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COVER IMAGE: Detail from Jackson Pollock, *Red Composition* (1946), oil on masonite. 19¼ x 23¼ in. Consigned by the Everson Museum of Syracuse, New York.

antae (ISSN 2523-2126) is an international refereed journal aimed at exploring current issues and debates within English Studies, with a particular interest in literature, criticism, and their various contemporary interfaces. Set up in 2013 by postgraduate students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, it welcomes submissions situated across the interdisciplinary spaces provided by diverse forms and expressions within narrative, poetry, theatre, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, digital cultures, philosophy, and language studies. Creative writing and book reviews are also encouraged submissions.

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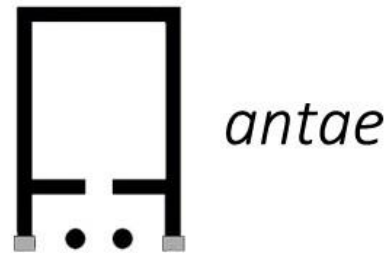
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Editorial

James Farrugia, Elsa Fiott

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Editorial

James Farrugia, Elsa Fiott

University of Malta

The three essays published in this issue consider, respectively, the three cornerstones of literary form: the poem, the novel, and the play. In this light, the issue's cover image—a detail from Jackson Pollock's *Red Composition*—stands in stark contrast, entirely dismissing the concept of form and embodying, in its drooling, carnivalesque splashes and unseemly drippings, what Georges Bataille describes as “formlessness” in a now notorious entry of the *Critical Dictionary*.

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.¹

Indeed, the paint splatters extend as spider legs do, or as remnants of fluorescent spittle—there are no neat categories, the painting exclaims in bold colours. No boxes or Venn diagrams or genre, but rather indeterminacy. The only shape is shapelessness, and everything is porous and colours overlap one another with no sense of dialectical synthesis. And, thus, formlessness ‘designates an ensemble of operations’ that includes within it art's liberation from both ‘the constraints of representation’ as well as from the constraints of the artists themselves.² ‘By abandoning the paintbrush and thus the anatomical connection that made it an extension of his hand’, as Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss write of Pollock, the painter ‘delegated a part of his process to matter itself. His traces took form through a combination of gesture and gravity, and both would vary according to the viscosity of the pigment’.³

In their own ways, the following articles respond to the formlessness intimated by Bataille's thoughts and Pollock's works even as they engage with meaning given specific form.

Sayani Sinha's ‘On John Ashbery's Poetry’ analyses the inchoate and enigmatic voice of the late American poet, undertaking a principally Heideggerian reading of his language and its obscure turnings. Through concepts such as contingency, the mirror(ed), final vocabularies, and the subaltern (as Spivak understands the term), Sinha examines the relation between Being and poetics to bring to light the fundamental impossibility of Being and Not-Being that Ashbery's writing uncovers. Hovering between something and nothing, ‘Ashbery creates non-

¹ Georges Bataille, ‘Formless’, *Documents 1*, Paris 1929, p. 382, as reproduced in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. by Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 31.

² Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), pp. 24-25.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

meaning out of meaning, nonsense out of words, emptiness out of metaphors. He courts cynicism because he is a practicing cynic', and we are thus asked to suspend any determinate notions and positionings of the "I" within a Being that is (not).

Following this, Liam Randles considers another aspect of suspended identity in his reading of Murakami's *In the Miso Soup* (1997) and Erickson's *The Sea Came in at Midnight* (1999). In 'The Anxieties of Cultural Influence: Cross-Cultural Contrasts and Conflicts in Steve Erickson and Ryu Murakami', Randles explores the collision of national and cultural identities, as when America meets Japan in these two parallel novels. The immediate association, of course, is the devastating 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which both authors, as Randles presents them, implicitly understand as an event predicating a trajectory of contemporary fragmentation through cultural displacement, ideological struggle, alienated selves, and a globalised commercialism that dilutes any sense of prevailing national identity. Randles thus brings to light the 'potent symbolism and thematic properties of these [cultural, national] encounters' in order to 'establish what exactly this reveals about American and Japanese attitudes towards culture, tradition, and their shared and individual histories at the twentieth century's conclusion'.

Lastly, in 'Give Us the Foils—Fencing in *Hamlet*', Sean Fenech looks at a particular aspect of Shakespearean drama which, despite featuring in multitudinous recreations, often remains unseen. Fenech's essay scrupulously examines the details of the fencing match in *Hamlet*'s final scene in order to bring to light the nuances, inconsistencies, and unread significances that emerge in the wake of its acknowledgement. The essay contextualises contemporary fencing treatises, as well as stage directions and manoeuvres of performance, and discusses the play's ludic element as one that emerges more starkly in this conversation. While the combat was likely inserted 'both to meet public demands for fencing matches in plays as well as for dramatic purposes', there remains a notable contrast with contemporary 'flashy choreography heavily dominates the visual sphere of entertainment and art', something which Fenech explores in depth.

And so, returning to Pollock, one can observe how these three articles all break down the form that they address. Sinha's work considers a poetics that annuls and decimates the poet's identity along with its own language, where one is left with the impossibility of the subaltern that 'cannot speak; which is to say, the subaltern cannot be heard'. Randles emphasises the fragmented nature of diverse cultural and social forces, shaping us not into something definite and specifically national/cultural, but rather homeless and wandering. Fenech, in turn, stresses the corporeal materialism of combat which in turn allows the play to be embodied in an age where *Hamlet* is either more read than seen or else, when seen, sanded down to more digestible action. This issue encourages the reader to enter into a dialogue with these three essays, further seeking formlessness out of form.