an act of penance. I trapped my brother in an abandoned fridge. Christopher. Chris. When we were kids. A prank. He died. He was my right hand” (39). This incident is included in the second of the Wesley short stories, “Braces”, first published in Barker’s 1996 collection, *Heading Inland*. In the novel, however, the maimed hand *is* Christopher.³¹ And these links to Barker’s earlier writing lend to the novel a sense of intertextual world-building. As well as the above explicit reference and an internalized one in

Wesley's conscience later in the book, "Braces" is inscribed within *Behindlings* through the repurposing of *Bottersnikes and Gumbles* (a children's book by Australian writer S. A. Wakefield) in Wesley's attempt to make amends to Arthur. Katherine reads Wesley's copy of this book: "Gumbles are these silly, squidgy little creatures who get shoved into tin cans and bullied and manipulated" (498). Christopher, trapped in the fridge, was a "gumble". This connection means Wesley's decision to call the company he sets up to launder cash from the Loiter back into the Behindlings site to secretly help Arthur, *Gumble Inc*, inscribes this act of atonement with Wesley's much older guilt about Christopher's death. He explains to Jo: "I thought if Arthur made enough money through the Following that he might finally re-evaluate his feelings on the situation. He could help his kid, rebuild his relationship with Bethan, go off and do his *own* walking, his *own* writing" (531).

*

Throughout the novel, there is a question mark over whether Wesley needs to be Followed, hates it, or if he feels something else, ill-defined, in-between the two:

"Because he hates being Followed," Doc interjected, smiling [...] "and he never speaks to the people Following. That's the whole point. It's the rule. We are the *Behindlings*. Wesley actually coined our name as a kind of swearword, as an insult, but we don't treat it that way; we quite like it. It unites us. It ..."

"It *legitimises* us," Hooch interrupted.

[...] "Wesley thinks you have to be backward to follow things [...] He's a free spirit. People call him an anarchist – in the papers and so forth – but he despises labels, even that one [...] They like what he stands for – although he constantly bangs on about not standing for anything"

[...] "Because – let's face it – he *is* the very thing he's so set upon despising. At root *he's* the contradiction. *He's* the puzzle" (61)

That swearwords are unifying, and legitimizing, is significant later when "*I AM THE FUCKING*" sets Wesley free from Canvey. Similarly, it is interesting that the root of the antagonism here is Wesley himself: "he *is* the very thing he's so set upon despising". The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of "antagonism" confirms opposition as a being-with: "The mutual resistance or active opposition of two opposing forces, physical or mental; active opposition or hostility".³² Wesley's "rule" of never speaking to the Behindlings is more than a rule: it is "the whole point", it is this rejection and alienation that splits the Followed from the Followers, allowing them to *be*, to exist, in their own separate category or identity. And these "two opposing forces" also articulate the operation of "the binary", which underpins signification. Or to put it another (more poststructural) way, that we understand the meanings of words through opposition and difference. Such antagonism is foundational to language and therefore to *being* as well, which can only be understood through language.³³ These are all ideas assumed within Derrida's work; however, he characterized the maintenance of opposition between any two forces as *differance*, which implicates the trace of the other in the self-same in all binaries. Consequently, in the above case: the trace of the Followed in the Follower and the Follower in the Followed.

Thus far, this article has identified traces of being-with, *khōra* and *objet petit a* in the void-at-the-heart character of Wesley. However, if further evidence was required that fiction *exceeds* theory in *Behindlings*, consider this brief thought experiment: Wesley may or may not call Katherine Turpin a "cunt", would a poststructuralist do that in their writing or through a scenario in their writing? As said, a *brief* thought experiment. Below is the passage where Katherine discovers the "insult":

Lamb's tail.

Wuh?

Good *God* – out of nowhere – and then there, in the sand (the two things interrelating, corresponding, unifying, *merging*, with a brainstorming rapidity), the word, the *scribbling* ...

Now what ... ?

The word ... *a ... n ...*

No (She adjusted her angle, squinting) ...
 ... *a* ...
 No ...
c ... *u* ...
 Uh ...
c ... *u* ... *n* ...
 C-u-n-t? In a strange joined-up style of writing.
 Cunt? Could it be?
 In *sand*?
 A *lamb*'s tail? (116)

The writing emerges in a ghostly, authorless fashion: it is literally written in *sand*. There is perhaps a Romantic echo of a synergy between the level sands of Shelley's "Ozymandias" and the name writ in water of Keats' gravestone. Wesley's later protestations that he was writing the word *aunt* cheekily demonstrates Nicholas Royle's point about the duplicity of writing, that: "writing is the double, writing is a double writing, from the beginning".³⁴ Furthermore, Katherine is a woman made infamous by graffiti. More writing that threatens to disappear but is spectrally maintained and made even more notorious by Wesley's book: "The walks book,' Doc announced [...] 'the section on Canvey. All that crazy stuff about boundaries. I never understood a word of it [...] nor did Wes himself, more than likely'" (45). The word cunt/aunt creates a frisson between Katherine and Wesley that keeps resurfacing throughout the text: for example, when they finally meet, "they both stalled for a moment (to digest, re-appraise, re-arm and – in Katherine's case: he'd called her a cunt, the *bastard* – take aim)" (197). *Cunt*: that socking blow to the jaw of a signifier, viscerally demonstrating here the force of language, the spectrality of authorship, writing as palimpsestic, antagonism as a being-with – but *not* as a poststructuralist would. They would make similar points, but not through using the word "cunt".

Yet as stated, Wesley *is* a conscious character, with a conscience. His pricks of conscience are best illustrated by the following passage that is and is not about his daughter, Sasha. It also refers to a key aspect of Wesley mythology, when he cut open a recently dead horse and slept inside it to keep warm:

*Fine to brag about the horse
 But it was different in fact
 Nearly died in that cold night
 Not brave
 Not outrageous
 Not clever ...*

*Oh that beautiful pony
 Velvet belly –
 New-dead –
 Not clever or funny
 No
 Only –
 Only pathetic
 Like the judge had said*

Nobody ever remembered the bad ...

*Brother Christopher
 Bright summer morning
 Such blackness inside of it
 So much dark inside of it*

*Remember the warm –
 Daughter
 The warm –
 Horse
 The warm –*

Christopher
Warm – velvet – closeness

Wesley suddenly pushed the nails on his good hand into the flesh on the palm of his bad. Five nails. Felt them cutting. Celebrated the wound –
The absence
The absences (255)

The imagery of warmth and the daughter, the horse and Christopher coupled with the poetic construction of this near stanza are inscribed with guilt and loss that Wesley does not verbalize but is present in his mind. Again, the relationship between his “good” hand and his “bad” (his words) is imitative of a ritual punishment Wesley repeatedly reenacts upon himself as penance for Christopher’s accidental death in childhood at his hand. And beneath there is a unifying Christ metaphor too: Saint Christopher, as Christ carrier, positions Wesley as Christ, reinforced by the fact that Christopher was his older brother. This characterization of Wesley as Christ is strengthened by the “pushing” of nails into the flesh of his palm, celebrating the wound and the absence of his fingers. Moreover, such emphasis on absence returns us to the parallel with dark matter. Elsewhere in the novel, Arthur explains this type of *felt* absence in a more personal way to Wesley’s daughter, Sasha: “‘One of the strangest facts of life,’ he murmured, ‘is that some people have more of an impact on you when they aren’t even there. As absences. Like your dad’” (421). It is true *of* Wesley but it is also true *for* him because of the formative and devastating loss of Christopher.

What can be concluded? Wesley says this of Doc at the end of the novel: “‘Doc has nothing left now but the Following. It’s his mission. It’s my *legacy*. He will die behind me. On his feet, struggling. On duty. In service” (533). Thus, *Behndlings* is ultimately a novel about loss and this statement reveals that Wesley continuing “un-stopped” is in the final analysis an act of love. Such loss is also inscribed within the much highlighted inadequacies of language; meaning is multivalent, ambiguous, ambivalent and proliferating, since “‘our good friend Wesley invents special words for things, doesn’t he? He thinks words *make* things special’”.³⁵ Despite lacking Wesley’s excessiveness (remember, this man kills, plucks and joints a heron then makes it into a casserole) all poststructuralists do after all delight in neologisms.³⁶ Like them, Wesley also recognizes that things cannot always fit together neatly, “‘it’d be a kind of hell if they did’” (532) because meaning only escapes from the gaps and the cracks and the differences between things, including words. As on the palimpsestic sea wall that symbolically holds the community in and the sea out, that is also a canvas for display, site of expression, repetition, the retracing of steps and of graffiti. Furthermore, Canvey Island is *itself* the graffiti, as best observed by Wesley as he walks on the sea wall: ‘This was the shattered, hacked-up back-bone of a once hard-worked industrial legacy. This was the ancient trash of modernity. These were the scribbles in the margin. This was the graffiti’ (164).³⁷

In *Behndlings*, the gaps, silences and ellipses are meaningful, full of possibility and chatter. Furthermore, identity is always a “becoming”, not an arrival. These points are made throughout the novel, but never so powerfully and effectively as when Wesley discovers an expletive carved into the sea wall:

He stopped for a second time when he felt the quality of the concrete changing. He drew close to the wall and found himself analysing another, shorter line of graffiti (much smaller, this time), hacked into the concrete with a knife or a flint or a broken bottle [...] (painstakingly tracing his fingers through each letter for further confirmation)

I
am
the
fucking ...

He tried to find a noun at the end of the sentence [...] but there was nothing.
He frowned.

“I am the fucking ...” he murmured. Leaving space for expansion – an opening, a question mark, even ...

Then, “I am the . . .”

He began chuckling [. . .] “I am the *fucking*,” he proclaimed proudly, finally making sense of it [. . .]

*I AM THE FUCKING*³⁸

It is “*hacked* into the concrete”, literally inscribed onto the landscape of Canvey Island, on its perimeter and defining edge. Wesley traces each letter for confirmation with his fingers until they bleed. There is no noun at the end of the sentence, nothing, only a gap in which he imagines various possibilities: ‘I am the fucking *king*; I am the fucking *end*; I am the fucking *champion*; I am the fucking *best fuck in the whole fucking WORLD so FUCK YOU*’. Ultimately though, there is simply “space for expansion”, an ellipsis. This extract records the painful, alienating process of making sense of language, which, as Lacan has argued, is indifferent, it-does-not-care-about-you: rather it is machinic, unfeeling, the antagonist *par excellence*. Wesley is frustrated by and excluded from the meaning of the words, but he perseveres and achieves a being-with, a reflection back from its dark mirror. This confirmation comes in part because it is a moment of self-recognition, that space for expansion, that opening, that question mark, is the *khōra* of Wesley himself.

Notes

1. Mark 3 14.
2. Bishop Philip North.
3. Nancy 30.
4. Barker 14.
5. Easthope has a chapter in his final book *Privileging Difference* exploring the relationship between the work of Lacan and Derrida, which is playfully entitled, “The Two Jakes” (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 139.
6. Barker, *Behindlings* 175. This article explores the concepts of some of the poststructural heavy-weights of critical theory, whose work – especially that of Derrida and Nancy – is also considered philosophy.
7. First and last; Clark, “Lost in the Fog”, *Guardian*, 28 September 2002 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/sep/28/featuresreviews.guardianreview9>> [accessed 2 November 2020]; Pye, “Walkabout”, *New York Times*, 29 December 2002 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/29/books/walkabout.html>> [accessed 2 November 2020]. Others untraceable, though attributed to *Sunday Times* and *Elle* on the back matter (Fourth Estate, 2011).
8. Please see: Derrida, “Ellipsis”, in *Writing and Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 371-378. My monograph, *Origin and Ellipsis in the Writing of Hilary Mantel* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2019) is a book-length poststructural study of “undecidability” in the work of another experimental female novelist, Hilary Mantel.
9. Platt 2.
10. “Poststructuralism names a theory, or a group of theories, concerning the relationship between human beings, the world, and the practice of making and reproducing meanings”. Please see; Belsey, *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.
11. Derrida, “*Khōra*”, in *On the Name*, trans. by David Wood, John P. Leavey, JR. and Ian McLeod and ed. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 89-127 (99). The term was used by Plato to describe a womb-like space that potentially gives place to being. Revisited by both Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan, for Derrida *khōra* is the ultimate alterity: it allows for everything but is entirely unaccountable and elusive itself.
12. This exposition expresses something close to theoretical “messiness” and it has been rejected by publications several times.
13. Hall.
14. Barker has also explained that the choice of islands as settings in her early work allowed her to feel “contained” and therefore safe and able to write.; *The Novels of Nicola Barker Symposium*, International Anthony Burgess Foundation, Manchester, UK (September 5, 2018).
15. For example, Jo Bean stepping down from the curb outside Katherine Turpin’s house – “back (always back) into the gutter’s spurling trough” – is retold nine pages later from Wesley’s perspective: “then stepped down heavily into the gutter and slowly began walking”, 217, 228.
16. “One of Barker’s favorite characters, Wesley previously appeared in four short stories – trapping his brother in an abandoned refrigerator, liberating eels from a ‘pie and mash’ café, feeding his hand to a ravenous owl, and stealing an antique pond”, Press, “Loitering with Intent”, *The Village Voice*, 28 January 2003 <<https://www.villagevoice.com/2003/01/28/loitering-with-intent/>> [accessed 29 August 2018]. Please see: “Wesley: Blisters”, “Wesley: Braces”, “Wesley: Mr Lippy” and “Parker Swells” in Nicola; Barker, *Heading Inland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998). These “stories” are referred to in the novel, for example: ‘*The Story of the Freeing of the Eels*. The first Wesley story. It was the start of everything. It was all but legendary’, 321.

17. Arthur is a distant relative of Arthur Young (1741-1820) an English writer on travel and agriculture: “It appears you once had a famous relative who wrote a book about walking. Or farming . . .”, 10.
18. Prior to the novel, Wesley was interviewed by a woman called Bethan Ray (71) for a banking job, and she rejected him, potentially because of his disfigured right hand. He then seduced her, and left her, stealing her antique fishpond. Bethan then became involved with Arthur, but could not forget Wesley (neither can Arthur): her daughter with Arthur has Cystic Fibrosis (340) which Bethan sees as her punishment. For further details please see, “Parker Swells” in Nicola Barker, *Heading Inland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 170-192.
19. The reindeer farm is also where Wesley fed the fingers of his right hand to an eagle owl in penance for trapping his brother Christopher in an abandoned fridge when they were children: Christopher died.
20. Possibly sabotaged by Dewi, perhaps by Wesley (gas canister, 514) or even the company (442).
21. Nancy.
22. “*With special thanks to Mr Toffler for his widely celebrated genius*”, 535, italics and bold original. Please see: Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (London: Pan Books, 1981) – the sequel to his world-wide bestselling, *Future Shock* (1970). According to Toffler, the third wave, the information age, followed the second wave of the industrial age.
23. Elsewhere in the novel he states: “I eschew the car ideologically”, 311.
24. Please see: Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). Heidegger famously reexamined being as being-in-the-world, or *Dasein*, not just being applied to individuals as Plato had previously argued. Heidegger’s preoccupation with this form of being, the proliferation of neologisms in this work and his emphasis on authenticity are all strangely reminiscent of Wesley.
25. Wesley obsessively walks around the perimeter of the island wondering if he is losing it. Later, when he is trying to rescue Sasha and Arthur from the sabotaged craft it is described as groaning “like Moby Dick, harpooned” (464) positioning Wesley as Ahab.
26. *Oxford English Dictionary* <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/30721?redirectedFrom=charisma#eid>> [accessed 4 November 2020]. Please also see: Weber, *Theory Social and Economic: Organization*, vol 3, trans. by A. M. Henderson and T. Parsons (London: W. Hodge, 1947), 329.
27. Barker, *Behindlings*, 31. At The Novels of Nicola Barker Symposium, Barker spoke of a reader who had written to explain that they always saw The Friend in her writing, meaning Christ (September 5, 2018).
28. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. by Alan Sheridan and ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 282.
29. The novel’s title has no preposition: it is not *The Behindlings*, but simply *Behindlings*. The effect is to emphasize the act of naming, rather than Behindlings as a noun.
30. Barker, *Behindlings*, 398. On the same page are references to other “cryptic comments” in the book’s margins “all saying Toffler *TTW* afterwards”, which are further allusions to Toffler’s *The Third Way*.
31. “‘Your brother,’ [Jo] said, ‘Christopher.’ Wesley’s left hand lunged towards his right”, 533.
32. *Oxford English Dictionary* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/8171?redirectedFrom=antagonism#eid>> [date accessed 22 December 2018].
33. Please see: Derrida, “Differance”, in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. by David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 129-160. Like the inversion of the relationship between Christ and his disciples, Wesley’s coining of the name Behindlings is a through-the-looking-glass version of Adam’s naming of the animals in chapter two of Genesis.
34. Royle 188.
35. Barker, *Behindlings* 12. For example, Behindlings, Loiter and Gumble Inc.
36. A neologism is a made-up-word: or rather, to put it more formally, it describes the process of coining a new term “to say what cannot be said otherwise”; Belsey, *Poststructuralism*, 5. Poststructuralists are famously fond of neologisms, like Wesley they too think “words *make* things special”.
37. Please see: Len Platt, *Writing London and the Thames Estuary 1576-2016* (Leiden: Brill, 2017). For further analysis of place as “graffiti”, please see the work of Platt on Barker’s whole Thames Gateway series, *Wide Open* (1998), *Behindlings* (2002) and *Darkmans* (2007). In particular, for commentary on the global in the local in *Behindlings*, please see: Platt, “‘Eating Gull since Friday’ – Estuary Grotesque, Seaside Noir”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58 (2017), 1-11.
38. Barker, *Behindlings*, 438-439. Barker revealed at The Novels of Nicola Barker Symposium that she actually found this graffiti in situ on the sea wall of Canvey Island (September 5, 2018). The author of this article prompted this revelation by wearing a t-shirt with the expletive line printed across it to deliver their paper, “Puerile Shithead? We Need to Talk about Wesley in Nicola Barker’s *Behindlings*”.

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