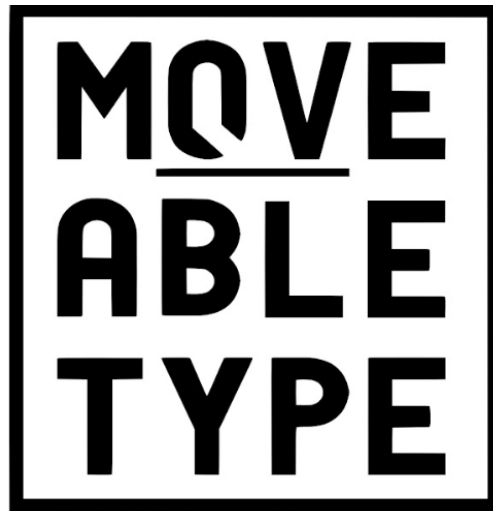




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Promise

Introduction

“That’s the point of a promise, [Cromwell] thinks. It wouldn’t have any value, if you could see what it would cost you when you made it.”

The Mirror and the Light by Hilary Mantel (2020)

A promise is an essentially human speech act—a performative utterance of intended action, which assumes or conceives an imagined, but uncertain ethical responsibility to our future selves. Self-reflexive and anchoring, it both constrains *and* creates the self to come; as an intersubjective force, it binds us to our promisee(s) *and* commits us to future obligations; it is both public *and* private in the sense that it is performed by and for us, the intended other party, and for the witnesses of the promise. It is a test of moral courage, self-constitution, and fulfilment: we cannot know what will happen in the duration of the promise to which we must commit *come what may*. The vow has temporal duration and power—it imagines, anticipates, and creates our future. It makes and breaks our worlds. This temporal force is imbedded in its etymology, borrowing partly from Anglo-Norman *promesse* and from Latin *promissum*, literally something sent forth. The prefix *pro* can also suggest delegated agency – in making a promise we speak of *and for* others. For moral philosophers, it has profound ethical significance; it underpins societal operation and relations. Self-creating and -fulfilling, it creates and organises epistemic parameters that are not yet determined at its inception. Its impact on the parties to the promise has ontological force; it brings them into being in their altered, created, and reordered world. Potentially excessive or self-limiting, the promise can impact, and yet be rendered inoperable or constraining, drawing other subjects into its passionate force.

Promises abound in fiction, creating, and determining intersubjective relations; their inherent narrative dynamic impels the plot over time. When is a promise performed? When can we evaluate and judge it? Is that beyond, literally, the book’s recognition? This uncertain yet sustained trajectory of a promise, and its ethical, moral, and, overwhelmingly, social implications are vital components of writers’ imaginative exploration of subjects negotiating their worlds. Fiction makes its own promise to us as readers to allow us imaginative and sensory simulation to experience and judge our social and material existence. Promises and their evocation in literature are socially and culturally contingent. There is a double promise here of the promissory act itself *and* its textual representation as an important component of literature. Reading about the enactment of promises through the human and ethical drama of their working out is both a thrilling spectator sport and, we hope, a paradigm of this dynamic intersubjective human connector. By reading about the trajectory of a promise, we learn by example the complications and dangers of the verbal act and its consequences. Far from being shunned, bonds between humans are a vital vector of our human condition and, perhaps, give us joy, hope and comprehension even in their tragic and costly versions. The contributions to this edition examine many different examples of promises and emphasise the essentially human power of the speech act and its adherence.

Bret van den Brink argues that promises are ontological commitments to the settled templar states of virginity and marriage in Sir Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia* (1593); *falling* in love is an intermediate, unstable, labyrinthine passage – a secular trajectory that mirrors that of scriptural

paradise, fall, and redemption. His ideas enforce the primacy of promise as a vital aspect of being in the world, of self-regard, and its construction. The process of falling in love is a disordered and, potentially, disastrous movement between the promise of achieved virtuous states. Virginity, in this construction, is as much a metaphysical and spiritual reality as physical. As a gift from God, it cannot be attained by an effort of will. *Arcadia's* Philoclea cannot make this vow, as she has neither the agency nor the grace. Falling in love forces her precipitously to unmake and remake her vow with the peril that this offers to self-knowledge and construction – ‘a more quick opening of her mind than she minded’. Philoclea’s initial promise was epistemically contingent – she could not know that she would fall in love. She does not break her vow but rather remakes it, ‘governing her passion with reason’; marriage holds the promise of unity with another person and crucially of generation of self and child. Promises in this schema of literary romance, based on Renaissance Neoplatonist philosophy and Protestant theology, are reflexive and rooted in the World– they represent a ‘fall into mortality’ whilst instigating a commitment to a better self-knowledge, and a virtuous life.

Turning to literary representation, Sohini Raychaudhuri reveals the double promise of scary stories for child readers in the collection of Alvin Schwartz – master folklorist and storyteller. Banned and controversial for their alleged terrifying content, these stories are drawn from universal collections, scattered and strengthened by oral retelling, and are revitalised by Schwartz and his illustrator, Stephen Gammell. For Chaudhuri, the fulfilled moral promises of revenge and restitution offer an exemplary and, in the end, comforting trajectory for children. The art of storytelling, especially the *jump* is exciting—it models for children and their parents a communicative model of being in the world and our making of contracts in order to live fairly together.

Luke Basil Louis Ow Zhi Heng considers the ideal of peaceful cooperative living promised by the social contract implicit in the strong governance proposed in Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651). Ow suggests that this promise is inherently unstable, and its potential vicious failure was illustrated half a century earlier by Shakespeare in his play *Titus Andronicus* (1594). For Hobbes, the promise of his utopian community denies the human impulse to construct fragmented alliances and conflict; in return for subjects’ collective restraint of their egotistic impulses, the sovereign has a reciprocal obligation to act on behalf of the well-being of his subjects. This mirrors the bond between God and his subjects we have explored in Old English poetry. Ow puts Machiavelli in dialogue with Shakespeare in his *Discourse on Livy* (1531), in which the earlier writer urges vigilance to guard against the false promises of a self-proclaimed benevolent and cooperative governance. Titus begins the play as a loyal and valiant subject who is betrayed by his ruler. The reciprocity of a pledge to loyal subservience envisaged by Hobbes—that the state has a corresponding obligation to its subject—is overridden by human pride and greed. Ow argues that it is the particular pursuit of glory that corrodes the mutual and protective bonds of the state and its subjects. A commonwealth has bounds—implicit promissory obligations which, if relied upon rigidly and without consideration, are undermined and overthrown by self-seeking, which Machiavelli asserts as intrinsic to human nature. To this human flaw, Shakespeare gives a bloody unravelling of severed ties. Titus fulfils his side of the bargain to an almost unconscionable degree, sacrificing sons and daughter to the sovereign, and his own flesh to protect the state and his fellow citizens. In Hobbes’ purview, the soldier outshines his master to build and protect the commonwealth. This implicit bargain is not kept. As Machiavelli predicts, the emperor is fearful of his reliance on, and potential eclipse by this service, regarding Titus as a rival for his authority. Hobbes understands the dangers of a ruler’s vainglory—that it can become an insatiable hunger upsetting any rational transactional behaviour and negating reciprocal obligations, even those that promise a stable and prosperous commonwealth. For Ow,

this dynamic could be seen as a map for Titus' demise. Saturninus breaks his covenant to his people, and to Titus, recklessly without thought for security and well-being that Hobbes sees as his duty and responsibility. Without a clear understanding and enactment of these reciprocal obligations, society degenerates into factional chaos and violence. Machiavelli predicts that binding laws and customs will fray as good intentions fade to weak and wicked ones. Political systems need to recognise collective will and understanding to regulate the balance of reciprocal obligations that underpin a healthy society. Promises and rules are only as strong as the protagonists, and their faith in societal beliefs which enact them. If, as Hobbes predicts, men are governed largely by appetite, or by cunning according to Machiavelli, a strong enlightened ruler is needed to direct their obligations to society. Saturninus is an absurdist negative model, unable to fulfil any sustainable bargain of civil interpersonal behaviour. He fails to deliver the promise of the commonwealth and Machiavelli warns of the danger of such a breakdown.

Both Alexander Williams and Kennedy Marie Crowder examine the promise of cultural resistance and expression for African Americans. For these critics, America has failed in its promise to provide life—no ontological acknowledgement or acceptance has existed in American society despite the explicit post-emancipation promise. Crowder examines the historic failure of undertaking in its literary expression of disappointment, pragmatism, and subversion. Williams notes that Fanon's 'existential deviation' not only adumbrates twentieth-century white hegemonic exclusion but is made more complex in the current era. For both writers, unresolved hauntology and 'middle-passage epistemology' operates as a wake, unsettling and unbalancing the possibility of a reckoning and recognition of Black lives. This schema operates, perhaps, as a broken or unfulfilled promise – slavery and its aftermath are profoundly antithetical to the undertakings of the America constitution, and of the later enshrining of human rights.

Kennedy Marie Crowder argues that the concept of linear time functions as a false and even disingenuous promise to reckon with the aftermath of slavery, and indeed permanently delays laying to rest slavery's ghost. Through reading three contemporary American texts through the comforting Western linearly progressive, yet restrictive and regressive, lens of 'middle passage epistemology', she offers an alternative more complex, compelling, and accurate version of the lived realities of slavery's legacy, and false promises of uncompromised life and freedom. A western teleological version of history overwrites the reality of recurring violence, and restriction; it eliminates the memory of cultural heritage and struggle, as well as the need for a promise of recognition and restitution in order to *live*. The urge to 'move on' paradoxically validates the concept of progressive linear time without paying attention to the need to stop, acknowledge, and make amends.

For Williams, rap as a cultural expression of Christina Sharpe's 'wake work'—work that bears witness to the cumulative trauma that results from the experience of new world blackness—promises ontological resistance and the opportunity of reparative solutions to the psychopathy of the Black man's existential deviation. Childish Gambino, as the avatar of twentieth-century African American experience and embodied being, operates to ventriloquise the ghosts and animate the Black man's lived experience. The rapper draws on African oral traditions to give animated meaning to Sharpe and McKittrick's evocation of ontological fracture, violence, and the resultant haunting. Williams believes that the rap artist extends and makes specific these abuses. Speech and syntax appropriated, yet altered, from the coloniser's hegemonic constitutive language of civilisation is made transcendent, a narrative of anti-black singularity, and resistance. It fulfils Fanon's purposing of language as a vital ontological vector. Gambino as an economic object confronts the colonial ledgers of the black archive, promising a renewal and repossession. Williams's close reading shows that through lyric repossession, retelling, and cathartic alleviation, rap promises hope for linguistic redemption; ghostly knowledge is passed through

the generations and articulated through rap and storytelling—the expression of an inverted reworking of dark promise.

Bruce Xiao discusses the early literary evocation of promise in his reading of Old English hagiographic poetry. Using linguistic analysis, he shows the complex and performative qualities of promise, and the operation of self-promise—that the adherence to a promise, especially to God, is an act of self-fulfilment and development. Promise in this analysis is a visible demonstration of personal commitment, and spiritual exemplar to others. It operates as its own reward to self. As a performance of saintly intercession, it is an act of sacrifice to believers *and* a gift to self. He considers that promise is central to the spiritual legitimacy of religious communities. The pledge made to God is reciprocal, connecting heaven and earth. Furthermore, the distinct literary qualities of these poems offer a secondary promise to readers and listeners, one of the satisfying communicative and constitutive conceptual action of pledges, as well as their aesthetic fulfilment. In his reading, Xiao puts the imagined religious community of God and his followers in dialogue with the qualitative performance and growth of self through faithfulness and steadfastness. The sustained undertaking of promise is a vital expression and construction of religious faith and community. Promise can be read through this conviction of covenant. For Xiao, the foundational covenant in Christian soteriology is re-presented in a vernacular promise that underpins subsequent interpretations of the reciprocal gesture. He argues that epistemic intellectual growth—figurative seeing—is crucial in the development of a pledge to and covenant with God. Words themselves and their delivery become vital to the performance, comprehension, and consequence of the promise; the speech-act is inherent. There is, nonetheless, an expectation of physical suffering, to test faith in God's reciprocal commitment. The saint must demonstrate his temporal extended fidelity in both words and deed.

Nabanita Chakraborty argues for an understanding of the contingent socially-situated nature of a promise in her analysis of Elizabeth I's rhetorically conditional vow to her subjects to marry. Once again, the perilous exchange of virginity for marriage and its generative promise is under consideration. Chakraborty examines the performative promissory act, noting the obligations of the audience to believe the promisor to effectuate the contract and yet, in this case, to understand the concept of *kairos* – the propitious moment for action without which the promise cannot be fulfilled. Through a careful reading of Elizabeth's speech with consideration of speech act theory and rhetorical precepts, Chakraborty demonstrates the queen's proficiency in promissory construction by putting the onus of trust on her subjects, yet protecting her political position with conditional pragmatism. This reading complicates feminist readings by showing the queen as a skilled and wary political operator. Whilst Philoclea is able to fulfil the conditions to move from one promised state to another, with grace, Elizabeth's rhetorical strategy keeps her subjects literally in suspense.

A wide range of creative writing submissions explore the sensory promise of life, reciprocal obligation, and the redemptive power of promise to undo harms. Lydia Pearson's poem 'An Unspoken Promise' pledges words in a temporal suspension to make good the harms of living. She offers a commonality of word and comprehension, a weaving together to be stronger in the world through shared voice and utterance. Misha McDaniel's deliciously sensory story 'this is what august tastes like' reminds us of our temporal obligation to being in the world with a warning to honour our mutual commitments to each other and to the natural world. In her translation of Savita Pathak's 'No One is Voiceless', Sonakshi Srivastava evokes the childish present and ever-possible future, holding out hope and promise to the weary. The child's overbrimming zest for life, animating all he glimpses, underscores this fragile promise. Fiona O'Malley captures the personal trust inherent in promise; a commitment to the sea is life enhancing and fulfilling, but ultimately a pledging of one's safety. The ocean may be

treacherous, but entrusting your being and fate to larger forces may in the end be a human compassionate gift. Nicholas Samaras in his poem ‘The Promise’ manifests the sadness of promises that elude us—we can only promise ourselves but have not the power or vision of determining our end—all our promises are a contingent leap of faith.

The book reviews in this edition engage with ideas of the self-reflexive power of promise to create and bind, sometimes in destructive ways. Freddy Conway-Shaw shows us how, for Stuart Burrows in *Henry James and the Promise of Fiction*, the promise is a governing trope in Henry James’s fiction. Burrows structures his argument with a rigorous theoretical grounding to show the weight of a Jamesian promise, world-making and -breaking, with its existential impact across the author’s fiction. These promises are self-reflexive acts—strengthening and constituting being. Intriguingly, Conway-Shaw further emphasises that textual production, as much by the protagonists as by the author, imbues fiction itself as a promissory act. In her review of Victoria MacKenzie’s fictional account of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, *For thy Great Pain Have Mercy on My Little Pain*, Sarah Wallace contrasts the protagonists’ devotional promise to God in all its life-renouncing and -embracing qualities. She mourns Kempe’s narrow if spirited refusal of the world and feminine promise, celebrating Julian’s doubled devotions, and wishing that MacKenzie’s poetics could animate the joy and suffering of this spiritual anchoress more deeply. Catherine Marcotte notices the double nature of promises—those we make to each other *and* the ones we make to ourselves—in her review of *Milk Fed* by Melissa Broder. The entangled narrative of religion and myth, with female conventions around thinness and queer attraction allow for a complication of human and narrative promise. She shows how our commitment to ways of being in the world are conflicted by the ideological stories we are fed. This novel about eating and taking care of our bodies shows the bad and then better ways to understand the restrictions and liberations of epistemic beliefs in order to fulfil the double nature of personal promise. Kushali Mahajan makes visible the implied promise to care and protect in return for patriarchal domination – a domestic version of Luke Louis Ow’s political theory. Her review of the forthcoming publication of the translation of Andrea Bajani’s autofiction *The Anniversary* details the pain and rupture of broken commitments.

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This issue of *Moveable Type* is a satisfying outcome to the pledge we make to our contributors to bring their voices and ideas together, creating an issue that exceeds its constituent parts. I am grateful for their faith in us and for the quality of their writing. The team at *Moveable Type* has worked generously together – my thanks for support from Olivia Ho as reviews editor, and to Ilona Mannan as creative editor. Emma Cavell and Daniel Evans brought their skilled editorial advice on Old English. Eric Langley advised incisively on Shakespeare, and has generously fulfilled his promise as faculty advisor. Anthony Ossa-Richardson has brought his editorial wisdom, warm encouragement, and expertly fixed wayward matters of format and typography. Excellent peer review and editorial support was given by Jennifer Kenyon, Naomi Reiter, Catherine McNaughton. Zoe Guttenplan transformed the quality of the journal’s appearance with her invaluable advice and knowledge. I am grateful to you all.

Sarah Chambré
Editor in Chief