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The Unseen World: Denarrative Desire in the Contemporary British Novel

By

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requirements for the degree of

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University of California, Berkeley

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Abstract

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This dissertation proposes a new theoretical account of the contemporary British novel's vexed relationship to history. This project examines novels that attempt to rewrite narratives of violence and imperialism through what I see as failed magic tricks: fantastical reinventions of earlier literary or historical texts that ultimately prove untenable. This impulse resists the demystifying attitude of the postmodern novel, exemplified in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), where the ever-present figure of the novelist makes analytical intrusions into the Victorian plot. Instead, the novels that I examine—including works by Peter Ackroyd, Graham Swift, A.S. Byatt, and David Mitchell—beguile readers into a temporary state of willful desire for historical recuperation. However, these would-be narrative enchantments threaten violence and pose dark ethical quandaries for both author and reader. This threat of complicity emerges in Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* (1985), through the reader's uneasy sympathy for the novel's twinned anti-heroes, a murderer and a detective separated by two hundred years, yet illogically involved in the same crimes. In what I call the necropolitan chronotope of Ackroyd's London, distinctions between these temporally distant characters deteriorate, as do those between life and death, good and evil. Past and present coalesce into a nightmarish void of time, in which attempts at narrative or historical resolution inevitably backfire: events can be neither changed nor undone because they are in a state of perpetual manifestation.

I contend that these recent texts express a compulsive *denarrative* desire to undo or unknow pre-existing narratives, a wish that can never be responsibly fulfilled. This drive is fetishistic; the authors I consider recognize the impossibility of historical revision but enact it nonetheless, through formal experiments that critics often inadequately categorize as belated versions of postmodern irony or playfulness. These over-familiar terms fail to account for the serious claims that these novels make about the uncomfortable inextricability of the past and the present. For example, in *Cloud Atlas* (2004), Mitchell constructs densely interlocking layers of pastiche and a unique nested structure that moves first forwards, then backwards in time. Mitchell hews close to metanarratives of modernization and literary history, only to confound both. By considering texts like *Cloud Atlas* that hover outside the postmodern in the nebulous area of the “post-postmodern,” my project traces an alternative lineage of the contemporary novel. Alongside these theoretical questions about history, narrative form, and periodization, my dissertation interrogates the contentious status of the British novel in relation to broader European, Anglophone, and “world” literary landscapes.

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Introduction:  
**The Land of Begin Again**

*Turning Back the Pages: Denarrative Desire*

The end of a novel is always a death; as we leave its world, we mourn its passing, as well as our own. When Walter Benjamin tells us that “death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell,” it is not only the lurking shadow of the character’s death, or the storyteller’s death, but the reader’s as well that lends this resonant gravity (Benjamin 94). Yet this death, though ineluctable, is also what we fear; as the pages dwindle and the end (or The End) approaches, one might wish the book could reach further, sprout new pages, extend its own “shivering life” and thus ours (Benjamin 101). The irresistible deathliness of “The End” is elegantly formulated by Peter Brooks’ explanation of “narrative desire”: “If the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire for the end” (Brooks 52).

Yet when we come to the desired last words – final, fixed, deathly – they are never so meaningful as we had hoped, and after them, we find only blankness: the white of the empty page, the darkness of grieving contemplation. This project began with a simple speculation: if narrative desire is our end-seeking death drive, then what are we to make of the feeling of loss and abandonment that we find in the blank abyss that follows, the vacant non-afterlife of a desired next page that never comes? One answer immediately presents itself: we turn back to the source of the story: we return to Page 1. The dissatisfaction of reading is incurable, but one might try and assuage it by *rereading* – finding, once we’ve fulfilled our drive to get to the end of a story, that it provokes a perverse, equal and opposite desire to go back to the beginning. In keeping with the contrarian nature of this impulse, I began to think of this Newtonian narrative backlash as *denarrative desire*: namely, the inexorable yearning to turn the pages back and read them, or, more dramatically, to *write them* again. Yet the problem of rewriting is the writer’s (and reader’s) recognition of the impossibility of unwriting. For rewriting implies rereading, and any act of retelling or reshaping cannot actually erase the original text that lurks beneath and within a new incarnation. How can any author, attempting a rewriting, avoid the classic metafictional trap of Jorge Luis Borges’ Pierre Menard, believing that he instills new meaning into Cervantes’ *Quixote* by writing it over again, word for word? Denarrative desire turns the pages back, inserting new pages to render other narrative possibilities visible (while covering up the ones that we are unhappy with). But *writing over* is not the same as erasing; generating more narrative never actually undoes that first reading. Despite the urgent want to re-view – to see something else from a different angle - you can’t unsee something, just as you can’t unwrite what is written, or make someone unread what they have already read. The originary death still lurks in the text, regardless of how it is reread or reconfigured; in Brooks’ words, “Once there is text, expression, writing, one becomes subject to the processes of desiring and dying” (Brooks 53).

The concept of denarrative desire draws equally on Brooks’ readerly formulation, and on Brian Richardson’s innovative, writerly exploration of “extreme forms of narration” in *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (2006). In his chapter

on “Three Extreme Forms of Narration and a Note on Postmodern Unreliability,” Richardson defines “denarration” as “a kind of narrative negation in which a narrator denies significant aspects of his or her narrative that had earlier been presented as given” (Richardson 87). That is, the narrator *takes back* what has already been narrated – as Richardson explains, “the simplest example of this might be something like, “Yesterday it was raining. Yesterday it was not raining” (Richardson 87). This concept has its origins in Gerald Prince’s idea of the “disnarrated” event, a term describing a “non-event” that is speculatively narrated but does not actually occur. In Richardson’s more “extreme” version, the narrative negation blatantly undoes what it has already done. Ultimately, as Richardson comments, “the narrative world may start to fissure; instead of observing a fluctuating narrator alter descriptions of a stable world, we will see the world being created and re-created anew” (Richardson 89). Such is the overarching, much longed for, never achieved goal of any denarrative project. Denarrative desire is the unfulfillable yearning to enact this move on a large scale: rather than the yearning to reach the end that Brooks’ term foregrounds, denarrative desire longs to loop back and overwrite an entire story with a known end, to “re-create” the world “anew,” all the while recognizing the futility of this act. Thus, denarrative desire is the expression of the perverse drive to somehow *unknow* or undo narratives, whether fictional, world historical, or literary historical, that readers are already familiar with, to go back to the same first page and read a different book. The texts I examine self-consciously play upon the state of frustrated suspension that this unattainable desire creates.

The text’s fundamental understanding of this impossibility – that which the denarrative impulse futilely disavows – renders conventional narrative strategies insufficient, and thus necessitates the magical (anti-scientific, anti-Enlightenment) narrative logics that each of my chapters explores. In the texts I will address, the attempted “magic” is a revision of previous unsatisfactory or incomprehensible narratives, both fictional and historical (often situated somewhere in the no man’s land between the two), thus striking the first tone of meaning in my title, *The Unseen World*. These projects of rewriting call upon our interest in a certain kind of magical thinking, and can be seen as complex feats of illusion, narrative enchantments that recognize that readers know that historical recuperation is as impossible as magic, but force us to believe temporarily—or, at least, to *want* to believe—that it is possible after all, perhaps in an alternate world or an alternately narrated one.<sup>1</sup> This understanding that these attempts are predestined for failure is essential to reading these texts, for it is not *actual* reparation or recuperation of the previous narrative that is at stake, but rather, it is the desire for a sustained moment of belief in the possibility of the latter that is significant. This desire is a fetishistic one, following Octave Mannoni’s formulation, *je sais bien, mais quand même*: the reader knows well that completely rewriting the original narrative is impossible, yet *all the same*, she longs to believe in this possibility. The texts that populate my dissertation are highly self-aware and self-reflective; they are *knowing* texts in the sense that they recognize the impossibility of the projects that they take on, yet they simultaneously occlude that knowledge, staving off inevitable failure for as long as possible, and attempting to sustain the illusions of renewed concordance or possibility that they craft.

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<sup>1</sup> Though my project does not explicitly engage with Catherine Gallagher’s recent work on alternate histories and the counterfactual, I do believe that the counterfactual as a literary mode relates closely to the “magical” models of narrative exploration that I engage. Rather than changing *facts* or rewriting events, the novels that I interrogate here are interested in how the form of telling might insidiously affect the content of a narrative.

*Death After Death: A Brief Case Study*

The ontological problem of this mode of challenging suspension is performed intriguingly by Kate Atkinson's 2013 novel, *Life after Life*. In the novel, death cannot be undone – yet, by narrative means, it can be redone, or paradoxically, even *relived*. The novel's basic premise is an enactment of this concept: in it, an otherwise unremarkable protagonist, Ursula Todd, lives out an extraordinary narrative experiment, wherein, at the end of each “chapter,” she dies, then is reborn on the next page, into the same life, having learned – something. This is already a structural perversion of Brooks' narrative desire; while, as he writes of the sixteenth-century picaresque novel *Lazarillo de Tormes*, “each chapter develops as a set of tricks and stratagems devised to overcome a specific form of threat, and thus literally to enable life, and narrative, to go forward” (Brooks 38). Ursula must similarly learn to overcome the threats that menace her, yet she markedly *fails* overcome them – and her failure is inscribed over again. Thus, every new section is a new beginning, a return to the first page (quite literally – we return to the heading “11 February 1910,” the date of Ursula's birth, over and over again). If narrative desire is the progress-seeking drive, then *Life after Life* enacts something at once the same and very, very different – a *denarrative* urge to pass *through* the end and return to the beginning or, as what the novel, quoting Vera Lynn's 1942 wartime chart-topper, cynically and poignantly refers to as “The Land of Begin Again.” The novel enacts a kind of tug-of-war between the forward-pushing narrative drive and the backwards-pulling denarrative one, such that for every life there is a death to be reckoned with.

Significantly, Atkinson begins her novel with a contradictory set of citations: the first of her three epigraphs is Nietzsche's famous “eternal recurrence” passage from *The Gay Science*. The thought experiment that he describes is as follows:

What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more”... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experience a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.” (Nietzsche, quoted in Atkinson)

Atkinson's novel takes Nietzsche's initial “What if?” as its premise, and ultimately plays out the following “would you or wouldn't you” as its continuing central drama. In it, a single protagonist lives and relives a single life countless times, knowing but not knowing that she has already crossed her own paths. The novel's table of contents reads like a dysfunctional timeline, repeating the same cryptic, alternately grandiose and reticent chapter titles with dates that loop and stutter. Is Ursula's quandary an opportunity for recuperation and perfection – a chance to live “life after life” – or a state of ongoing morbidity, the experience of death after death? This playful yet serious challenge to the reader is unsurprising coming from Atkinson; since her appearance on the scene with *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1999), she has enthusiastically staked her claim as a maker of disruptive, rowdy fictions; her novels overflow their generic boundaries. Particularly in *Behind the Scenes* and *Life after Life*, Atkinson stages elaborate novelistic tricks that ultimately self-destruct, gleefully caving in upon their own formal and temporal structures. The knowingness of her authorial



command is signaled slyly in the epigraphs that follow Nietzsche's speculative proposal. Next, she presents a quote from Plato's *Cratylus*, "Everything changes and nothing remains still," that seems to instantly oppose and undo – *denarrate* – the static premise posed by Nietzsche's demon. Finally, in the third epigraph, she buries a self-referential bomb in plain sight. The quotation, "What if we had a chance to do it again and again, until we finally did get it right? Wouldn't that be wonderful?" is attributed to Edward Beresford Todd; readers who look back at this significant opening page realize that this is a character in the novel, Ursula's often-lost brother, Teddy. This metafictional commentary can be read in two ways, enacting the debate that Nietzsche himself poses, as well as the conflict between Nietzsche and Plato. On one hand, it could be deceptively wonderful, in a positive sense, if we view the novel as an extenuated process of metaphysical *Bildung*. On the other, though, it could also simply be wonderful – provoking wonder, in the neutral sense of the fantastic – if we focus on the ambivalence and unease at the novel's heart.

*Life After Life* whips us through these possible reactions that each of the epigraphs presents; the novel's furious narrative energy is both exciting and ultimately taxing on the reader, as well as on Ursula herself. Each start is a new one, with a novelty that quickly grows old. The reader, like Ursula (and like the mysterious authorial consciousness of the novel), grows exhausted by a sense of familiarity and retention. Of the "new" things that are written into Ursula's always-unfolding life, a surprising few are actually new to readers of twentieth century European literature and history; Ursula's many lives rely upon certain historical set pieces that strike readers simultaneously as exciting and familiar (the Blitz; the building mania of pre-war Nazi Germany; post-war Britain of ration cards and pay-as-you-go gas meters). The real moments of newness happen early in the novel, when Ursula is still a child, and small things are everything to her: for example, an odd wooden knitting doll, a bowl of sugar lumps, a pair of baby rabbits. What emerge increasingly in the novel as mental sticking-points, or moments that haunt, are the deaths that Ursula experiences. In these unique deaths, always changing, never "remain[ing] still," multiplied yet individual – death by falling, by drowning, at the hands of an abusive husband, by Blitz, and – notably – once by suicide – there is a terrible novelty that overwhelms the increasing banal repetitiveness of the lives that she leads in between. While the phrase that announces Ursula's deaths, "darkness falls," is as repetitive as the date of her birth, the "darkness" accretes meaning across the time of the novel, through the different ways we see Ursula fall into it. Atkinson's narrative back-and-forth swings between wish fulfillment and disaster, neurotically acting out the unstoppable drive of denarrative desire; the novel itself, as Frank Kermode puts it in *The Sense of an Ending*, is an extreme working out of the fact that, "Men, like poets, rush 'in to the midst,' *in medias res*; they also die *in mediis rebus*' (Kermode 7). And, in fact, the novel itself leaves readers – and Ursula – still *in mediis rebus*, as one of her lives leads to a moment of resolution that feels deceptively permanent, yet is actually as temporary as any of the others. In the end, it appears that Ursula fails to affect major historical change; while the novel's red-herring prologue, and an oft-reenacted scene in 1930 Munich, suggest that killing Hitler and preventing World War II will be Ursula's ultimate goal, that plotline dwindles before the end of the novel, suggesting that the world in which Ursula successfully kills the Führer is as ephemeral as any of the others. Ursula's greatest triumph in the novel is a relatively small one: at the end, she creates a world in which her brother Teddy – he of the "wonderful" epigraph – returns home from the war. However, this suggestion of a happy ending is rendered all the more poignant and disappointing by its brevity; the next page, which readers

anticipate will be a blank and final ending, brings us back to the beginning: the chapter heading, “Snow,” and that familiar date, 11 February 1910.

### *Wishing in the Moment*

The questions of form and genre that Atkinson’s back-and-forth novel raises also gesture towards a central aspect of this project: periodization. While I do not see denarrative desire as an exclusively contemporary phenomenon by any means,<sup>2</sup> its use as the governing premise of this project seeks to give shape to what I see as a constellation of texts that put pressure on form for the explicit purpose of reshaping readers’ relations to the earlier narratives, whether historical or fictional (if there can be said to be a difference between the two). As I have demonstrated above, denarrative desire is a self-consciously defeating impulse that takes into account its own failure, and thus the texts that act it out are always forced to interrogate the shapes they take, and the literary traditions they draw upon. In the cases of the novels I have chosen to frame the “contemporary,” the most salient point of periodizing reference is the problematic notion of the “postmodern novel.” In a 2004 article in *The Guardian*, David Mitchell reflects fondly but critically on a formative text of his university years, Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler* (1979). Tongue firmly in cheek, he describes his undergraduate self as an enthralled reader (or “Reader,” as Calvino’s novel would have it), whose passion for Calvino’s book and others like it culminated in “a devout MA on (ahem) ‘The Postmodern Novel.’” Upon rereading the novel years later, he is struck by how it relies heavily upon its prodigious “cleverness,” creating in the older Mitchell “the sense of flatness you get when a hackneyed magician says ‘Prepare to be amazed!’” (Mitchell, “Enter the Maze”). All the same, Mitchell acknowledges both his continuing debt to Calvino, and his new respect for the novel’s deeper concern with the processes of reading and writing. He tells readers the experimental form of Calvino’s novel inspired his own 2004 novel, *Cloud Atlas*, which takes the playful premise of *If on a winter’s night a traveler* (a sequence of disconnected, unfinished narratives) and extrapolates upon it. The first half of *Cloud Atlas* is a series of six open-ended narratives, which are then revisited and completed in its second half; thus, Mitchell’s novel enacts its own kind of magical transformation by closing them.

*Cloud Atlas* is not alone in its attempt to bring a new, less “hackneyed” practice of narrative magic to the novel. I identify a series of unique narrative processes that can be best described as literary magic tricks. In the texts that I address, the “magic” entails creating a new relation between the past and the present by revising earlier narratives of violence and imperialism. Using modes of narrative experimentation that draw upon traditions of mysticism and the occult to reimagine history, these texts attempt to escape from the ahistorical aesthetic of the surface, recalled in Mitchell’s “sense of flatness,” that critics often claim characterized the postmodern moment. These projects of rewriting are instead complex feats of illusion, narrative enchantments that recognize that changing history is as impossible as magic, but ask us to believe temporarily—or, at least, make us *want* to believe—that it is possible after all. The brutal histories that these authors reappraise are ultimately irrecoverable, and to attempt real explanation or reconciliation with them is

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, like Brooks’s working out of narrative desire, this concept had its birth in Balzac (while Brooks’ central example is *La Peau de Chagrin* (1831), my project found its inspiration in the 1830 novella, *Adieu*). The impulse to write back or write over is clearly not a specific historical imperative, and other studies might trace its appearance in other traditions and literary historical moments.

disingenuous, perhaps even dangerous. Through the constellation of primary texts that I have chosen—including works by Mitchell, Graham Swift, A.S. Byatt, Peter Ackroyd, and others—I render visible the ways in which the postmodern novel’s neurotic preoccupation with what Linda Hutcheon calls the “unresolved contradiction” of historical knowledge is currently being supplanted by a markedly different dialectic (Hutcheon 106). Many of these newer texts engage these magical modes of narrative to seemingly “resolve” or re-close historical narratives, while still striving to avoid the ethical crime of heroically recuperating the past. By framing these questions in a comparative context, my dissertation sheds light upon the emerging body of texts that represent the state of British fiction today, in which concerns regarding pre-established narratives of historical pasts and speculative futures create dynamic interactions with similarly evolving notions of broader European, postcolonial Anglophone, and “world” literatures. As Peter Boxall suggests in his study of the novel in the twenty-first-century, “the international novel today offers a response to a new kind of being in the world in the third millennium, one that emerges in the wake of the decline of national sovereignty, and with the development of a new set of cultural and technological protocols for the organization of space and time” (Boxall 8).

The “magical” quality of these texts, and their appeal to unseen worlds of different narrative avenues of exploration also resonates, in some senses, with Philip Tew’s focus on the resurgence of the mythopoeic mode in the contemporary novel’s figurations of the past and present. Using Ernst Cassirer’s definition of myth, Tew highlights the fact that “Postmodernism, the reductively rational and the dominance of the scientific are diffused through evoking a range of mythopoeic and historical subversions” that hearken back to modernism’s “experimental consciousness” (Tew xi). While my readings do not follow Tew’s specific focus on mythic structures, it is important to note a broader critical interest in reinstating earlier modes of narrative thinking, such as the mythical, the magical, and the mystical.

### *Unseen Worlds*

In philosophical terms, the texts that I examine might be seen as narrative enactments of theories of environment and history that have emerged in recent decades, from Jacques Derrida’s influential concept of “hauntology” through new interrogations into the relationship between human, object, and nature. We might see the novels I have selected touching upon innovative discussions of how we conceived of the human in the world, such as Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern* (1990), and newly emerging fields like Bill Brown’s formulation of Thing Theory and Jane Bennett’s vital materialism, and Object Oriented Ontology (theorized notably by Graham Harman and Timothy Morton, among others), theoretical approaches that I liaise with in certain chapters. In their individual idioms, each of these novels attempts to denarratively unravel the preconceived notions of how we narrate the past, regarding human interactions with each other, and with the planet; in this way, the project shares Eugene Thacker’s interest, expressed provocatively in *In the Dust of This Planet*, in confronting the unknowable notion of “the world without us,” or simply “The Planet.” Thacker’s Planet is “a negative concept... impersonal and anonymous,” a formulation that is echoed, in diverse ways, in the various texts I examine (Thacker 7). My selected textual objects present variations on these convergent fields of interest not only surrounding the world we live in and its uncanny independent life, but also regarding the

mode of speculation and speculative fictions.<sup>3</sup> The broader idea of a profane “unseen world” that is irreligious yet numinous, distant yet uncomfortably intimate, always encroaching upon us, is a problem that haunts ecological, political, philosophical, and social modes of criticism, and this investigation in to its particular investment in magical interventions in narrative form<sup>4</sup> hopefully provides one particular perspective on our concerns about the unseen, unseeable, and unknowable will contribute to that network of developing fields of inquiry.

Finally, the last “unseen world” that these novels circumambulate anxiously is the realm of the political. The texts that I have chosen are divided between two moments that bookend what I consider the contemporary period in Britain, the mid-1980s of Margaret Thatcher’s ministry (which might be seen to mark, with the debacle of the Falklands War, the death rattle of British empire), and our current moment in the early 2000s, characterized by concerns about both lasting legacies of empire, and the ecological consequences of our global development as a planet. These are both moments of crisis – one sociopolitical, one ecopolitical – that ask us to question how we receive, perceive, and remake narratives. None of the texts I examine choose to overtly engage their own political and historical moments, choosing instead to look further back (or in Mitchell’s case,<sup>5</sup> both backwards and forwards). However, this very omission points to the presence of the political in these texts; that unseen world haunts their narrative speculations about the unknowable relations between past, present, and future. The Jamesonian political unconscious of these texts speaks through their various anxieties about how we interact with the unavoidable precipitate of history that lingers – geologically, narratively, or cosmically – in our uncertain present moment.

Chapter 1, “Necropolitan Time,” expands on the premise of Derrida’s hauntology to explore a deeply pessimistic enactment of denarrative desire: the return of the dead, which causes temporal disorder. Through readings of London’s history in Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor* (1985), and of postcolonial Australian rewritings of the old world in Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* (1997) and Christos Tsiolkas’ *Dead Europe* (2005), this chapter focuses on the European metropolis as a site teeming with the horrifically vibrant ghosts of history. In these texts, the living and the dead are ultimately indistinguishable from each other; attempts to rewrite historical events or narratives become futile in worlds where the past and present are overlapping, rather than contiguous. The non-linear nature of time depicted here suggests that the simultaneity of all events makes chronology itself, much less revision, impossible.

Chapter 2, “Fairy Tale Ecology,” moves from the city to the rural landscape of the East Anglian Fens in Graham Swift’s *Waterland* (1983). Swift’s novel invests the land itself with a peculiarly agential, opaquely sentient quality, suggesting that the earth itself actively revolts against human interference. Swift depicts human modes of organization in antagonistic counterpoint, using the process of land reclamation as a metaphor for other

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<sup>3</sup> Thacker’s compellingly innovative book focuses on “dark” materials like black metal and supernatural horror – which resonates with my readings, in Chapter 1, of Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor* and Christos Tsiolkas’ *Dead Europe*. However, the other readings in this project extend beyond these genres to other modes of speculation and the fantastic, but continue to share his broader interest in thinking about the unthinkable.

<sup>4</sup> These formal innovations at times draw upon magical realism (particularly in Graham Swift’s *Waterland*), but more generally work outside the ambiguous scope of the latter – perhaps, in some of these cases, approaching what Timothy Morton has playfully termed “realist magic.”

<sup>5</sup> Notably, one of Mitchell’s novels not treated in this study, *Black Swan Green* (2007), directly addresses the Falklands War, and its perception in 1980s Thatcherite England.

futile human activities – in particular, the generation of narrative (both “fairy tales” and “history,” categories that are inextricably confused in the novel). These artificial attempts at controlling the earth are framed as an oppositional kind of magic, that enact denarrative desire through their resistance to the unstoppable erosion of time and water.

Chapter 3, “Practical Alchemy,” looks closely at the aesthetic and ethical questions surrounding the making of art addressed in A.S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book* (2009). Byatt’s novel, a deeply historical text that examines the overtly asks readers to contemplate the problem of how to “capture life” in an artwork without draining it from a living subject. While on one hand, several of the novel’s artist characters act out on a denarrative impulse to use art as a mode of suspending time, Byatt also suggests a possibility of art-making that preserves life, rather than stifling it. This chapter traces Byatt’s use of the metaphor of alchemy not only as a way of making art, but also as a transfiguring mode of perception. Ultimately, Byatt asks her readers to turn this mode of perception on to the historical period she depicts, the years from 1895 through the end of World War I, casting a critical eye on the dwindling Victorian ethos and its cultural and historical consequences.

Finally, Chapter 4, “Clouds of Unknowing,” goes furthest in its effort to articulate the specific conditions of the post-postmodern novel. Through Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* and *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010), I explore twenty-first century novels that reject earlier narrative models based on divine authority, and yet explicitly demand that readers slough off the Lyotardian “incredulity” towards master narratives. My dissertation concludes by confronting the shady specter of the “post-postmodern,” turning to theories of negative theology and the fantastic to suggest that contemporary readers and writers are cautiously reinvesting in the *idea* of resolution, even as it is acknowledged to be an unreachable telos.

## Chapter 1 Necropolitan Time

“The time is out of joint: time is *disarticulated, deranged*, both out of order and mad. Time is off its hinges, time is off course, beside itself, disadjusted. Says Hamlet.” So says Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, riffing on Shakespeare to describe the ineffability of the present (Derrida 18). Derrida’s conjuration of ghostly imagery famously posits a “hauntological” premise that results from this disjointure of time, describing a world in which the boundary between the spectral and the real—the dead and the living—dissolves into uncertainty. While this chapter will eventually make passing acquaintance with certain specters of Marx, its goal is not to engage primarily with the political aspects of Derrida’s work, but rather, to use his observations on the nature of the specter as a jumping-off point for a discussion of the consequences of time’s disorderliness in the face of a breached barrier between life and death. To Derrida,

...the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some “thing” that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant* or the return of the specter. There is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reappearance of the departed. The spirit, the specter are not the same thing, and we will have to sharpen this difference; but as for what they have in common, one does not know what it *is*, what it is presently. *It is* something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it *is*, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence... One does not know if it is living or if it is dead. (Derrida 6)

The specter, in the Hamlet-inspired rhetoric of Derrida’s hauntology, floats between definite states of “to be” and “not to be,” or, we might more boldly say, *is* the false boundary between these states; the questions are, then, how to talk about a liminal space, and how to talk *to* it? The specter, in its sheer ungraspability, always has a certain power over us, and it seems that its not-fully-embodied quality both creates and limits this power—whether it is, as in Derrida’s text or Marx’s, the abstract specter of an idea (Communism), or in the novels I will examine, more vivid figures of human history. For the specter has the protected position of what Derrida calls “asymmetry,” that allows it to watch us even as we don’t see it. Referring back to the helmeted ghost of old Hamlet, he frames this position of anachrony as the “visor effect,” a curious position in which “we do not see who looks at us” (Derrida 6). Were the specter fully embodied, it would lose this power in becoming fully visible to us, yet we must also wonder what other powers it has over us, the living; the revenant, returning from its mysterious sojourn in death, sees and knows things that we can neither see nor know. Is the specter’s privilege of looking and not being seen more or less powerful than the ability of the living to act in the real world?

The specters in the texts this chapter examines flit between these two states of empowered knowledge, and defy the notion of a distinct boundary between embodied life and disembodied death. But how does this condition of in-betweenness express itself in

time, and how does it relate to the denarrative impulse that my project proposes? An answer is suggested by Nicholas Royle's Derrida-inflected description of the uncanny, which, in his words, is "indissociably bound up with a sense of repetition or 'coming back' – the return of the repressed, the constant or eternal recurrence of the same thing, a compulsion to repeat... and it is different (yet strangely the same) every time: *its happening is always a kind of un-happening. Its 'un-' unsettles time and space, order and sense*" (Royle 2; my italics). Royle's suggestion of the uncanny as "un-happening," which recalls the hauntological disarticulation of time, is a productive point of departure, one that is pushed to extremity by the three very different texts this chapter will engage: Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* (1985), Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997), and Christos Tsiolkas' *Dead Europe* (2005). In diverse ways, these novels engage with the uncanny, the haunted, the hauntological, by enacting the most dramatic un-happening of all: the very literal return of the dead.

Each of these novels is driven by demonic, vibrantly animated visions of history, and all express a marked cynicism, by turns gleeful and mournful, towards elegiac renderings of haunting as nostalgia or romance. Haunting, in these cases, ceases to be the condition of romantic melancholy that it is so often framed as, and instead becomes the visceral temporal sickness of Derrida's version of Hamlet's time out of joint, a condition that more specifically manifests itself as a condition of perpetual presentness. For the dead in these texts do not merely have a spectral life – they have a physical life that is, in some ways, even more vibrant than that of the living. Everything that has happened or is happening (or implicitly, *will* happen) commingles in a state of still-happening, regardless of how much characters wish they would un-happen. If all moments continue to exist simultaneously in these textual worlds, then nothing is historical, and what's more, nothing is ever really dead: the very active specters that populate these novels may have died, but they have not departed. They are horrifyingly present, and as *Specters of Marx* suggests, do not belong to the future or the past, but rather, to an eternal, extenuated moment of "now," an unending state of indistinguishable life and death, from which there can be no departure or return. Yet Ackroyd, Carey, and Tsiolkas all push this figure of the time-disturbing specter beyond Derrida's theoretical sense. The specters of *Specters of Marx* are immaterial concepts, and are confronted through the various processes of intellectual conjuration (summoning and forswearing) that he describes. This chapter, however, will consider the extreme "sickness" of time through its expression in material terms: the worlds discussed here are dense with the detritus of history. The dead, in these novels, are *always* the undead, and they continue to dwell among the living, resulting in an utter confusion between the two. The question these novels ask is ultimately an ontological one that pushes the hauntological premise to a more extreme position: what is the difference between the living who are already dead and the dead who continue to live? If this is their only hell, and it is ours, too, how are we different from the dead that walk among us?

### *Denarration ad extremis*

This ahistorical state of the eternal present is the fullest, most perverse flowering of denarrative desire; because everything is happens at once, the sins and mistakes of the past are tauntingly ever present, yet the coexistence of all moments (past, present, and implicitly, future) means that no event can be erased or written over, and no narrative can be corrected. The denarrative impulse we have seen up to this point is the yearning to move back through

a story, to hear it or tell it again, differently, and to see this changed narrative reflected in some version of the world, either fictive or historical. The end result is inevitably a self-conscious failure; the denarrative desire is always fetishistic one, for the desire to unknow something only masks the knowledge that the latter is impossible. The fetishistic logic of knowing (but wishing not to know) of the denarrative impulse can be read in the tension between the resolutely, but futilely denarrative gestures of these novels' plots and protagonists against the non-linear, irrational and atemporal undead worlds where they take place. All of them ostensibly begin with a premise of unraveling or undoing, akin to Royle's uncanny un-happening: *Hawksmoor* is a detective story, *Jack Maggs* rewrites Dickens' *Great Expectations* from the perspective of the exiled colonial, Magwitch, and *Dead Europe* follows an Australian on a quest to reconnect with the old world of his Greek ancestors (in effect, undoing the event of immigration). However, though these starting impulses seem like they might lead to tales of redemption, reinvention, or at the very least, rediscovery, they instead all result pessimistically in the same thing: replication. The very events that their protagonists attempt to undo and reinterpret end up reduplicating themselves nightmarishly and infinitely. Though these stories implicitly begin with the hopeful premise that strands of narrative are continuous and linear, and thus that it is possible to re-braid them in a new configuration, they all end with the realization that time and narrative (theoretically a sequential, temporally-dictated form) are non-linear, knotty masses beyond any hope of unraveling.

Here, a theoretical intervention by Mikhael Bakhtin is useful in our conception of the disjointed vision of time presented by these texts. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin famously proposes the chronotope as a productive term in modern discussions of the novel. Bakhtin, who borrows the term from mathematics, describes the chronotope as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature... we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely)." He goes on to sketch out the form and function of the chronotope; in it, he says, "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 84). In short, the chronotope, the time-space framework of any given text, simultaneously situates the reader not only in the world through which characters move, but also the *way* in which they move through that world, both temporally and spatially. Bakhtin is particularly invested in the role of this time-space hybrid figure in establishing generic distinctions across a literary historical view of the novel. His self-consciously restricted account of various novelistic chronotopes from the ancient Greeks to Rabelais sketches out only a few of these forms of time, and, in fact, concludes with the modest disclaimer that his essay only treats "the major chronotopes" (Bakhtin 252). This chapter will sketch out a set of specific chronotopes for the muddled time and space systems of these novels; though they highlight different aspects of a death-saturated living world, they all ultimately propose complementary models of a kind of undead time, a time that is both dynamic (in that readers move through it with chaotic, terrible freedom) and static (this freedom connotes a static condition of total temporal overlap; a true coexistence of all times in an attenuated, earthbound present). *Hawksmoor*, *Jack Maggs*, and *Dead Europe* also share a particular interest in the imperial capital as an extremely condensed locus of this undead chronotope; these sites (London, Paris, Athens) seem super-saturated with overlapping times and lives. For this reason, I read this undead chronotope specifically as an imperial urban mode, one where every metropolis is



also a necropolis, and density of population equates to density of history, and of human horror. As Jean Baudrillard comments pithily in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, “The cemetery no longer exists because modern cities have entirely taken over their function: they are ghost towns, cities of death. If the great operational metropolis is the final form of an entire culture, then, quite simply, ours is a culture of death” (Baudrillard 127).

*“I will never, never leave thee!”* Hawksmoor’s *Eternal Necropolis*

Bakhtin’s richly physical language makes the chronotope felicitously relevant to Peter Ackroyd’s deeply unsettling 1985 novel *Hawksmoor*. Bakhtin expands upon the figure of “thickened” time that “takes on flesh,” describing the chronotope as a medium in which

[T]ime becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins... Thus the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, emerges as a center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel. All the novel’s abstract elements... gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work. (Bakhtin 250)

The striking physicality of Bakhtin’s imagery comes to vivid new life in the peculiar and specific chronotope of Ackroyd’s work, and *Hawksmoor*, like his other London-centered novels and non-fiction works, unfolds in a space molded out of time made “palpable and visible.” Ackroyd’s super-haunted versions of history, in which ghostly and living inhabitants jostle each other on city sidewalks, also reflect this sensuous relation of abstract time to concrete physicality. In a review of Ackroyd’s 2002 non-fiction book *Albion: The Origin of the English Imagination*, Terry Eagleton astutely comments on this tendency in his career, noting that Ackroyd has always been “seized by the Gothic and grotesque, the intricate and offbeat, the phantasmal but also the fleshly” (Eagleton 217). His interest in the interstices between “the phantasmal” and “the fleshly” might remind readers of Derrida’s specter, “neither soul nor body, and both one and the other,” and of the in-between, out-of-jointedness of time that gives birth to it (Derrida 6). Indeed, Ackroyd’s obsessive attention to the “offbeat” people and events, and the otherwise unnoted grotesqueries of history—drifting particles of time that, in *Hawksmoor*, are never located firmly in any single moment—is a deeply chronotopic one, in which time and space are not only inextricably related concepts, but are in fact made of the same stuff, the physical and psychical detritus that swirls sluggishly in the cracks of historical record and city pavements. In Ackroyd’s London, any seemingly unremarkable city block could be the flimsy cover for a sinkhole of dark and fascinating mysteries. The streets that Ackroyd’s characters tread are built atop an ever-churning slurry of material and immaterial evidence, a shifting foundation of time’s unpredictable residue.

This physicalized vision of the city as a buildup of time, suggesting a morbid convergence of all times on the earthly plane (more specifically, in the metropolitan space), poses a dramatic opposition to the Augustinian notion of the convergence of all things in eternity. As Paul Ricoeur summarizes in volume I of *Time and Narrative*, for Augustine, “Eternity is ‘forever still [semper stans]’ in contrast to things that are ‘never still.’ This stillness lies in the fact that ‘in eternity nothing moves into the past: all is present [totum esse

praesens]. Time, on the other hand, is never all present at once.”(Augustine, quoted in Ricoeur 25). This eternal stillness is reflected in the chronotope of the medieval vision-text that Bakhtin describes, in which

The temporal logic of this vertical world consists in the sheer simultaneity of all that occurs (or “the coexistence of everything in eternity”). Everything that on earth is divided by time, here, in this verticality, coalesces into eternity, into pure simultaneous coexistence. Such divisions as time introduces – “earlier” and “later” – have no substance here; they must be ignored in order to understand this vertical world; everything must be perceived as being within *a single time*, that is, in the synchrony of a single moment; one must see this entire world as simultaneous. Only under conditions of pure simultaneity – or what amounts to the same thing, in an environment outside time altogether – can there be revealed the true meaning of “that which was, and which is, and which shall be”: and this is so because the force (time) that had divided these three is deprived of its authentic reality and its power to shape thinking. (Bakhtin 157)

This condition of atemporal verticality, which Bakhtin exemplifies in Dante’s vision-time in *The Divine Comedy*, sets it aside from the narrative movement along the “horizontal” axis of earthly action. The “sheer simultaneity” of the vision, in which “time is utterly excluded from action,” reflects a diversion of human narrative time into the unbound temporality of a divine chronotope. *Hawksmoor* creates a similar experience of total verticality: the key difference, however, is that everything in Ackroyd’s novel happens in a very *human* world, one devoid of any proof for the divine conception of eternity, that is somehow disarticulated from any conventionally historical, linear notion of time. His London is a space unbounded by the “division” of time, where “that which was, and which is, and which shall be” collapse into each other. It is also a space voided of the possibility of action or intervention, for all things happen at in the same moment, as Bakhtin says, “coalescing” into an eternal present.

*Hawksmoor* thus presents a perverse version of the mystical vision-time that Bakhtin describes, but instead of revealing “the coexistence of everything in eternity,” Ackroyd’s chronotope discloses a nightmarish coexistence of everything *on earth* – that is to say, in a kind of unending earthly hell. In fact, Ackroyd himself has often used the term “visionary” both in regards to other London-obsessed writers that interest him, and implicitly establishes himself in a line of “London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries,” the title of a 1993 lecture. In the latter, he engages with a set of “visionary” artists and writers who have recreated

...all the variety, the energy and the spectacle which this city expects and demands of its inhabitants. They have expressed the horror, too, for this also has been one of the dark places of the earth. The truth is that London has always been a shadowy and merciless city... as the old prayer of the London alchemist puts it, ‘it is the city of gold, it is the city of fire, it is the city of death’ (Ackroyd, *The Collection* 342).

The term “London Visionaries” is also adopted by Susana Onega in her various studies of Ackroyd’s work, stating rather opaquely that “the tradition Ackroyd comes from is exclusively Anglo-Saxon, and the author refuses to attach the label ‘postmodernist’ to his

work, preferring to describe himself as the inheritor of a very innately English sensibility, which is, basically, a visionary sensibility” (Omega 4).<sup>1</sup> Omega extrapolates upon the English, specifically Londonian visionary quality of Ackroyd’s prose and Ackroyd’s city, claiming that his writing is grounded in the topos of “London as the visionary city built on the accumulated wisdom of numberless generations of Londoners whose roots go back to the dawn of English civilization” (Omega 43).<sup>2</sup>

The “visionary” characters peering into the heart of London’s darkness in *Hawksmoor* are the novel’s mysteriously linked anti-heroes, the eighteenth-century architect Nicholas Dyer, employed by Her Majesty’s Office of Works in Scotland Yard (based on the real-life figure of architect Nicholas Hawksmoor) and a 1980s Scotland Yard police detective, confusingly named Nicholas Hawksmoor. The novel alternates between chapters of intimate first-person narration by Dyer (rendered in scrupulous but exuberant pastiche) and a distanced, third person account of Hawksmoor’s modern London. Both narratives follow a series of murders across London that take place in the churches Dyer builds over the course of the novel; six of the seven are real churches built by the real Nicholas Hawksmoor between 1711 and 1733.<sup>3</sup> Dyer, who secretly belongs to an obscure Satanist cult, maps out a network of malevolent power with the placement of his churches in the city, a premise that Ackroyd developed out of Iain Sinclair’s psychogeographic observations in his 1979 book of poems, *Lad Heat*, about a pattern of sinister occult significance in the layout of the real Hawksmoor churches across the map of London. For each new church, Dyer commits a ritual murder as a kind of unholy consecration; these eighteenth-century murders are replicated in the 1980s, where Detective Hawksmoor attempts to find a killer, possibly a spectral one, who leaves no clues as to identity or motive.

Though it might seem at first glance that these narratives simply run parallel to each other, the novel actually exhibits a deeply complicated version of time, in which the reader’s ability to clearly maintain the distance between these two historical loci (the 1710s and the 1980s) is eroded from the start. This breakdown of time’s divisions begins even in the novel’s prefatory note, which begins with a distanced, somewhat officious and historiographic tone—“Thus in 1711, the ninth year of the reign of Queen Anne, An Act of Parliament was passed to erect seven new Parish Churches...Nicholas Dyer, architect, began to construct a model of the first church. His colleagues would have employed a skilled joiner to complete such a task, but Dyer preferred to work with his own hands” (Ackroyd 1). However, by the end of a single paragraph, the narrative lurches surprisingly into a new, more intimate, yet strangely mobile present:

Dyer worked swiftly with only his assistant, Walter Pyne, for company while, on the other side of the great city, the masons shouted to each other as they hewed out of rough stone the vision of the architect. *This is the vision we still see, and yet now*, for a

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<sup>1</sup> This reluctance to submit himself to periodization in literary historical terms as “postmodern”—a comment that Ackroyd has repeated in numerous interviews—seems to go hand in hand with his dogged engagement with this visionary, trans-historical mode.

<sup>2</sup> Omega goes on to use this visionary quality to link Ackroyd’s historical logic to the cyclical time of myth, a specific claim that I will address in terms of *Hawksmoor* later.

<sup>3</sup> The real Hawksmoor churches are St. Alfege’s Greenwich, St. George’s Bloomsbury, Christ Church Spitalfields, St. George-in-the-East, St. Mary Woolnoth, and St. Anne’s Limehouse; the seventh, Little St. Hugh’s (named for a mythical child martyr) is fictional.

moment, there is only his heavy breathing as he bends over his papers and the noise of the fire which suddenly flares up and throws deep shadows across the room.  
(Ackroyd 1, italics are mine)

Even before the novel starts, we are uncertain of what time it is (a question that echoes endlessly through the novel as a whole, in different characters' voices). Are we in the *now* of the pompous historian ("Thus in 1711..."), the *now* of the twentieth-century London pedestrian ("This is the vision we still see"), or the most direct and intimate *now* of the declared "now," where we share Dyer's desk, made especially immediate by "the noise of the fire which *suddenly* flares up"? This last sentence is particularly disorienting; the switch to the first person takes us only moderately by surprise when it seems to reference a contemporary viewpoint—"what we still see"—yet, just on the other side of a comma, the present tense suddenly refers to Dyer's long-distant present.

This is only the very beginning of a novel that never releases its readers and characters from a state of permanent temporal vertigo. The narrative proper appears to situate readers in a distinct moment in time, with Chapter One set firmly (it seems) in the eighteenth-century setting and in Ackroyd's determinedly antiqued prose. The first person narrator, quickly revealed to be Dyer himself, instructs his assistant to, "as the Fabrick takes its Shape in front of you, always keep the Structure intirely in Mind as you inscribe it" (Ackroyd 5). Dyer is ostensibly talking about the beginnings of an architectural plan, but Ackroyd obliquely counsels his readers to take the same precautions as they begin the novel. In this expository chapter Dyer describes his childhood in London's poverty-stricken East End, devastatingly molded by the Plague and the Great Fire of 1666, his conversions to both an occult, Satanic faith and to the seemingly rational discipline of architecture, and how he intends to use his new churches to channel the irrational powers of darkness. Chapter One ends with the possibly accidental, possibly malevolently fated death of a young boy, Thomas Hill, upon the completion of Dyer's first church, Christ Church, Spitalfields. Dyer rejoices at the death, which he views as a sacrifice necessary to consecrate the church in his unholy faith. His expression of perverse joy closes the chapter: "I am in the Pitte, but I have gone so deep that I can see the brightness of the Starres at Noon" (Ackroyd 25).

However, though the reader may think she has the novel's structure "intirely in Mind," that framework abruptly lurches into an entirely new shape in the opening of Chapter Two. This chapter begins with a seeming continuity, the repetition of Chapter One's closing words: "*At noon* they were approaching the church in Spitalfields" (Ackroyd 26; my italics).<sup>4</sup> Immediately, though, time takes an abrupt and dizzying leap as the new chapter's contemporary setting becomes clear; the church, which we just saw completed, is suddenly decayed and in the midst of restoration.<sup>5</sup> As a group of twentieth-century tourists regard the ancient church, a ghostly flicker of Thomas Hill's deathly fall two centuries before barely registers narrative attention—"What was that falling there?", one of the group asked... but his voice was lost in the traffic noise which had only momentarily subsided"—as the chapter digs more firmly into its new temporal setting (Ackroyd 26). However, just as

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<sup>4</sup> Ackroyd uses variants on this technique of temporal and textual crossover at the start and finish of each chapter throughout the novel.

<sup>5</sup> Later in the novel, Dyer himself expresses a similar feeling of temporal dislocation; describing his study of ancient architecture and visions of his own future work, he says, "There was some thing that waited for me there, already in Ruines" (Ackroyd 52).

the canny reader, familiar with what now may seem like a hackneyed, “postmodern” shifting of narrative focalization begins to acclimate, a new wave of temporal motion sickness washes over her. The third-person narrative’s perspective darts away from the tour group and their indifferent guide, over to a crowd of raucous school children, and settles on a small boy, the subject of his peers’ taunts. This boy is called Thomas Hill—and he is and is not the same Thomas Hill who fell from Christ Church’s steeple almost two centuries earlier. Through this new Thomas’ perspective, we receive fleeting and eerie echoes of the past; hiding in the church, he overhears unseen supplicants praying against the Plague, and in the schoolyard, he hears the same stories of pagan crypts and folk superstitions that Dyer heard as a child. It is impossible to directly align the twentieth century Thomas Hill to the eighteenth century one, for Chapter Two’s Thomas experiences moments out of various other times and other lives. He is a multifariously haunted child, and he lives in a multifariously haunted place, where moments from past and present are indistinguishable from each other. The reader quickly recognizes that the “Fabrick” of the novel cannot be clearly and rationally contained by any “structure,” as Dyer initially suggested. This shift is later reflected in an overt revision of Dyer’s opening suggestion, for as his twentieth-century counterpart, Hawksmoor, muses later in the novel, we are increasingly “not sure if all the movements and changes in the world were part of some coherent development, like the weaving of a quilt which remains one fabric despite its variegated pattern,” or if they are simply chaotic clashing patterns in a bin of jumbled temporal scraps (Ackroyd 126).

This textual overlap and temporal lurch instantly plunges readers into the disorienting state of simultaneity described in Bakhtin’s vertical vision-time. However, as noted above, this version of vision-time is quite literally grounded in the earthly plane; instead of suggesting the divine, abstract chronotope of Augustinian eternity, *Hawksmoor’s* eternity is physically manifested in the city itself. Eagleton comments on this uniquely “vertical” quality of Ackroyd’s London timescape:

Ackroyd’s imagination... has always been possessed by the notion of the past as a depth to be excavated within the present, as vertical or geological rather than horizontal and historical. The present is a kind of palimpsest through which the spectral lineaments of the long-buried are dimly visible, awaiting their disinterment by the redemptive rites of the literary imagination. (Eagleton 219)<sup>6</sup>

While Eagleton’s comment on Ackroyd’s overall attitude toward history incisively reveals his guiding obsession—the vertical, rather than horizontal alignment of time—it does not paint an accurate picture of *Hawksmoor’s* specific relation to history. Though the “redemptive” tendency of Ackroyd’s particular literary imagination may triumph in his more recent, nationalistic works (particularly his historical non-fiction, such as *London: A Biography*, or *Albion*, whose more effusive moments Eagleton notably castigates as “English Heritage prattle, *not the prose of the author of Hawksmoor*”; Eagleton 221, my italics) this early novel vehemently resists classification as a redemptive or recuperative text. Even the figure of the palimpsest, frequently invoked by critics as a model for Ackroyd’s historical thinking, seems inadequate to the task of depicting *Hawksmoor’s* time. Fitting though it may be to certain of Ackroyd’s later works, “palimpsest” seems too flat a term to describe this novel’s chaotic

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<sup>6</sup> The “geological” aspect of Ackroyd’s imagination is one he plumbs in 2011’s non-fictional history of subterranean London, *London Under*.

collapse of time. The image of the palimpsest suggests the infinitude of the postmodern deconstructive process, in which a patient reader might decipher layer after layer of text. However, this imagined process also suggests a possible legibility of separate moments, a reading through the veils of sequential other readings that might eventually offer an implicitly hierarchical ordering of time. For, if we consider that the present is only a surface, the top layer of writing under which other ghostly texts might be read, a model that faintly recalls the flattened, present-obsessed versions of postmodern perspective suggested by Jameson and Baudrillard, the palimpsest might be seen as a two-dimensional illusion of depth. Ackroyd plunges readers of *Hawksmoor*, by contrast, into a vertiginous verticality that suggests simultaneity and madness, in which narrative elements move osmotically and without resistance, *through* what Iain Sinclair calls “the membranous time-layer” that transparently and ineffectually divides past and present, rather than painstaking sequential readings and rereadings of a reinscribed papyrus (Sinclair 17). The terrifying sensation of unstratified, disorganized historical depth that pervades Ackroyd’s text is best described by one of the novel’s minor characters, the second Thomas Hill’s timorous mother, who lives in fear of falling into the fathomless past, as though “the ground was now made of the thinnest glass through which she could see the abysses beneath her” (Ackroyd 32).

The other graphic model most frequently invoked to describe Ackroyd’s historical thinking is the cyclical pattern of mythic time. Susana Onega’s thorough reading of *Hawksmoor* in *Metafiction and Myth in the Novels of Peter Ackroyd* suggests that the novel takes as its premise “the abolition of the notion of historical or linear time in favor of the cyclical time of myth” (Onega 25). In her reading, the various plot replications and linguistic repetitions that crop up with increasing frequency through the novel express a consistent, cyclical pattern:

Indeed, as we go on reading, we find more and more shocking reduplications of names, events, actions, and even identical sentences uttered by characters who live two centuries apart, until we are forced to conclude that, in the novel, nothing progresses in time, that the same events repeat themselves endlessly, and that the same people live and die only in order to be born and to live the same events again and again, eternally caught in what appears to be the ever-revolving wheel of life and death. (Onega 47)

Onega’s reading implies a direct relation of past characters to contemporary ones, and a surprisingly clear-cut relation of past to present that follows the single loop of Nietzsche’s thought experiment of eternal recurrence: always the same people, always the same events. Onega then walks her readers through the processes of reincarnation that Dyer achieves via his occult architectural schematics, resulting in his arrival in the twentieth century, where she claims that his spirit is divided into two halves; the rational, “good” side embodied in Detective Hawksmoor, and the irrational, evil side that takes form in a mysterious tramp called “The Architect,” whom she posits is the mysterious murderer. Though she concedes that various characters “switch roles” constantly, she then fits these switches into her linear, sequential model of reincarnation, claiming that “[Dyer’s] struggle is that of man condemned to play in succession the complementary roles of beggar, sinner, and punisher, with only the tiniest hope of getting out of this cyclical ‘fall into history’” (Onega 54). In the end, when the two halves meet in the final church, the fictional Little St. Hugh’s, “after finishing the

talismanic pattern of the churches, all that remains to be done is to reconcile these two opposed and split potentialities... in order for Dyer to achieve the godlike totality of the Self” (Onega 55). Though Ackroyd’s novel ends on a marked note of irresolution (the two figures mysteriously coalesce into a single, mysterious “I,” and this definitively un-godlike new subjectivity is left “a child again, begging on the threshold of eternity,” Ackroyd 217), Onega’s reading suggests that there is *something* past the threshold, and thus that transcendent escape to the “godlike totality of the Self” is at least conceivable.<sup>7</sup>

Whether or not Dyer’s occult maneuverings ultimately grant him transcendence is irrelevant, in a sense, for following upon this logic, the possibility of transcendence alone is enough to leaven the grimness of the eternal return model of history. In *Recalling London*, Alex Murray also invokes the cyclical, pre-determined model of recuperative mythical time and politicizes it, claiming that Ackroyd’s embrace of this repetitive model of history aligns him with a dishonestly redemptive, Thatcherite engagement with English history and Englishness. Murray follows Onega’s initial positing of Ackroydian cyclical time, but refuses any real possibility of transcendence, claiming that the inescapably repetitive nature of Ackroyd’s history is innately conservative, in that it cancels out the possibility of political action. Murray argues persuasively that the echolalic quality of *Hawksmoor*’s narrative obfuscates, rather than clarifies the past, and thus

cancels out the potential of an active historical consciousness... for Ackroyd, history, through its repetitive qualities, works to cancel out any agency, as the present is condemned to repeat the past. This idea of the present becoming obliterated by the past seems to accord... with the logic of Thatcherite historiography, in which history is deployed to mould and shape the present, to force it to be the echo of the past. (Murray 47-48)

In this manner, Murray draws together the disturbing visions of history depicted in Ackroyd’s earlier, more vexing writings with his later, more clearly recuperative, “English Heritage”-style works, such as *Albion*. If, as Murray posits, the replication of historical events is a process voided of agency, in which “motiveless revolution” forces us to repeat history infinitely, and “our engagement with history is always one of repetition,” then the inevitable result is a comfortable lull in historical consciousness, dangerous in its seeming innocuousness; thus, he states early in his book that Ackroyd’s city is “a ‘blue-plaque London’: a range of sites that enable the recollection of a potentially safe and secure version of the past” (Murray 5).

However, I see nothing “safe” about Ackroyd’s nightmarish depiction of time in *Hawksmoor*. Though these arguments for the circular movement of time (one that traces its own tracks in an orderly fashion, implying rote repetition) are compelling, *Hawksmoor*’s necropolitan chronotope cannot be reduced to the limited organization of temporal cycles; it does not simply enact the eternally recurrent, inherently conservative model of history that Murray and Onega both gesture towards in their different ways, in which actions are voided of meaning by repetition. Rather, the novel’s stubborn refusal to create clear, singular alignments between characters, which would indicate a more conventional model of reincarnation and reenactment, suggests that no single pattern or line of reasoning can be

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<sup>7</sup> Onega’s reading also suggests that the “child” is begging to be let *in* to eternity; however, we might also read it as a desired *escape* from the eternal present of *Hawksmoor*’s earthly prison.

teased out of the morass of the novel's commingled plots.<sup>8</sup> As Jeremy Gibson and Julian Wolfreys contend, "the play between centuries never settles into some comfortable, discernable pattern awaiting the reader's acumen to decipher the code"—rather, there is no reading that can possibly disentangle the mess of threads that make up the chaotically "variegated pattern" that *Hawksmoor* strives to discern (Gibson and Wolfreys 93). This observation channels Dyer's claim in the novel that, "There is no Mathematicall Beauty or Geometrical Order here – nothing but Mortality and Contagion on this Ordure Earth" (Ackroyd 147). Here again, the formal mirroring between Dyer's churches and Ackroyd's novel is clear, in the seeming paradox of the skilled architect's denial of geometric perfection, which reflects the perverse logic of a detective story that rejects flat-out the possibility of solving the crime. Rather than clearly suggesting that history neatly repeats itself through the model of reincarnation that Onega proposes (in which a human being, the tramp known as the Architect, is responsible for the twentieth century murders), Ackroyd markedly points out the lack of any physical—that is to say, *human*—traces of the mystery murderer at the crime scenes that *Hawksmoor* investigates. As a mystified coroner remarks after examining one of the victims, "There are no impressions, no prints. A strangler's fingers pressed into the neck will leave a curved nail impression, but there are only bruises here" (Ackroyd 113). Furthermore, though the first two twentieth-century murders are described in detail up until the moment of death, neither of these victims sees their killer clearly; the murderer is described only as "the shadow" (Ackroyd 42, 86). The eerie absence of any human trace at the crime scenes suggests that these crimes are unsolvable, by *Hawksmoor* or by anyone else. Instead of the "geometrical order" of a cyclical repetition of reincarnated characters and reenacted crimes, Ackroyd's novel depicts the illogical and insidious spread of some spectral agent of "Mortality and Contagion" through time, again recalling Sinclair's physicalized vision of the "membranous time-layer."

This uncertainty makes the reader question how the categories of "alive" and "dead" are defined in the novel. Whether or not we believe that Architect is the murderer, the killer is clearly framed as a non- or not-entirely-human being. The anonymous quality of the killer, and the utter confusion of timelines and characters also suggest a certain non-specificity of character. This blank space where a villain should be lacks the personalized quality of the conventional ghost—we cannot simply say that it is Dyer's ghost or Dyer reincarnated—and instead seems to be some indefinable incarnation of the psychogeographic histories of East London itself. This mysterious specter's ability to physically harm the living indicates the total overlap between the worlds of the living and dead inhabitants of this London, to which

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<sup>8</sup> In this sense, my reading follows upon the knottier portrayal of Ackroyd's time that Stephen Connor gestures towards in *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*, and that Philip Tew expands on in *The Contemporary British Novel* (Connor 144-145, Tew 130-132). Both Connor and Tew attempt to extricate Ackroyd's novel from relativized notions of time and historicity; Tew is particularly concerned with situating *Hawksmoor* in relation to a more nuanced definition of myth and mythopoeisis that he draws from Ernst Cassirer's *Mythical Thought*. Tew reads *Hawksmoor*'s abandonment of conventional notions of time as part of Cassirer's claim that "The mythical consciousness arrives at an articulation of space and time not by stabilizing the fluctuation of sensuous phenomena but by introducing its specific opposition—the opposition of the sacred and the profane—into spatial and temporal reality." (Cassirer 81, quoted in Tew, 131). Gilbert and Wolfreys also observe the fundamental instability of time and narrative in the novel, commenting on the disordered nature of time brought about by the patchwork quality of the text (Gibson and Wolfreys 93).



the word “haunted” seems insufficient. Is the killer a living being or an undead one? It is neither and both, and seems to occupy both the voyeuristic position of Derrida’s unseen, watching specter, and the corporeal presence of the living creature. Stranger still, we are led to wonder if the present-day *victims* were ever really alive to begin with. Increasingly, the reader suspects that the murders that happen in Hawksmoor’s time are not only echoes of the ones that happen in Dyer’s, but in fact that they are *the same ones*, impossible though that seems; the crimes seem somehow to happen in between times or across them, or simultaneously in both of them.

Beginning with the two Thomas Hills, there is a totally unpredictable slippage between characters across time that continues throughout the novel. The second Thomas seems to be a psychic satellite dish, receiving a multitude of transmissions from the past (at times Dyer’s, the first Thomas’, and others). However, another pair of victims, both called Ned, contains too many similarities, and the degree of precision with which they align suggests a stranger relation than reincarnation, for they do not just share memories or characteristics, but rather, exact circumstances. Both the eighteenth and twentieth century Neds are homeless men who were formerly printers in Bristol; both are driven to the “Wandering Life” by drink and madness (Ackroyd 64 and 71). The manner of their deaths further develops this convergence of characters across time. The conversations that both Neds have with their killers are almost identical, and in the moment of death, the same phrase resonates: as he leaves the first Ned, Dyer “let[s] slip an *Ay me*,” and just before the second Ned dies, he hears “a whisper which might have been ‘I’ or ‘me’” (Ackroyd 66, 86). This doubled whisper is particularly telling, coming as it does at the end of Ned’s terrifying narrative of mental illness: these two syllables contain both the homicidal Dyer’s simultaneously mournful and gleeful “Ay me,” but also the confusion of the temporally displaced madman, Ned: who am “I”? What defines “me”? This temporal crossover emphasizes the uncomfortably irrational suspicion that these murders take place in the shifting interstices of time. Ackroyd’s reader is increasingly disoriented by the swirl of shared names and histories, shared anxieties, shared physical images that proliferate here, and never in systematic ways. A consistently described man in a dark overcoat appears everywhere, but he is at times identified Dyer, Hawksmoor, Ned, the mysterious Architect, or a nameless man on the street—any random Londoner, it seems, could accidentally take a misstep and tumble into this plot. Any man might be a murderer or a victim, or paradoxically both at once, as the murderous Dyer’s telling surname indicates.

Ackroyd’s necropolitan London is direly overpopulated by the past and present, and the full-to-bursting quality of this chronotope exhibits itself in both terrifying and darkly comical ways.<sup>9</sup> While on one hand, violent acts seem to travel with a kind of vicious life throughout this text with the uninhibited circulation of past and present, other things do, too. Among them are the nursery rhymes and folk songs that echo cacophonously through the novel,<sup>10</sup> and the trite proverbial sayings that both Dyer and Hawksmoor delight in

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<sup>9</sup> This resonates with Gibson and Wolfreys’ reading of Ackroyd’s texts as “ludic.”

<sup>10</sup> The haunting drone of “London Bridge is Falling Down” is the consistent soundtrack to *Hawksmoor*, with significant variants that foreground the theme of erosion and instability in both time and space: “Bricks and mortar will not stay, will not stay, will not stay” (40), “Wood and clay will wash away, wash away, wash away” (150), “Set a man to watch all night, watch all night, watch all night” (152) – the implication of this final one being that, though you may set a man to watch over the city all night, he can never see who or what perpetrates London’s dark acts in its dark corners.

repeating. Their bemused fascination with these linguistic commonplaces mark them on one hand as separate from the banal, quotidian “folk” who circulate these sayings, and on the other, as creatures that are deeply tied to the urban populace, birthed by the city itself. Dyer is engendered in equal measure by the mass graves of the Spitalfields plague pit, and by the vividly alive circulation of language through East End lanes and alleys; as he states, he “was born in this Nest of Death and Contagion and now, *as they say*, [he has] learned to feather it” (Ackroyd 47; my italics). Hawksmoor similarly seems to have no personal qualities except for his knowledge of London’s geography and its people. The mysteriously blank Detective Hawksmoor is a bizarrely collaged character, totally lacking in personal history, made up of idiomatic sayings and cold procedural expertise, and defined solely by the obsessive motives of his profession: the Scotland Yard detective.

And of course, the idea of detection is central to the odd patchwork of the novel as a whole. It is easy to forget that *Hawksmoor* is technically a detective novel, for, as Gilbert and Wolfreys observe, “Mysticism and mystery proliferate in the narrative of the twentieth century [where the detective plot is located], rather than diminishing as they are supposed to in most detective stories” (Gilbert and Wolfreys 93). The novel as a whole seeks to undermine the possibility of rational explanation, a concept that Dyer—who Ackroyd notably positions as the protégé of the real-life architect Sir Christopher Wren, a celebrated bastion of Enlightenment rationality and proportion—is much incensed by. Dyer repeatedly emphasizes the idea that London’s seemingly ordered surface is only the shallow skin on top of disordered, buried horrors, and that the city is a “great and monstrous Pile,” a blemish on “this dunghill earth,” a view that the novel’s increasingly unresolvable plot seem to support (Ackroyd 13, 17). In Dyer’s arguments with Ackroyd’s fictionalized version of Wren, we see a precursor to the problem that greets Hawksmoor in the twentieth century: the irreconcilable tension between a rationalized worldview and a highly irrational cosmos. Of the main characters, Dyer alone seems to recognize the non-sequential, jumbled quality of time posited by the novel, describing it as “a vast Denful of Horrour, round about which a Serpent winds and in the winding bites itself by the Tail. Now, now if the Hour, every Hour, every part of an Hour, every Moment, which in its end does begin again and never ceases to end: a beginning continuing, always ending” (Ackroyd 62). Here, Dyer struggles to grasp the overlapping, nature of time in the universe that Ackroyd describes; though the mythological figure of the Ouroboros (the serpent that eats its own tail) suggests cyclical recurrence, the “vast Denful of Horrour” that it encircles resists interpretation. Though Dyer strives for a kind of unhallowed transcendence through the arcane architecture of his churches—a dark analogue to the Ouroboros’ alchemical affiliation with divine organization or unity in eternity—he is thwarted at every turn by the utterly un-transcendable quality of the worldly, inescapable “Dungeon of Man’s Desires,” the earth, or more specifically, the city of London (Ackroyd 47).

This realization is by turns horrifying and gleeful to Dyer; while he strives for escape from the prison of human life, he also glories in it perversely at moments, as he runs through the slums of his childhood, crying, “Do you remember me? I will never, never leave thee! I will never, never leave thee!” (Ackroyd 67). Indeed, according to Dyer’s logic of illogic, *nothing* ever leaves the seemingly bottomless “Pitte” of the earth. Readers realize that they are increasingly “lost in the Wastes of Time” like their narrator, slogging through a treacherous, marshy landscape of indistinguishable presents and pasts (Ackroyd 48). Ackroyd enacts his anti-hero’s arguments with Wren, who, unlike the history-obsessed Dyer,

liked to destroy Antient things: sad and wretched Stuff, he called it, and he us'd to say that Men are weary of the Reliques of Antiquity. He spoke in their stead of Sensible Knowledge, of the Experimentall Learning and of real Truths: but I took these for nothing but Fopperies. This is our Time, *said he*, and we must lay its Foundations with our own Hands; but when he used such Words I was seiz'd with this Reflection: and how do we conclude what Time is our own? (Ackroyd 55)

The answer to Dyer's question is clearly that we cannot; thus, any structure built on such unsteady foundations as offered by Wren's falsely concrete sense of the particularity of the present cannot stand. Instead, Dyer puts his faith in the very instability of time, and builds his churches upon the temporally unsettled ground of gravesites: "When there are many Persons dead, only being buried and laid in the Earth, there is an Assembling of Powers. If I put my Ear to the Ground I hear them lie promiscuously one with another, and their small Voices echo in my church: they are my pillars and my Foundation" (Ackroyd 23-24). Dyer's image proposes a grotesquely social, lively image of geological time, in which everything buried or submerged continues to thrive underground; the land itself speaks with the murmuring voices of the living dead. This understanding of every moment as a shifting convergence of moments, and the dead as buried, but still living, undermines any attempt to build a scaffolding of logic around the novel's unstable plots.

However, that is exactly what Hawksmoor sets out to do. The science of deduction is ostensibly the center of this detective novel's plot (though *Hawksmoor* stoutly refuses to follow any set generic course, further emphasizing the thematic futility of imposing any logical organization on the novel), and the Holmes-like, coolly logical Detective Hawksmoor's initial attitude is one of patient unraveling. As he tells his assistant, Walter (the uncannily similar, twentieth-century analog to Dyer's Walter Pyne), he believes in that a narrative's pattern will emerge coherently, given enough time and evidence, advising Walter to "Think of it like a story: even if the beginning has not been understood, we have to go on reading it. Just to see what happens next... I don't mind losing [the killer] for the moment. He'll do it again. They always do it again. Trust me on that" (Ackroyd 127). Of course, the narrative that Hawksmoor and Walter struggle to work out is not simply a story, but rather, a string of murders. Hawksmoor's lack of sympathy springs from his primary drive as a detective: his trust in the logical disentangling of events, and his assumed ability to look forwards and backwards along a linear timeline. Early in our acquaintance with the cold detective, he states his philosophy of detection:

And yet in the crimes which he had investigated, there was always so strong a sense of fatality that it seemed to Hawksmoor that both murderer and victim were inclined towards their own destruction; it was his job only to hurry the murderer along the course which he had already laid for himself – to become, as it were, his assistant. (Ackroyd 116)

Hawksmoor's method relies upon the ability of the detective to mentally move backwards in time to walk the murderer through the accomplished crime—a kind of imaginary time travel that assumes that events in the past can be clearly plotted out and intellectually reenacted with clarity and certainty. What Hawksmoor fails to take into account, however, is the impossibility of logically looking back into the past in Ackroyd's undead chronotope.

Timelines do not exist in this Dyer's London (which, we realize, is the same as Hawksmoor's London); instead, there is only the illusory safety of one's tenuous foothold in the present moment, the only thing that keeps the living from falling into the insanity of the past. As Dyer states, speaking of Wren (but also, obliquely, of Hawksmoor), "Men that are fixed upon *matter, experiment, secondary causes* and the like have forgot there is such a thing in the World which they cannot see nor touch nor measure: it is the Praecipice into which they will surely fall" (Ackroyd 101).

As Hawksmoor continues to confront the clearly irrational events of Dyer's time-warping murders with his rational methods, he falls deeper and deeper into the "Praecipice" of the unknown. His method of logical causality spirals into a dizzying sequence of endless speculations, and eventually falls apart in the face of the unsolvable mystery he's confronted with:

The event of the boy's death was not simple because it was not unique and if he traced it backwards, running the time slowly in the opposite direction (but did it have a direction?), it became clearer. The chain of causality might extend as far back as the boy's birth, in a particular place and on a particular date, or even further into the darkness beyond that. And what of the murderer, for what sequence of events had drawn him to wander by this old church? All these events were random and yet connected, part of a pattern so large that it remained inexplicable. He might, then, have to invent a past from the evidence available – and, in that case, would not the future also be an invention? It was as if he were staring at one of those puzzle drawings in which foreground and background create entirely different images: you could not look at such a thing for long. (Ackroyd 157)

Hawksmoor's loss of control over his understanding of time mimics the reader's experience of an increasing inability to keep track of things; ultimately, attempting to sort events into any explicable order by looking backwards or forwards in time (or in the novel) only results in the sensation of temporal motion sickness, a kind of narrative vertigo. Thus we see the impossibility of the detective's mission in this would-be detective novel; without any hope of ever being able to sequentially explain the events that transpire in the non-specificity of the present moment (which is simultaneously this moment and every moment), the detective transforms from a figure of cold logic and sanity into a raving madman, lost, like Dyer, in the "Wastes of Time."

The insanity of attempting to reckon with time that eventually overcomes Hawksmoor resonates with Derrida's hauntological time out of joint, a time that is "*deranged, both out of order and mad*" (Derrida 18). To look backwards in *Hawksmoor's* chronotope of the lively necropolis, is to fall into the "Praecipice" of this disarticulated time, to become mad. The novel seizes upon this susceptibility and exploits it. Ackroyd enacts the terrifying ease with which the living might fall into the fathomless earthly hell of the undead in the second Ned's narrative. This chapter extensively recreates the man's slide into madness, with a degree of realism and directness that is both surprising and alarming—and this section comes at a critical juncture in the novel, where the reader herself is increasingly unnerved by the madness of temporal disorder. As the uncomfortably intimate narrative shows us Ned's disengagement from rational everyday life (illustrating the movement from a realist,

predictable chronotope of everyday life, into the vertical, warped chronotope of the novel's diegetic illogic), it focuses at length on his perception of time:

He now sometimes dressed in the middle of the night, and took off his clothes in the late afternoon... He found a shop several streets away, where he bought a small wristwatch, but on his return he became confused and as he entered his room he said out loud, "Time flies when you're having fun." But everything seemed quite different to him now: by approaching his room from another direction, Ned at last realised that it had an independent existence and that it no longer belonged to him. He put the wristwatch carefully on the mantelpiece, and took up the spherical compass. Then he opened the door, and stepped over the threshold. (Ackroyd 74-75).

This rejection of the wristwatch is telling: Ned relinquishes the restriction of the time-keeping device, and instead submits to the chronically disordered, vertical time of *Hawksmoor's* history-saturated landscape. Eventually, Ned abandons the compass as well, giving into the temporally and spatially unanchored "wandering life" of the vagrant, drifting without agency through places and moments. Ultimately, the figure of the vagrant is the native inhabitant of the novel's chronotope of claustrophobic spatial and temporal collapse, in which characters are always treading over and *through* each other, both seeing and not seeing (and like Derrida's specter, seeing and not being seen) the mingling figures of the living and the dead, just as each chapter treads on its predecessors' toes in the disorientingly blurred and repeated text across chapter breaks. The ground that Ackroyd's characters walk upon, is, like Sebald's landscape (or, looking forward to Chapter Four, David Mitchell's) thick with the accumulated suffering of submerged generations—plague pits, buried Roman temples, Druidic ruins, the bones of sacrificed victims whose names and stories are forgotten, but whose spectral bodies continue to occupy the living world all the same. As Dyer declares, cynically gleeful, we—the living and the dead—are "all in the Dark, one with another," and in this state of muddled darkness and disordered time, all narratives converge into madness (Ackroyd 101).

#### *The Un-Death of Maggs: Indeterminate Afterlives in Jack Maggs*

The next two works in this chapter look back at the dead-or-undead space of England through the distanced eye of the colonial (or postcolonial) subject. The first, Peter Carey's 1997 novel, *Jack Maggs*, explicitly frames itself as a retelling of an imperial text. The rewriting of any familiar story always contains within itself a bizarre vertical framework of eerie simultaneity; as we read the new text, we cannot help but see the specter of the original hovering above it, demanding that readers experience both of them at once (an impossible demand). *Jack Maggs*, an exhilaratingly, unsettlingly unfamiliar take on Dickens' *Great Expectations*, is no exception to this rule. Carey's novel, however, further enacts this uncanny quality of rewriting, positioning its eponymous hero himself as a revenant back from the dead: Jack Maggs, Carey's reanimated version of Dickens' transported convict, Abel Magwitch, is not simply *as good as dead* upon his return to England from Australia— he *is*, in effect, a dead man in his native country. There are many questions and problems raised by this knotty depiction of Maggs' (after)life and (un)death, particularly regarding the curious relationship between England and Australia that the novel suggests. For if Maggs is a dead

man walking in England, but a revived one in Australia, then are we meant to see the colony a kind of afterlife of the imperial center?

Jack Maggs is a revenant brought back from three metaphorical “deaths” in England: the first is the legal sentence of transportation to Botany Bay, or exile “for the term of the convict’s *natural* life.” Maggs’ second death is the one decreed by Dickens, for readers of *Great Expectations*, the pre-text that haunts Carey’s novel, know that it is Magwitch’s lot to die following his return to England, and thus expect that it is Maggs’ as well. The third death that Maggs “survives” is one imposed by a mysterious *second* text that haunts the novel, *The Death of Maggs*. This text, referenced intermittently throughout *Jack Maggs*, is a fictional novel by Carey’s Dickens-like character, Tobias Oates, a young London writer and a would-be mesmerist who hopes to make his fortune by publishing Maggs’ story. Of course, by the conclusion of *Jack Maggs*, we learn that *The Death of Maggs* is actually Oates’ vindictive and fictionalized rewriting of Carey’s own rewriting, an alternate version of Carey’s alternate version of Dickens’ Magwitch. Oates’ novel ends with the convict’s violent death by fire, a fate that does *not* actually await Maggs within the diegetic world of Carey’s novel.

This over-determined over-abundance of deaths is constantly reflected in Carey’s figuration of the returned convict, which follows Dickens’ own cues in his depiction of Magwitch. If, as the letter of the law states, Maggs has been sentenced to stay in Australia for the remaining term of his *natural* life, then we might read his illegal return to England as the beginning of a second, *unnatural* life. In *Great Expectations*, Dickens depicts the returned Magwitch as a specter, foreshadowing his fate from the moment of his initial meeting with Pip in a graveyard. More directly, the convict’s reappearance after many years of Australian exile is steeped in ghost-story cliché; his appearance in Pip’s home is announced by an ominous clamor of churchbells, accompanied by a screaming wind, and finally, a mysterious footstep on the stair: “The sound [of the bells] was curiously flawed by the wind; and I was listening, and thinking how the wind assailed and tore it, when I heard a footstep on the stair” (Dickens 292). As Magwitch tells Pip his story, he effectively declares his own status as a specter, by impressing the fatal consequences of his return on the young man: “By God, it’s Death!... I was sent for life. It’s death to come back” (Dickens 300). Having returned, he is already “dead,” in a sense, regardless of the technicalities of the matter. However, Dickens’ Australian ghost is ultimately more pathetic than terrifying; his optimistic plans to disguise himself in shorts and hair powder are completely ineffectual and even touchingly comical, though Pip, of course, fails to see their humor, morosely comparing Magwitch’s attempted disguise to “the probable effect of rouge upon the dead” (Dickens 313).

Carey’s returned convict is also depicted as a revenant. However, unlike Magwitch, Maggs is not simply an out of touch and pathetic ghost; rather, Carey’s undead Australian is more akin to Frankenstein’s monster, a ferociously vibrant and physically powerful ghoul. Dickens himself draws a comparison between Pip’s relationship with Magwitch and Frankenstein’s with his monster, confusingly describing himself as both maker and monster: “the imaginary student pursued by the misshapen creature he has impiously made, was not more wretched than I, pursued by the creature who had made me, and recoiling from him with a stronger repulsion, the more he admired me and the fonder he was of me” (Dickens 314).<sup>11</sup> Carey picks up this allusion and runs with it, describing his revenant convict in terms that more graphically recall Mary Shelley’s images of *her* monster. Maggs, like Frankenstein’s

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<sup>11</sup> Finally, following Dickens’ ambiguity of identity between Frankenstein and the monster, Carey also frames the pair of Maggs and his Pip-equivalent, Henry Phipps, in a similarly changeable dynamic.

creature, is initially described as a collection of body parts: “thick lips,” “malevolent, heavy-lidded eyes,” cheeks that shine “as if life had scrubbed at him and rubbed until the very bones beneath his flesh had been burnished in the process,” and on his back, “a sea of scars, of ripped and tortured skin” (Carey 127, 55, 4, 95). These aspects subtly evoke Shelley’s description of the patchwork monster, whose “yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes... his shriveled complexion and straight black lips” (Shelley 57). Maggs is also, like Shelley’s revenant, larger and stronger than life, and his massive limbs can barely be contained by the constraints of the cramped metropolitan spaces that we see him uneasily move through; our first glimpse of him is of a man “so big in the chest and broad in the shoulder that his fellows on the bench seat had felt the strain of his presence, but what his occupation was, or what he planned to do in London, they had not the least idea” (Carey 3).

It is not Maggs’ corpse-like qualities that make him stand out amidst the Londoners he encounters, but rather, it is the shocking vivacity and animal energy of his larger-than-life body that mark him as different, in a mass of diminutive, physically unspectacular, undynamic urban bodies, who all feel the “strain of his presence” among them. If at the novel’s inception, Maggs is a dead thing, he is one that clings tenaciously to life, and not with the hangdog sentimentalism that animates Magwitch. He is a creature necromantically compelled to return to the land that made him, propelled both by sparks of hope and love for his English “son,” Phipps, but also, unbeknownst to him, by the need to communicate the story of his lifelong betrayal by Mother England to English listeners.<sup>12</sup> These English listeners are also notable in themselves. For if Maggs is an unnatural, reanimated corpse, possessed by a demonic energy, then he is out of place in the English world that he returns to is because it is a land, not of the *living* dead, like Maggs, but of death itself. The England that Maggs returns to is not the “green and pleasant land” of his idyllic Blakean fantasy of “home,” where country lanes are lined with the fecund “hedge bells, ground ivy” that he fixated on during the fifteen years of his antipodean exile (Carey 249-250). Rather, the England that Carey reveals to us and to Maggs is the infertile, inhumane urban space of London. Notably, Carey moves the Magwitch and Pip characters from the potentially fertile countryside of Dickens’ book to the insalubrious metropolis; his Maggs and Phipps are Londoners to the core, whose lives are framed by dark, narrow city streets, rather than rural expanses.

As the novel proceeds, England’s unnatural deadness is made more and more glaringly apparent. Carey’s London is framed not as a bustling imperial metropolis, but, not unlike Ackroyd’s city, as a shadowy, soot-filled necropolis, a place of seemingly eternal night.

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<sup>12</sup> Carey’s framing of Maggs as the undead figure of colonial return also resonates in many ways with Alan Bewell’s examination of the trope of colonial disease narratives in Chapter Two of *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*. Though Bewell focuses on depictions of sailors and other servicemen who return to England as invalids, his observations are also relevant to Carey’s returned convict. His description of Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* as “a hybrid double, at once a phantasmic other who voices colonial experience as in a glass darkly, and also the most common of colonial others, the vagrant and displaced sailor,” might be adapted to describe Maggs’ role as storyteller compelled to tell his tale, who is divided into the colonial prisoner and his repressed traumatic memory of British military authority (embodied in the figure of “the Phantom” who haunts his dreams) through Oates’ mesmeric treatments (Bewell 108).

The action of *Jack Maggs* takes place primarily in the dark, in claustrophobic Victorian interiors and nighttime wanderings through twisting alleys. While the city that Maggs enters on the night of his arrival—the place that greets readers in the first scene of the novel—is brightly illuminated, it is not lit by nature. Instead, he discovers the newly gas-lit, garish bustle of the Haymarket by night, lit with “an unearthly flare and glare... gas light, blazing and streaming like great torches; sausages illuminated, fish and ice gleaming, chemist shops aglow like caves with their variegated vases illuminated from within” (Carey 4). Accompanying this infernal glow is the “uproar, din, the deafening rush, the smell of horse shit, soot, that old yellow smell of London Town” (Carey 5). This vision of hellish “London Town” is one utterly divorced from nature; it is a space dictated entirely by artifice and commerce, where dead fish lie in ice awaiting sale, rather than swimming in open waters, and chemist shops take the place of sheltering caves in the densely fashioned landscape, exposed by the unnatural midnight sun of gaslight. This grimly exhilarating opening scene sets up a hopeful expectation that a corrective contrast might be found somewhere else, either in the countryside or in the colony. It becomes clear that the former is not an option; though Maggs and Oates take a brief journey to the countryside, they ultimately only find a provincial version of London’s squalor there.<sup>13</sup> The sun, in this novel, seems only to shine, however harshly, on the colonial space, and never on the imperial center.

In the London of Carey’s novel, birth and death are inextricably intertwined. We learn that the infant Maggs was discovered abandoned in the mudflats beneath London Bridge, perversely suggesting a kind of birth through interment. Like Hawksmoor, he is a creature born through death, seemingly molded out of the London mud and squalor. The young Maggs is raised by a cold-hearted foster mother, Mary Britten, who supports her family through illegal practice as a back-alley abortionist. Throughout the novel, England as a nation—cynically referred to more than once as “Mother England”—is brutally aligned with Ma Britten. Neither Mother England nor Ma Britten nurture their children; just as Mary Britten causes the women who come to see her to miscarry, so too does England condemn its children to a kind of dull death-in-life, either metaphorical or literal, before they are even born. Indeed, if we are to believe the novel, very few births seem to be viable in England—the unions Carey shows us result in abortion, as in the cases of Maggs and his childhood love, Sophina, or Oates’ affair with his young sister-in-law, Lizzie; the only other sexual union that appears in the novel is the equally un(re)productive homosexual relationship between the sympathetic Edward Constable, who is seduced and betrayed by Pip’s louche avatar in *Jack Maggs*, Henry Phipps. Should an infant be fortunate enough to survive the trauma of gestation and birth in Carey’s London, the fate that awaits is also grim: the novel proliferates in images of violent childhood death, illness, and abuse. We only see one living baby in England, Tobias Oates’ son. Even as an infant, though, Oates’ child is already infected with England’s deathly contagion, for he develops a mysterious boil that, when lanced, releases a “great river of pus” that the distressed Oates views as a manifestation of his own shame: “when he saw the evidence of infection pour forth from his son’s innocent body, he felt the poison to be all his own” (Carey 206). Those who survive in the necropolis

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<sup>13</sup> This episode ends with Magg’s murder of the man they went to seek, a small-time swindler; he and Oates are forced to flee through an unpleasant, revised version of the English countryside: “Maggs’s hessian boots trampled lettuces, broke carrot stalks” as they make a dash for the Severn; once on the river, they find it “sluggish and malodorous” and covered in a mist that “stank of the tannery but it was also a good opaque yellow and hid their escape” (Carey 281-282).



of London only seem to live half-lives, infected by the city's omnipresent soot, as well as the metaphorical soot of moral decay and economic greed that Carey disperses over the city. In "Modernism and Imperialism," a brief essay collected in *The Modernism Papers*, Fredric Jameson comments on Empire's tendency to push outwards to "infinity," saying that, "It is Empire which stretches the roads out to infinity, beyond the bounds and borders of the national state, Empire which leaves London behind it as a new kind of spatial agglomeration or disease..." (Jameson 162). Though Jameson is writing here about Forster's *Howards End*, this comment is also singularly fitting to *Jack Maggs*, in which a central scene in the unfolding of the plot actually revolves upon the dramatic declaration that "there is Contagion on Great Queen Street," which leads to the principle characters being quarantined together (Carey 156).

Jameson's depiction of London's metropolitan sprawl as "spatial agglomeration or disease" pushes against the popular depiction of the colonial space as the source of contagion, as described in Alan Bewell's *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*. This tension—begging the question, which place is more malignant, empire or capital?—is intriguingly captured in Carey's novel, in which both the imperial center and the colonial periphery are framed as different types of dead spaces. Initially, given Maggs's depiction as the colonial revenant, it seems that the trope of colonial disease is predominant. Early on, Carey describes Australia as "the place Jack Maggs had most recently come from." "The place" could easily be either Australia or Hell, where even the buildings are wracked with physical suffering: "[the houses] strained and groaned in the long hot nights, crying out against their nails, contracting, expanding, tugging at their bindings as if they would pull themselves apart" (Carey 46). Like Milton's Satan in Hell, the convict Maggs strives to build a heaven, not in his Australian hell, but in his own fantasy of England: under the whip of his military prison guards, he "would begin to build London in his mind. He would build it brick by brick as the horrid double-cat [o'nine tails] smote the air, eddying forth like a storm from Hell itself" (Carey 350). But Maggs' fantastical, heavenly London is not at all the city he returns to—rather, he comes back to find a gaslit, ghastly Pandaemonium. As London's virulent contagion is revealed over the course of the novel and Maggs' imaginary heaven falls to dust, a curious and oppositional recuperation also takes place. For as England is ultimately revealed to be a land of the dead, Australia gradually emerges as a possible space of the living. After all, it is the colony that bestows such an infernally energetic new life upon Jack Maggs; he is referred to increasingly as "The Australian" – an ambiguous identity that comes into being over the course of the novel, as Maggs paradoxically goes from being the "dead" man to being a character too vibrant to be contained by the desolate English setting, a turn foreshadowed from the novel's opening scene by the visual cue of Maggs' bright red waistcoat (Carey 3). Carey gradually transforms his images of Maggs from the Frankensteinian revenant of the novel's earlier descriptions to something more natural and vitally alive in later chapters.

The question that ultimately emerges, however, is *what kind of life* the colonial experience offers. Animal images, perhaps influenced by Dickens' descriptions of Magwitch as a ravenous dog, a kind of domestic creature gone wrong, begin pop up more and more frequently, suggesting that Maggs' Australian spirit contains some greater degree of natural freedom than the domesticated spaces of England. By the end of the novel, Tobias Oates is described a very English, very trapped and helpless "fox in a snare," while Maggs, on the other hand, is depicted as a free-swimming, wild "great antipodean squid" (Carey 305). In

Carey's rendering, Jack is a new and utterly foreign animal, transformed by his "transportation" from life to death and back again. The English characters that complement him are also drawn in wild animal images, such as his fellow footman Edward Constable (who matches Maggs in size as his physical "bookend," and as a gay man in Victorian society, is also forced to live a life in secret), described at one point as "an odd and long-legged marsh bird" (Carey 156). The only other character who truly equals Maggs' animal energy is the spirited, free-flying kitchen maid, the aptly named Mercy *Larkin*, who ultimately escapes with him back to Australia, where she becomes his wife and the matriarch of the healthy and numerous Maggs clan. And indeed, the proliferation of the Maggs family in Australia seems like the ultimate repudiation of the infertile and diseased metropolitan center of the British Empire. Over the course of the novel, we gradually perceive a possible recuperation of Australia as a space of the living, in direct contrast with England's necropolitan associations of abortion and degeneration. Maggs himself only finds happiness once he abandons his self-reinforced ties to England, and accepts the fact that his tenure in Australia has made him an Australian, with or without his consent.

Maggs' stubborn self-identification as English is summed up in his vehement claim that he has returned to London because he is "a fucking *Englishman*, and [he has] English things to settle," and throughout the novel, he insists that he is out of place in Australia, saying "I am not to live my life with all that vermin. I am here in London where I belong" (Carey 141).<sup>14</sup> However, as Mercy eventually convinces him, Maggs's love for England is a masochistic one; describing his lashing at the hands of a British soldier in New South Wales, she insists that "it were the King that lashed [him]" (Carey 346). Finally, Mercy reminds Maggs that the two sons that he abandoned in Australia, who he rejects as members of "That Race":

"You have babies in the place where you have come from."

His mouth tightened in denial.

"My son is an Englishman."

"I am not of that race."

"What race?"

"The Australian race," he said. "The race of Australians." (Carey 340)

Mercy's claim that "You have babies in the place where you have come from" is itself extraordinary in this novel, where very few people have babies anywhere, and Maggs's distant, healthy children seem miraculous in themselves. These unseen "real children" are framed in direct opposition with Maggs's English "son," Henry Phipps. Phipps himself is merely an unworthy stand-in for Maggs' aborted English son, whose image haunts Maggs' dreams: "*the poor dead mite was such a tiny thing. I could have held him in my hand. And on his queerly familiar little face, a cruel and dreadful cut*" (Carey 263). Phipps is actually a kind of twofold specter; initially, he is a fantastical revivification of this long-dead child, and in the end, following his enlistment in the army, he also transforms into the nightmarish figure of

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<sup>14</sup> This identity crisis echoes Carey's comments in a 2005 interview: "Australian history is filled with denial and false consciousness. I grew up thinking that we were English; my grandfather called England home. And somehow, when we imagined the convicts and soldiers, we always placed ourselves on the soldier's side of the experience. We thought the convicts were nothing to do with us" (Gaile 7).

Maggs' convict trauma, a "Phantom" in the "brutal, dreadful uniform" of the English military (Carey 351).<sup>15</sup> By contrast, Maggs' living, natural children are actually much closer to him than the spectral Phipps, and while they await him in Sydney, Mercy convinces Maggs that it is useless for him to seek out "someone who does not love you at all"—not only Phipps, the ungrateful English son, but England itself (Carey 347). We see that Maggs can only become part of a procreative, living world through the acceptance of his own membership in "the Australian Race," and the implicit, broader suggestion is that a generative future for the *human* race can only be found outside of the imperial center.

However, this optimistic gloss on the novel's ostensibly happy ending is unsettled by the novel's formal qualities. In addition to asking what kind of life Carey's novel offers its characters, readers of this self-aware, metafictional novel also must ask what this turn to an antipodean identity suggest about Australia as a space of *narrative* generation. Carey implies that his judgment of England as a dead space extends to its literature, conceiving of the Dickensian Tobias Oates as a builder of monuments to the dead: speaking of Jack's childhood love, Oates tells Jack that he "write[s] that name... like a stone mason makes the name upon a headstone, so her memory may live forever. In all the Empire, Jack, you could not have employed a better carver" (Carey 305). The Imperial metropolitan writer is thus framed as a carver of epigraphs, a cataloguer of dead things, a subjective remembrancer of things past. But Oates is not the only writer we encounter in the novel. The other one is Jack Maggs himself, whose naturalistic autobiographical letters to Henry Phipps provide a striking counter narrative to Oates' sensationalist, morbid telling of the story. The novel's final pages remind readers that these two, very different narratives are both within the frame of the overarching narrative, Carey's, telling readers that Mercy's "very peculiar library," comprised of seven copies of Oates' *The Death of Maggs*, along with Magg's letters to Phipps, currently reside in the Mitchell Library in Sydney (Carey 356-357). This remade, seemingly completed national archive, in which the "real" history (Maggs' letters) sit beside the falsified English version in Sydney, the antipodean answer to the imperial metropolis, seems to suggest that stories of England reflect upon a dead past, while Australia produces honest narratives that gaze into a fertile future. Mercy's readerly obsession reflects our own, as we, Carey's readers, are constantly confronted with the differences between *Jack Maggs* and *Great Expectations*; reading Carey's novel, it is impossible not to consider the violence the novel enacts upon *Great Expectations*, but conversely, rereading Dickens' novel after *Jack Maggs*, one cannot help but feel a curious sense of violence through omission in Pip's unsympathetic evaluation of the convict's character. Thus, the pair of *Great Expectations* and *Jack Maggs*, like Maggs's letters alongside Oates' book, ostensibly provides a more complete or full account of Dickens' original premise. Carey's novel's marked concern with documentation clearly enunciates the question of what is transmitted through historical record, and whether or not the latter can be supplemented or completed.

The coexistence of these antagonistic and contradictory versions of the same story enacts the opposition of two kinds of history—the fictionalized Imperial version versus the honest, unmediated colonial version—a strategy that Carey returns to with greater emphasis in *The True History of the Kelly Gang*. However, this seemingly idealized notion of an honest and natural history proves troublesome in the conclusion of *Jack Maggs*. The obsession with

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed discussion of trauma, psychoanalysis, and the mimetic function of mesmerism in *Jack Maggs*, see Elizabeth Ho's 2003 article in *Antipodes*, "Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* and the Trauma of Convictism."

the process of evaluating texts that contradict and aggress each other that Carey bestows upon us over the course of the novel ultimately seems to ask readers to question which received narratives of Australia's history are true, natural, and honestly documented and which are not. To that end, the fundamental question of *Jack Maggs* is ultimately what, if anything, is "natural." After all, if Maggs can only live the unnatural half-life of the revenant in the dense necropolis of the imperial center, then the suggestion is that a free and "natural" afterlife is eventually found amongst what he calls "the race of Australians" (Carey 340). This suggestion uneasily elides the question of which race is "natural" to Australia itself. While *Jack Maggs* ostensibly refuses to engage at all with the racial discourse of Australia's settlement, I read Carey's pronounced emphasis on the "race" of Australians to which Maggs is so unwilling to claim membership as a screen for the real racial question that goes unspoken here; the blatant omission of any aboriginal presence in the final, "Australian" section of *Jack Maggs* speaks as loudly as the sidelong cynical references to colonial violence that proliferate in a work like *Oscar and Lucinda*.<sup>16</sup> This very process of opening up hidden or secret narratives, such as Maggs'/Magwitch's untold story, obliquely reminds readers that in fact, the novel's archive is *not* complete, and other, suppressed narratives, undocumented on the shelves of the Mitchell Library, still wait to be unearthed.

This ending also highlights a hauntological problem: no *afterlife* can be ever be natural, and readers cannot forget that Maggs has already been a dead man, and thus have to wonder what the difference is between England, the land of the dead, and Australia, the imagined space of the hereafter. Carey's novel ends with a shockingly rapid and uneventful narration of the rest of Maggs' life following his return to Australia; the dramatic difference in temporality is disarming, suggesting that time is somehow collapsed in the curious afterlife of the colonial space, as opposed to its meticulous recording in epitaphs in the metropolitan/necropolitan center. This jarring temporal shift recalls the fairy tale trope of the land of the lost; in these final pages, Australia seems to be a kind of magic land beyond time, and its miraculous transformation from convict hell to settler heaven goes unexplained. While on one hand, the picturesque and healthy resolution found at the end of *Jack Maggs* appears initially to offer an sanitized and deproblematized origin myth for the contemporary insecurities regarding the history of Australia's colonization and development,<sup>17</sup> on the other,

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<sup>16</sup> Carey's heightened awareness of casual effacement of racial violence in Australian history is immediately signaled in the opening pages of *Oscar and Lucinda*, in which the narrator comments on the dishonesty of history as it's written by dominant culture: "I learned long ago to distrust local history. Darkwood, for instance, they will tell you at the Historical Society, is called Darkwood because of the darkness of the foliage, but it was not so long ago you could hear people call it Darkies' Point, and not so long before that when Horace Clarke's grandfather went up there with his mates—all the old families should record this when they are arguing about who controls this shire—and push an entire tribe of aboriginal men and women and children off the edge" (*Oscar and Lucinda* 2). In an interview with Andreas Gaile, he explicitly describes the fundamental "denial" of the Australian narrative of nation-building: "We told ourselves [the Australian land] was not farmed, not being used. We told ourselves that unlike the Maoris in New Zealand—who famously resisted—the Aboriginals didn't fight at all. But of course they did; there were these fierce wars fought all over the country. People of my age grew up in total ignorance of this" (Gaile 7).

<sup>17</sup> As Elizabeth Ho argues, the ending can be seen as "a legacy bequeathed to those not able to recognize themselves in the 'new' Australia that official multiculturalism supports. 'Old' Australia is reimagined as healthy and more importantly, as uninfected by its traumatic encounter with England" (Ho 132).

its fable-like opacity seems, to put it bluntly, too good to be true. The curious sparseness and mythical simplicity of the ending again suggests that the seemingly “natural” continuing life of the Anglo Australian Maggs clan is not so natural after all.

In terms of style alone, the seemingly slapdash way with which Carey ties up the loose ends of his otherwise precise and impeccably pastiched novel reads uncomfortably. The depiction of Jack and Mercy’s idyllic domestic dynasty is sketched out in pastoral clichés, in which Jack becomes president of the shire and the Cricket Club, his reclaimed natural son hits the cover off a new cricket ball in a local match, and the family is known to be “at once civic-minded and capable of acts of picturesque irresponsibility” (Carey 356). This fantasy of hobbit-like domesticity is a markedly English one, far removed from the hellish heat and blazing antipodean sun of Maggs’ first tenure as a convict in Australia, which he describes in graphic terms at various points in the novel.<sup>18</sup> The unexpected blossoming of a lifestyle that incongruously suggests a simulacrum of “England’s green and pleasant land” amidst the wilderness of the Australian landscape, in the would-be utopian happy ending of a newly recuperated Australian “heaven,” suggests slyly that the contagion of Englishness might continue to infect this new world unseen. This contagion is masked decorously as “civilization” and “civic mindedness” in the novel’s sparse description, but readers familiar with Carey’s concern with unearthing his nation’s violent histories must wonder what kinds of acts might fall under the rubric “civic mindedness” in the Anglo-Australian nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup>

If dead and decaying England has failed as the Blakean “New Jerusalem,” then Carey’s curious conclusion to the novel suggests that England’s afterlife in Australia is an attempt at a *New New Jerusalem*, with all of its pastoral charms—as well as its obscured histories of violence, both in the trauma of convictism, and implicitly, in the settlers’ violence against the true “natural” inhabitants of the continent. After all, if as Carey tongue-in-cheekedly writes, the Maggs clan is capable of acts of so-called “picturesque irresponsibility,” readers must wonder what other, undocumented acts of less picturesque irresponsibility are hidden beneath the fairy-tale veneer of Anglo-Australian village life. The civilized country idyll of the novel’s ending is disingenuous in the face of the brutality of the rest of Carey’s novel; upon reaching this point of conclusion in a novel that, up to its conclusion, is pathologically concerned with telling untold stories and exposing unseen horrors, readers cannot help but feel that this glib denouement is simply the screen that might cover yet another untold narrative. The fragility of this veneer of resolution echoes Carey’s earlier comments that Australian culture is “terribly thin,” given the nation’s newness (Carey, “Peter Carey Accepts NBC Award,” 1986). Given Carey’s frequent observations on the dishonesty of Australian popular narratives of settlement and national founding that I discussed earlier, we might read *Jack Maggs*’s happy antipodean ending as a falsely recuperative illusion of atemporal flatness that implicitly, if breached, might open up its own

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<sup>18</sup> The fantastical quality of this shallow final image of Australian settlement resonates with Lorenzo Veracini’s suggestion of “a Lacanian (imaginary-symbolic-real) interpretation of settler colonial phenomena. First, there is an imaginary spectacle, an ordered community working hard and living peacefully *Little House on the Prairie*-style. Then, there is the symbolic and ideological backdrop: a moral and regenerative world that supposedly epitomizes settler traditions (e.g., the ‘frontier,’ the ‘outback,’ the ‘backblocks,’ and so on). Finally, there is the real: expanding capitalist orders associated with the need to resettle a growing number of people” (Veracini 75).

<sup>19</sup> Again the “Darkwood” example of *Oscar and Lucinda* is relevant—see footnote 15.

historical depths akin to the violent verticality of *Hawksmoor*'s old world time. Thus is the denarrative project of *Jack Maggs*' project undone at the last minute: though Carey's Maggs is granted a happy ending that Dickens' Magwitch never had, the new world that he escapes to ultimately seems to insidiously replicate the sickness of the old world he left behind.

This peculiar, dishonestly flat Australian chronotope of *Jack Maggs*'s conclusion can be seen as a kind of estranged cousin to Ackroyd's uninhibited nightmare of an earthly convergence of times. *Hawksmoor* posits that the living, whether they realize it or not, are always on the precipice of a morass of seething spectral temporalities, and his London is super-saturated with a proliferation of overlapping present moments. *Jack Maggs*, however, seems oddly to withhold the image of a living present. Instead, the novel reveals two distinctly atemporal spaces: the over-historicized, static non-time of the dead and the suspiciously under-historicized, slippery non-time of the undead. The novel's dead imperial time is not *moving* time—instead, it is a time that has already run out, and is unalterably *over*, recorded for posterity in gravestones and novels.<sup>20</sup> London is the capital of timekeeping, which is dictated by the historiographic attitude of the epitaph-carver, and its citizens are effectively born only to die and be buried in the graveyard of the old world metropolis; by the end, even the lively Oates appears as “a deathmask” (Carey 333). The imperial afterlife of Australia, on the other hand, is represented as an indefinite place suspiciously divorced from time completely, where more than thirty years flies by in a matter of three pages of sketchy narrative. The only suggestion of a potential time of the present is in the implied position of an imagined reader—specifically, an *Australian* present-day reader—who might, in the novel's diegetic Sydney, conceivably stop at the Mitchell Library and look critically at *Jack Maggs* alongside its companion narratives, *The Death of Maggs* and Maggs' letters. This position of the postcolonial reader seems to exist somewhere in the rupture between the two distinct atemporalities of the imperial and colonial pasts.<sup>21</sup> Looking back, this reader might see that while England's time is over and cannot be reclaimed or restarted, but looking forward, the question of how to define Australia's time remains unanswered.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This sense of events that are already over—and a diegetic future that is also already over—is created by the novel's historiographic tendency to cast its knowing eye to future events in the lives of its characters: for example, at the novel's denouement, Tobias Oates “was not ye the bearded eminence he would finally become,” but is instead still “a frightened, ambitious young man” (Carey 354).

<sup>21</sup> This problem relates to what Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze's description of “the broken nature of time” in postcolonial experience, in opposition to “normal time in normal experience when cultures have elaborate mechanisms for provisioning their subjects a sense of continuity in experience” (Eze 29). While Eze writes specifically about the use of African languages in contemporary African fiction, his essay's observations on time and formulations of history is also pertinent to other postcolonial literatures. The further question that Carey's novels seem to pointedly ask is, is it possible for a newly *invented* nation, one that has intentionally obliterated the violent history of its creation, to create any sense of depth or continuity between the unrecognizable, deliberately distanced past and the oblivious present?

<sup>22</sup> Though Carey's novel is most often categorized within the parameters Linda Hutcheon's influential formulation of the postmodern historiographic metafiction, which engages with the past from the perspective of the present to reveal the incomplete and unresolvable nature of both times, I argue that it does something similar but ultimately very different. Carey's vision of the past seems to suggest that a more complete understanding of history is not only desirable, but actually possible. The barrier to this understanding, as he expresses in his numerous comments about Australia's long-

The pressure that this question places on the novel's reader is clarified by Carey's recent comments on the novel in *The Paris Review*: "The issues of *Jack Maggs* are being played out in this argument about the [Australian] republic and whether they are going to go and sit by the fire with the Queen of England having cakes and ale or whether they are going to understand their situation. To label it historical fiction is to risk misunderstanding its context" (Carey, "The Art of Fiction, 188). Similarly, the novel's fill-in-the-blank non-portrayal of past, present, and future Australia also speaks to Carey's claim in his interview with Andreas Gaile, that in Australia, "The past has been the subject of denial and memory-loss" and "it's essential... to go back to the past and try and untangle all the lies we've told and been told" (Gaile 3). *Jack Maggs*'s final, maddeningly flat vision of Australia as the blissfully timeless, heavenly afterlife of Empire simply cannot be left undisturbed, and Carey leaves it to his readers to look beneath this placid surface for further untold histories in order to fully delve into the "true history" of the country.

*The New Old World: Dead Europe's Necropolitan Standard Time*

If Carey's novel insincerely sets Australia up as the sweet hereafter of empire, then Christos Tsiolkas' 2005 novel, *Dead Europe*, begins with this premise and gradually chips away at it, stripping back the thin veneer of the decentralized, detemporalized heaven and revealing its place in a eternal, planetary hell, in which definitions of period—colonial, postcolonial, imperial, global—cease to bear any meaning. Like Carey, Tsiolkas takes pains to emphasize the fact that history does not begin and end in Europe; even though the majority of his novel takes place in Europe, he obliquely interrogates received narratives of Australian history as well as those of the old world. However, unlike *Jack Maggs*, which ends with the urgent demand for the attempted completion of a colonial-postcolonial historical archive (though still implying that recuperation is impossible), *Dead Europe* ultimately suggests that such completion, even if it were possible, would be futile. While Tsiolkas' Australia initially seems safe in its geographic and historic remove from its European progenitors, the novel ultimately reveals the fact that nobody is safe from the temporal sickness of history. Its deeply pessimistic models of time, history, and the inherent violence of human nature bring the historical simultaneity of *Hawksmoor*'s vertical chronotope to a globalized world: *Dead Europe* posits that there is no separation between the past and the present anywhere, and furthermore, that the living are no more than the conscripts of a global empire of the dead.

*Dead Europe* begins in an Australia far removed from anything but a distant, abstract understanding of Europe. The novel's protagonist, a young gay photographer called Isaac—who, like Tsiolkas, is an Australian of Greek descent—is raised by his immigrant parents on a diet of pan-historical Greek mythologies: his mother's anti-Semitic tales of blood libel, and his father's bitter nostalgia for the unrealized dream of Greek Communism. Under the auspices of a government-funded grant to return Greek diasporic culture to Athens, he travels there to exhibit his photographs, and has his first experience of post-Cold War Europe. He moves on from Athens to other parts of the continent, embarking on a perverted version of the nineteenth century Grand Tour that reveals to him not the cultural marvels of the old world, but its manifold historical horrors. In an interview with Catherine

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sustained "false consciousness," seems to be that present-day perspectives obstinately *refuse* to engage with proximate but intentionally obscured pasts.

Padmore, Tsiolkas comments on this conscientious rewriting of the trope of the colonial abroad, saying, “In terms of the travelogue... I’ve got to say I was just dead-set against doing the romantic trip through Europe. I chose the places Isaac travels through... because I wanted to write against the myth of Venice, the myth of Cambridge, the myth of Paris...” (“What does fiction do?” 449). However, *Dead Europe* is not only the story of the disenchanting postcolonial tourist’s travels through a post-Communist European world. While the early chapters of Isaac’s Australian story are written in the first person, in a mode of unsentimental naturalism, they alternate with a second, darkly magical realist, seemingly separate European narrative (as Isaac’s young nephew, comments upon watching *Star Wars*, Europe is “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...; Tsiolkas 11). This second narrative is written in the timeless language of myth, and it opens with a line straight out of the world of fairytale: “High in the mountains, where the wind goes home to rest, lived Lucia, the most beautiful woman in all of Europe” (Tsiolkas 15). As this alternate strand of narrative develops, the reader is surprised to learn that the seemingly mythical Lucia is actually Isaac’s grandmother. Her story reveals a horrifying, historically specific curse on the family: after agreeing to hide a Jewish teenager, Elias, during the World War II German occupation of Greece, Lucia and her husband murder the boy. His spiteful ghost—or perhaps a demonic manifestation of their violent act—continues to haunt Lucia and her daughter Rebecca, Isaac’s mother.

This second narrative’s engagement with the fantastic is jarring, compared to Isaac’s initially realistic, socially and politically inflected observations. However, as Isaac travels through his parents’ homeland, going from Athens to the remote, almost deserted village of his mother’s family, he is pursued by the malevolent spirit, whose presence affects him increasingly in both physical and emotional ways. Despite Isaac’s New World rationality and skepticism, the family ghost gradually possesses him, and the realist and magical narratives converge upon each other; as Graham Huggins suggests, “as the two narratives merge, the past superimposes itself frighteningly onto the present” (Huggan 196). This *Hawkmoor*-esque temporal disorder exhibits itself in both the novel’s narrative form and its content. In terms of the former, the alternation of the timeless, fairytale “past” sections and the naturalistic “present” ones is disconcerting, and increasingly difficult to keep separate. The mounting temporal confusion is made more unsettling by Isaac’s brief stay in Amsterdam, the violently debauched events of which are narrated in a dizzyingly dense future tense (“I will sleep on the train to Amsterdam and I will awaken refreshed and enter the city...”; Tsiolkas 302). Even before this chronological disarray fully manifests itself, the events of Isaac’s European trip speak clearly of the intermingling of the past and present, the living and the dead. From the first days of his arrival in Europe, Isaac encounters vivid specters of the dead everywhere he goes. Initially, he refuses to believe in the supernatural events that he experiences, but gradually he comes to realize that the superstition-filled, folkloric illogic of his ancestors’ world has eclipsed his own; in Europe’s time out of joint, there are certainly more things on heaven or earth than he dreamt of in his rational, new world Australian philosophy. In Athens, he visits the home of a poverty-stricken immigrant Russian grandmother and her young grandsons, but upon returning hours later, a neighbor informs him that the woman died some time ago. Later, his host for several days in Paris, Gerry, is eventually revealed to be a long-dead friend of his father’s. The photographs he takes everywhere show malevolent ghostly figures he knows were not there, and warps the faces of his living subjects into tortured death masks, a literalized example of Huggan’s claim that



the past is “*superimposed*” over Isaac’s present moment.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Isaac is possessed completely by the demonic spirit of his ancestral crime, and transforms from the living Australian to a revenant of European history, a vampiric monster driven by a timeless hunger for violence and human blood. The ghost story takes over the “real” one, leading us to waver, as Catherine Padmore does, “between two worlds, the real and the ethereal, in an uncanny oscillation... [She] found it impossible to say who was living and who was dead” (Padmore 56). The result is a novel that, like *Hawksmoor*, uses its formal instabilities to unsettle to the reader affectively, with sickening effectiveness.

This state of utter confusion between the living and the dead is emphasized by Tsiolkas’ disturbingly reversed portrayals of the living characters and the dead ones. Isaac, who begins the novel vigorous and healthy, is sapped of his physical strength as he is gripped more and more by the demonic possession of history; the ghosts, on the other hand, seem to grow more and more vitally physical. They are not like Derrida’s specters, all seeing but unseen, full of strange knowledge but voided of physical power. Rather, Isaac’s ghosts are *more alive* than he is, more vibrant and embodied than he will ever be. For example, the Russian family’s apartment shows no signs of spectral unreality. To the contrary, the physical evidence of their all-too-human bodies is everywhere to be seen:

The bathroom was small and dingy, and the boys’ underwear and Elena’s bras hung from the shower stall. The toilet bowl was filthy and with the stains of shit. Mould caked the walls and the porcelain of the basin. I took a piss and looked down at the small wastepaper basket at my feet. There was a yellow syringe hiding among the shit-stained paper. It was uncapped and it was this more than anything that unnerved me. Not the basket of soiled paper, that reminder of waste and human excretion; so confronting for a visitor such as myself whose whole life had been cushioned from exactly such evidence of human need. (Tsiolkas 49)

The repulsively obsessive level of detail in Tsiolkas’ description heightens the effect of grotesque human embodiment. These are no airy phantoms, but instead, ghosts that occupy the city streets and apartment blocks more solidly than Isaac, the “living” man does. Similarly, in Gerry’s home in Paris, Isaac sits down to eat and drink with his ghostly host and his wife, Anika; Gerry eats nothing, but drinks profuse amounts of whisky and angrily tells Isaac stories of the past, growing louder and more heated as the evening goes on, culminating by viciously beating Anika. Meanwhile Isaac, who can no longer eat human food, and craves human blood instead, vomits and faints, weakened and incapable of responding to any of the physical or emotional stimuli of the evening; he is only temporarily revived by feeding on Anika’s spilt blood. As Humphrey McQueen writes, Isaac has “contracted the virus of death,” and as a result of this sickness, he becomes somehow less alive than the dead themselves (McQueen). This “virus” is a convergence of the novel’s primary pathological fears: the grotesqueness of the human body and the matching

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<sup>23</sup> In her article, “Blood and land and ghosts: Haunting Words in Christos Tsiolkas’ *Dead Europe*,” Catherine Padmore relates Tsiolkas’ use of photography in the novel to Roland Barthes’ comments on death and photography in *La Chambre Claire*, and Derrida’s commentary on Barthes in *The Work of Mourning*; in so doing, she gestures towards Tsiolkas’ creation of a European space that is “more and more dense, more and more haunted and peopled with ghosts” (Derrida, quoted in Padmore, 57).

grotesqueness of the human spirit.<sup>24</sup> The nature of this virus is at the heart of the primary critical debate around the novel, which surrounds its relation to anti-Semitism—namely, is its unflinching confrontation of the cultural persistence of anti-Semitism *too* unflinching?—a question that I also found unsettlingly difficult to answer upon my first reading of the novel. In the end, though, I think the demonic hatred that Tsiolkas depicts (problematically represented most clearly in Elias’ ghost) is not one limited to a single race or creed. Rather than actually being anti-Semitic, this novel’s ultimate disturbance comes from the fact that it presents the utter conviction of its attitude of total misanthropy, without the slightest hint of irony, or even the leavening agent of black comedy. *Dead Europe* offers nothing but an unrelentingly violent and horrific depiction of the essential inhumanity of humanity.

But I do not want to focus here on the horrifically, vibrantly alive specters that Isaac encounters in Europe, nor his transformation into the vicious undead embodiment of his family’s (and country’s, and continent’s, and species’) historical horror that I briefly summarized above. These intriguing elements of the novel have already been discussed to great effect in the many polarized Australian and British reviews of the novel, as well as in several academic articles, including Huggan’s and Padmore’s. Rather, as in *Jack Maggs*, I am most interested in the indirect portrayal of Australia in the novel, and its role as a distant other space. Contemporary Melbourne provides the setting for the novel’s first and last chapters, but is never directly seen in the hundreds of pages in between. However, the occluded issue of what it means to be Australian emerges with intriguing clarity, even through the novel’s veiling focus on Europe. The novel ends with Isaac’s return to Australia, where he is cured of his “virus of death,” and allowed to return to life. Many readers, including Humphrey McQueen, have thus seen Australia as a possible site of escape; McQueen cautiously summarizes the novel’s would-be resolution, saying, “The Europeans are dead: the New World is alive. Isaac is restored to life by being brought back to Australia... Yet a suspicion remains that the novelist has found a happy ending for his fairy prince by a change of scenery.” McQueen goes on to shift his focus to the pressure the novel exerts on its Australian readers who, he implies, still have the chance to turn a critical eye upon themselves and grow into maturity as a nation by understanding their own national histories of violence.

This reading follows suggestions planted throughout the novel. As Carey does in *Jack Maggs*, Tsiolkas offers his readers a potentially redemptive view of Australia as a *new* nation; throughout the novel, the European characters refer to Australia as a nation as “young” and “innocent.” This seems to be a condition specific to Australia itself, not the whole New World. Rather, Australia is often directly contrasted with America, which, in the logic of the novel, has become part of the violent imperial mentality that goes by the name of “Europe.” One of the characters, a refugee in Paris, makes this clear, saying that “I have met very few Australians... but I have always been struck by their innocence. They remind me of a character from Henry James, they have an innocence that the Americans have now lost” (Tsiolkas 282). The American loss of innocence is more strongly expressed later in the novel by Vera, an Eastern European immigrant living in England, who claims that, “The real

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<sup>24</sup> We can trace the theme of contagion (like *Hawksmoor*’s proliferating “Mortality and Contagion”) to the novel’s opening section, “Ante-Genesis.” This grim pun plays both on *ante-genesis* as “before the beginning” and *anti-genesis*, or antigen. The novel’s three main sections are named in this biblical fashion (later we reach “Apocrypha” and “The Book of Lilith”); each of their names gesture towards the notion that there are hidden or suppressed parts of a dark catechism of human history.

terrorists are the Americans... I will not pretend a grief I do not feel. My grief was exhausted a long time before that. I was happy to see New York bombed. So they can understand, finally, what it is to suffer” (Tsiolkas 343).<sup>25</sup> America, it seems, is well on its way to learning “what it is to suffer”—that is to say, to “grow up” by developing its own history of violence and mourning, like a European nation.

It seems that Australia, in this dyadic frame, is still “young,” a nation unsoiled by the twinned diseases of imperial ambition and xenophobia, and untested by a sense of “what it is to suffer.” However, my reading of the novel’s Australian conclusion is ultimately pessimistic. Though the dead and diseased Europeans Isaac encounters seem to embrace the optimism of this notion, he himself—the novel’s primary representative Australian—reminds readers consistently that this is a naïve hope. As a Greek Australian, Isaac’s experience of his nation is very different from the idyllic Anglo-Australian culture sketched out in the last pages of *Jack Maggs*, and the culture of immigrants that he grows up in informs his cynical view of his nation. Being interviewed about his photographs in Athens, he declares that

In Australia we all ask ourselves where we come from.

- Even the Aborigines?

She was sorting through a series of black and white photocopies Anastasia had gathered of my photographs. She pointed to one of a young Aboriginal boy, a baseball cap on his head, a Tupac t-shirt on his chest. He was standing outside a Greek bomboniere store, scowling at my lens.

- Is he asking himself where he comes from?

- No, he’s asking me where I come from. (Tsiolkas 35).

Isaac’s modification of his claim reminds him, and his readers, of the real dishonesty of Australia’s carefully cultivated image of an integrated, multicultural society; he later refers to the Aboriginal population as “the only true Australians” (Tsiolkas 83).

Isaac’s identification with an Australian culture of racial tension and difference communicates his distance from the colonial history of white Anglo-Australia that takes precedence in received narratives of nation building. To this end, readers are both surprised and unsurprised to see him find a brief period of respite from the viciousness of his haunting when he first arrives in England. On one hand, it is jarring to read an Australian voice that proclaims, as Isaac does, “I was simply who I was when I was in England. A stranger. Myself. There were no colonial ties. I was blessedly free of identity” (Tsiolkas 330).<sup>26</sup> On the other, it is increasingly clear that the historical sickness—the “virus of death”—that seizes

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<sup>25</sup> This vitriolic invocation of 9/11 is echoed in a similar moment in Tsiolkas’ 2008 novel, *The Slap*, in which elderly Greek immigrants to Australia present similarly anti-American views. When one of them praises the 9/11 attack, a shocked listener takes her to task for it. She shakes this criticism off, saying, “...are you serious? With all the suffering in this world you want me to care about the damn Americans?” They all burst into merriment at the joke of it” (Tsiolkas, *The Slap* 310).

<sup>26</sup> Of course, this bold assertion is not entirely true; even if Isaac does not recognize it, the traces of his colonial identity are written in the literary allusions he makes to describe what he finds in England—he arrives on a clear, “Enid Blyton morning,” and, after his ghostly illness returns, “There were clouds billowing menacingly in the sky. This was a Patricia Highsmith England” (Tsiolkas 329, 360).

Isaac seems to predate the event of Australian colonization, or of the British empire itself. As he realizes over the course of his few days in England, he is swept up in an ever-present historical legacy of generalized misanthropy that is not limited to the specific resentments of particular imperial-colonial formations. The demonic force that possesses Isaac is not only the vindictive specter of his family's anti-Semitism, or his culture's; rather, it seems to be the universal condition of being human:

What I believe is that we will kill each other, that we will hurt each other. We will destroy our neighbours and we will exile them. We will sell our children as whores. We will murder and rape and punish one another. We will keep warring and we will keep hating and we will believe we are just and righteous and faithful. We will keep killing and selling one another and we will believe that we are just and fair and good. We will pursue pleasures and destroy one another in these pursuits. We will abandon our children. We will do all this in the name of God and in the name of our nature. We will create poverty and illness and we will create obscene wealth and the depravities that arise from it. We will think ourselves just and righteous, faithful and sane. We will hate and kill and piss and shit on one another. We will continue to do so. We will create Armageddon. In the name of God or in the name of justice, or, simply, because we can. This is what I believe. (Tsiolkas 379)

The novel's ultimate claim is that "we"—humans—are all like Isaac whether we realize it or not, sick with the virus of ever-present history, living unnatural half-lives in a timeless empire ruled only by death. In the face of this rancorous revelation, Isaac's recovery upon his return to Melbourne seems like a paltry shred of resolution struggling (not very hard) to cover "the vastness of Hell" that we glimpsed only a chapter earlier (Tsiolkas 377). This falseness of this resolution is made abundantly clear by the catalyst for his recovery: his mother, Rebecca, takes the possessing spirit into her own body, freeing her son from its deathly grip. In doing so, she understands that she is damned for eternity. However, the hell she imagines is a horrifyingly earthbound one: "this earth, this earth that smelt of sparse rain and parched ground, this earth and this boundless sky, was Hell" (Tsiolkas 411). The "parched ground" and "boundless sky" of Rebecca's hell is, of course, Australia. Ultimately, the novel reveals that image of an idealized, distant, "young" space of Australia is false, and that the new world is already infected with the contagion of human nature, just as the old world is. Before his return, when Isaac desperately tries to imagine an escape from a geologically and temporally vertical, Ackroydian London, with its "the oily squalid air" and "layers of sediment. Layers and layers of shit. History, manure, blood and bone under [his] feet. The dust of death, life, death, life, endless death and life, repeating and repeating..." he cannot even fully commit to the fantasy of "pure, vast Australia where the air is clean, young," knowing too well that there is already "blood there, in the ground, in the soil, on the water, above the earth," even in "juvenile" Australia (Tsiolkas 374-375).

Tsiolkas' invocation of a generalized, geographic proliferation of violence (past, present, and future) that can never be cleansed again emphasizes the novel's global necropolitan chronotope, in which the accumulated populations of the dead, who keep no time, dominate the living. His collapse of a history-saturated metropolis, London, with the equally violence-infused ground and sky of infected Australia recalls Peter Carey's comments on the innate, but obstinately unrecognized historicity of the Australian landscape; when

asked about his understanding of Australian history, he claims that, “There’s a dizzy web of interconnectedness produced by the physical linking between past and present... In Europe, you think history is everywhere about you, whereas in Australia you tend to think it’s not, but in fact it’s right in your fucking face” (Gaile 4). This comment is equally applicable to the vertiginous, shifting historical geology of *Hawksmoor*’s London-based necropolitical time, Tsiolkas’ horrendously vivid, globalized world of the living dead in *Dead Europe*, or Carey’s own visions of interred histories in both the imperial graveyard and the colonial afterlife of *Jack Maggs*. Though they propose differing models of the specific nature of time—as a reeling verticality of shifting presents in Ackroyd, a discomfiting and unpredictable oscillation between moments in Tsiolkas, and geographically-defined, competing atemporalities in Carey’s dead/undead spaces—these texts speak to each other in a uniquely unsettling language of historical and temporal disorder that returns us to the madness of Hamlet’s “time out of joint.” In each case, this language exerts pressure on its readers to consider the world outside the text, as Mark Ravenhill comments in his *Guardian* review of Tsiolkas’ novel:

*Dead Europe* is a narrative in which history and geography are cut loose to spin around each other and in which the narrative voice grows steadily more unreliable. *But Tsiolkas is no playful postmodernist.* Neo-liberalism hasn’t set us free, he suggests, to enjoy a new multicultural world of globalization. Instead, his novel pitches us into an environment where an illusion of freedom masks a murderous Balkanisation and the only thing that unites us is our centuries-old hatred for each other. *There is a hell, Tsiolkas seems to say, and we’re living in it.* (Ravenhill; my italics).

Ravenhill’s astute depiction of Tsiolkas’ deeply pessimistic view suggests that there is an urgent realist quality to the nightmarish, fantastical novel; rather than simply playing formal games with time or narrative, it strives to affectively depict the real conditions of life in the present-day globalized world, a claim that applies to *Hawksmoor*’s implicit condemnation of the contemporary moment’s rationalist outlook, and the links between *Jack Maggs* and the Australian republican movement discussed earlier.

This heightened sense of direct reader implication, for lack of a better word, puts these texts and others like them directly at odds with Douglas Coupland’s recent coinage of the genre of “Translit” in his review of Hari Kunzru’s *Gods Without Men* (2012). Coupland describes a condition of contemporary time that initially appears not unlike the conditions of time and narrative proposed by Ackroyd, Carey, and Tsiolkas, claiming that the current moment is characterized by the feeling that “all eras coexist at once.” However, his version of this coexistence is radically different from the dense, over-saturation of histories that the novels examined here have posited. Instead, Coupland describes an airy state of “possibly permanent atemporality given to us courtesy of the Internet. No particular era now dominates... The zeitgeist of 2012 is that we have a lot of *zeit* but not much *geist*.” Coupland is insistent upon this last point, suggesting that there is something “psychically sparse” about the contemporary moment. This claim posits a view of the condition of atemporality that is fundamentally opposed to the sickness of Derridean “time out of joint” examined here, in which no time can ever be “sparse,” overpopulated as it is by every time that came before. Instead of overwhelming readers with this horror of converging times and narratives,

Coupland's term implies a certain lightness and touristic irresponsibility. His description of Translit, which groups Kunzru's novel with precursors like Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and contemporary companions like David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, claims that they are books that fulfill the fantasy of "traveling back to Victorian England—only with vaccinations, a wad of cash, and a clean set of ruling-class garb." This description represents a heroic *Doctor Who* fantasy of time travel without consequences, rather than the complicated and ethically invested models of time that Kunzru, Mitchell, and Woolf's novels all propose.

I raise Coupland's argument here because this misreading does a disservice not only to the novels he groups under Translit's rubric, one of which (*Cloud Atlas*) will be discussed in my final chapter, but also to the distorted and disordered necropolitan chronotopes I have discussed here. The broken figure of time out of joint can never be anything but disarticulated, sickening, and spectral, unlike the slick, easily traversable dreamscape of Coupland's "bold new perpetual every-era/no-era." To take away the quality of uncanny derangement that characterizes the disorderly collapse of time in narrative is to take away its serious, most vital purpose: to enact, in the resulting proliferation of specters, the dire, ever-renewing, ubiquitous horror of human history that seethes under and around every present moment.

## Chapter 2 Fairy Tale Ecology

To the human eye, flatness can be a comfort in a landscape; it can imply gentle pastoral order, civilization, cultivation; the opposite of the sublimely inhuman verticality of mountains and gorges. Yet the reverse is also true: flatness can be the madness of the desert waste or a treacherous patchwork of marshland, blank representations of nature's utter disregard for human enterprise. And at times, the viewer can see in the weird landscape of the flatlands a paradoxical collapse of sanity and madness, comfort and alienation, nature and its opposite. Such is the space in which Graham Swift's 1983 novel *Waterland* unfolds:

We lived in a lock-keeper's cottage by the River Leem, which flows out of Norfolk into the Great Ouse. And no one needs telling that the land in that part of the world is flat. Flat, with an unrelieved and monotonous flatness, enough of itself, some might say, to drive a man to unquiet and sleep-defeating nights. From the raised banks of the Leem, it stretched away to the horizon, its uniform colour, peat-black, varied only by the crops that grew upon it – grey-green potato leaves, blue-green beet leaves, yellow-green wheat; its uniform levelness broken only but the furrowed and dead-straight lines of ditches and drains, which, depending on the state of the sky and the angle of the sun, ran like silver, copper or golden wires across the fields and which, when you stood and looked at them, made you shut one eye and fall prey to fruitless meditations on the laws of perspective.

And yet this land, so regular, so prostrate, so tamed and cultivated, would transform itself, in my five- or six-year-old mind, into an empty wilderness. On those nights when my mother would be forced to tell me stories, it would seem that in our lock-keeper's cottage we were in the middle of nowhere; and the noise of the trains passing on the lines to King's Lynn, Gildsey and Ely was like the baying of a monster closing in on us in our isolation.

A fairy-tale land after all. (Swift 2-3)

The haunted and haunting landscape of the East Anglian Fens is a deceptively blank screen upon which Swift projects these contradictory images; it is both barren wilderness and fertile farmland, and is at once wild and cultivated, alarming and reassuring. Swift's first-person narrator, the meditative, aging history teacher Tom Crick, calls it a "fairy-tale land," invoking the fairy tale's peculiar narrative function as both placatory and admonitory. Like the stories the young Tom absorbs, his home is built on paradox; the flatness of the land is simultaneously the thing that makes it safe – "so regular, so prostrate, so tamed and cultivated" – and dangerously wild, "an empty wilderness," enough to unhinge even the sanest viewer's grasp of perspective.

*Waterland* itself is thematically constructed on the shifting foundations of this "fairy-tale land," rendering its landscape inextricable from its narrative investments. This convergence is expressed through the overt association of two processes of human intervention: land reclamation and storytelling. In Swift's reckoning, both of these processes are expressions of profoundly denarrative impulses; in the case of land reclamation, to undo the work of erosion and the gradual dissolution of land by water, and in storytelling, to undo the erosion of unsatisfying or inexplicable events, seeking to solidify comprehensible

versions of the past with the structural reinforcements of explanatory narratives. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that neither of these practices are ever wholly (or even partially) successful, and at most, are inadequate measures that cannot ever halt the insidious progress of either of these natural resurgences, those of water and time.

Furthermore, while Swift's novel frames these human inventions, land reclamation and narrative, as would-be magical ("fairy tale") resolutions to the seemingly insurmountable problems they address, the natural world as shown in the novel has its own, opposing type of magic. The land, as Swift describes it, is itself alive with a strange and unknowable agency that pushes back against the incursions of human invention. Magic, Tom suggests, is native to both the landscape and its people; the empty expanses "yield so readily to the imaginary – and the supernatural," breeding in its inhabitants a respect for superstition and unearthliness of the earth itself: "the villages along the Leem were peopled with ghosts and earnestly recounted legends... An eel skin cures rheumatism; a roast mouse cures whooping cough; and a live fish in a woman's lap will make her barren" (Swift 18). The investment not only of the land, but of the products of the natural world – the "eel skin," "roast mouse," and the "live fish"<sup>1</sup> – with magical qualities suggests a certain human powerlessness in the face of the arbitrary and strangely animate elements of nature. The flatlands of the Fens are depicted as an otherworldly, liminal space, a field of battle between human invention and natural force, which meet in the neutral, precarious, always-temporary space of reclaimed land, and, because of this, "despite everything, despite emptiness, monotony, this Fenland, this palpable earth raised out of the flood by centuries of toil, is a magical, a miraculous land" (Swift 116). And so too is the past framed as a willful and unmasterable country that cannot be occupied or ordered by the artificial order of narrative, and can never be rendered solid or comprehensible. As Catherine Pessa-Miquel comments, "Vehicle and tenor become reversible, and in many sentences the pronoun 'it' could apply to the river Ouse, or to history, just as well as to the narrative form" (Pessa-Miquel 137).

This convergence of landscape and storytelling recalls Peter Brooks' meditations on plot in *Reading for the Plot*; considering the multiple meanings of the word "plot" in English, he focuses on its geographic and narrative definitions, as in a plot of land, or the plot of a story. In both cases, Brooks muses, "Common to the original sense of the word is the idea of boundedness, demarcation, the drawing of lines to mark off and order... We might think here of the geometrical expression, plotting points, or curves, on a graph by means of coordinates, as a way of locating something, perhaps oneself" (Brooks 12). Indeed, one of the central problems of *Waterland* is the impossibility of "locating oneself" in the madness-inducing vacuity of the Fens. The novel explodes with proliferating narrative starts, stops, and loops, which attempt unsuccessfully through their various beginnings and re-beginnings, to locate its reluctant protagonist in various histories (familial, national, geological) while uneasily circumambulating his immediate personal history, which provides the novel's evasive central plotline. The basic events of this plot are relatively few, though the novel toggles between two moments in Tom's life, a point of adolescent crisis in 1943, and a late-mid-life crisis circa 1980. Event-wise, the 1943 plot is the more complex of the two: Tom's girlfriend Mary becomes pregnant, and questions of paternity arise. Both Tom and his mentally disabled older brother Dick believe themselves to be the father (though the baby is, in fact, Tom's), and in an attempt to protect Tom from his brother's wrath, Mary tells Dick

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<sup>1</sup> A superstition that obliquely and mysteriously comes true: Tom's wife Mary, who briefly shares her lap with a live eel in a childhood scene, is later made barren by the botched abortion.



that their friend, Freddie Parr, is the father. Dick kills Freddie, and throws his body into the river, Mary suffers a botched abortion at the hands of the local “witch,” and Dick commits suicide. Eventually, after a period of repentance, the young lovers are reunited and married, and leave the fairy-tale/nightmare landscape of their native Fens for London.<sup>2</sup> Forty years down the line, however, the dormant psychological toll of these youthful traumas erupts when Mary suffers a psychological break. Claiming that she hears the voice of God, she steals a baby from a local supermarket, and due to the resulting scandal, Tom is sacked from his teaching post.

While Mary’s belated response to the events of their adolescent years is her dramatic breakdown, Tom’s is less clearly visible. Ultimately, we see that, through his increasingly fragmentary and frantic mode of storytelling, his obsessive, neurotic generation of narratives is his way of attempting to work through, rewrite, and explain the earlier events that continue to haunt him. Both of these responses enact a clearly denarrative desire: Mary attempts to actually rewrite the narrative of her abortion by taking a new child, while Tom desperately tells and retells stories of his life and his ancestors’, looking back in time for an impossible point of origin that could possibly provide a clear-cut answer to how his life ended up as it did. In his quest for the correct beginning (marked with increasing, ultimately manic frequency by the wistful fairy-tale invocation, “Once upon a time...”), Tom progressively sketches out the very different histories of his forebears: on his father’s side, the water-dwelling Cricks, who are “phlegmatic” natives of the marshy Fens, who “did not forget, in their muddy labours, their swampy origins; that, however much you resist them, the waters will return; that the land sinks, silt collects, that something in nature wants to go back.” These waterlogged ancestors are opposed to his mother’s forebears, the ambitious Atkinson, an empire of farmers and brewers<sup>3</sup> who bring “the tonic of elevated feelings” down to the Fens from their original home in the low hills of Norfolk. Both sides of the family, however, are marked by melancholy and madness, for as Tom laments, “To live in the Fens is to receive strong doses of reality. The great flat monotony of reality; the wide empty space of reality. Melancholia and self-murder are not unknown in the Fens. Heavy drinking, madness and sudden acts of violence are not uncommon” (Swift 17).

Swift clearly – perhaps over-determinedly – articulates the causal link between the disorienting emptiness of the novel’s setting and its narrator’s neurotic desire to “plot” his location in both history and space; the Fen is an eerie and uncontrollable place, an area of reclaimed land that is half earth, half water, in which nature constantly works away at the ground that its inhabitants stand on. As Tom despairingly asks,

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<sup>2</sup> Significantly, these two emigrants from the timeless “fairy-tale land” of the Fens move not only to London, but to Greenwich, the absolute center of imperial time; however, even in this locus of time-making, they cannot resist the backwards pull of their origins – of madness and magic – in the Fens; as Tom says of Mary retrospectively, utilizing the disorienting back-and-forth grammatical structure of the future tense to narrate the past that infiltrates the novel, “She’ll move with her husband to the big city, but in her heart she’ll always remain in the flat fens” (Swift 341).

<sup>3</sup> Though Swift only obliquely addresses the historical or political framework of nineteenth century England, the Atkinson family empire is inextricable from the British empire, for at the height of their success, “a special pale brew known as Atkinson India Ale was being regularly shipped thousands of miles to Bombay... are not all these works... proof of that great Idea that sways them; proof that all private empires do but pay tribute to the Empire of Great Britain?” (Swift 92-93).

...what is water, which seeks to make all things level, which has no taste or colour of its own, but a liquid form of Nothing? And what are the Fens, which so imitate in their levelness the natural disposition of water, but a landscape which, of all landscapes, most approximates to Nothing? Every Fenman secretly concedes this; every Fenman suffers now and then the illusion that the land he walks over is *not there*, is floating..." (Swift 13)

This "liquid form of Nothing" is also a paradox; water, here, is both life-enabling and life-destroying. The flatlands of the Fens are thus always on the point of dissolution, hovering between land and water, hovering between life and death. Their flatness is deceptive; it suggests at once a lack of depth and vertiginous profundity. Flat land is either two-dimensional, perfectly visible and safe, or, like the streets of Ackroyd's London in *Hawksmoor*, it is the skin that barely covers a terrible abyss; it is at once both a clean slate and a dizzying palimpsest. Every watery plain that opens before the reader in Swift's novel might be both a fertile field and a swampy graveyard, solid ground or treacherous liquid. Thus Tom's constant scurrying through time; his narratives skip back and forth hurriedly from past to present, seeking the solid ground of explanation.

This frighteningly ambiguous landscape recalls another image of deceptive and disorienting openness, this time from the poetic prologue of Susan Stewart's *On Longing* (1984). Of the countryside, Stewart writes:

*...space ideal, space of childhood and death. The forest remote, water mirroring not ourselves but the infinite distance of sky. Within patterns of nature, we search for traces of the human: a tiny rowboat pulled up to shore, the oars folded and asleep. Perhaps a figure, but microscopic, and on the edge of some oblivion – a cliff, or the other side of the painting. Everywhere signs of cultivation and wilderness: the plowed field of poetic lines, the ax left leaning against a colossal tree. The countryside unfolds, maplike before us, simultaneous and immediate. And yet always the problems of horizon and distance, the problems of depth and breadth. As we begin to traverse the field of vision, the tragedy of our partial knowledge lies behind us. The distance becomes infinite, each step an illusion of progress and movement. Our delight in flying comes from the revelation of countryside as sky and sea, from the transcendence we experience over vast spaces. Yet to see the thin and disappearing signature of the jet is to see the poverty of this flight to omniscience; in each photo appears the grim machinery of the wing. In the notion of return or cycle, of the reclamation of landscape, lies the futility and productive possibility of human making.* (Stewart 1-2)

The "problems of horizon and distance" that Stewart's evocative landscape conjures up mirror those of Swift's; always, in this "space of childhood and death," the confusion of perspective (the inconclusive struggle between the vastness of landscape and the tininess of the human, the "signs of cultivation and wilderness") rattles the viewer, even as it delights. The unsolvable problem of perspective that Stewart highlights here – of the desire to see a whole picture – resonates with the despairing satisfaction of Tom's regard of the seemingly endless Fens, in onlookers must inevitably "fall prey to fruitless meditations on the laws of perspective" (Swift 3). As Stewart asserts, "point of view is particularly a narrative gesture... Point of view offers two possibilities: partial and complete. What remains silent is the third and anonymous possibility – blindness, the end of writing" (Stewart 3). Tom's particular struggle to generate explanatory human narratives (both on the small scale of his and Mary's

lives, and on the grand scale of empire-building and decline) might be seen as a desire for a “complete” point of view that can never be achieved by the human eye or mind, in opposition to the Fen landscape’s all-encompassing and unknowable point of view that is alarming in its impassive completion, its dizzying collapse of everything into “Nothing.”

The idea that the disorienting openness of space in landscape is teeming with both fecund potential for the future and the buried horrors of the past plays out in Tom’s story, the tale of restless would-be historian and his struggle with personal and collective histories. His narratives are plagued by problems of scale and perspective; they are equally and disconcertingly concerned with the Fenlands of his young life, the blood-soaked gravel of the Place de la Révolution, and the fields of Flanders, flooded with blood and silt, as he offers his students inextricable accounts of personal, collective, and natural histories. In the latter, Tom finds the theoretical framework for his mode of narrative-building as inevitably denarrative: he sees revolution as an element of the perverse kind of “natural history” that always returns to its source, that he theorizes, in which the revolutionary impulse is described not as a push forward, but a naïve, but irresistible falling back:

A turning round, a completing of a cycle... though the popular notion of revolution is that of categorical change, transformation – a leap into the future – yet almost every revolution contains within it an opposite if less obvious tendency: the idea of a return. A redemption; a restoration. A reaffirmation of what is pure and fundamental against what is decadent and false. A return to a new beginning... (Swift 137)

It is a universal human desire, Tom asserts, to try and return to an unreal and idealized point of origin, or, in the disbelieving words of his most resistant student, Price, to “put the clock back” (Swift 140). In terms of structure, Tom’s meandering narrative moves neurotically through time, continually seeking a clean and unmarred point of origin that it never finds. Furthermore, the idea of return is *forced* upon the inhabitants of Swift’s world, though not in a generative or optimistic way. Rather, the return of things thought (or hoped) lost or buried is one of the novel’s preoccupations; highlighting the difference between “natural” history and human history, Swift show us a world in which the very human desire to go back to a mythical beginning is always thwarted by the natural world’s tendency to remind man of the falseness of its various fictions of origin. The earth itself is instrumental in the exhumation of these histories; the fictional River Leem seems *willfully* to bring forth objects – “Willow branches; alder branches; sedge; fencing; crates; old clothes; dead sheep; bottles; potato sacks; straw bales; fruit boxes; fertilizer bags” – until eventually, one day, it brings forth a different kind of object: a human body (Freddie’s), the thing at the hazy center of Tom’s roundabout tale (Swift 4). These magically returned things are insistent reminders of the accretion of time; return to an unmarred beginning is impossible when every moment is deluged with the incontrovertible, physical evidence of the past.

While the majority of critical readings of the novel focus on its diverse, sometime contradictory figurations of history,<sup>4</sup> my primary interest in *Waterland* lies in this ambiguous suggestion of an antagonistic, unscientific, and strangely *personal* ecological relation between

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<sup>4</sup> This inclination is perhaps guided not only by the novel’s own overt engagements of history, but by Linda Hutcheon’s influential categorization of it as a key work of historiographic metafiction; her invocations of the novel as a clear example of the latter throughout *A Poetics of Postmodernism* highlight its obsessive relation to the project of narrativizing history.

the earth and the human desire.<sup>5</sup> Swift depicts competing magics: on one hand, the incomprehensible *will* of natural forces, expressed through mute and incomprehensible phenomena; on the other, the very human, essentially denarrative desire to maintain control over our environments, both natural and historical. *Waterland* ultimately proposes that all human attempts to thwart or reshape the world, like the reclaiming of land or the organizing of histories, are fairy-tale tasks in themselves, no matter how scientifically they are undertaken; while history is, as Tom says drily, “an accredited sub-science,” there don’t seem to be any actual sciences that maintain their integrity in the novel (Swift 86). There is a kind of occultism at the center of any such attempt; the hope that cultivation, taxonomy, or the instilling of narrative order can exert control over history (human or natural) is like casting a wistful spell one knows will fail.

The contradictory nature of the Fen landscape of the novel enacts this tension between believing in the magic of human organization, and having it constantly disproved; the flatness of the Fen is at once the illusion of safety and natural submission, and the threat of vengeful nature, lying in wait, all the more terrifying in its incomprehensible and mute willfulness. Tom’s narrative obfuscations and evasions (that often masquerade as revelation), and the attempted obliteration of evidence are both central denarrative would-be magic tricks in the novel, summed up in the ritualized act of casting things (a bottle, a body) into the running river. However, things banished will always return, the novel suggests – for in the novel’s magically agential, capricious ecosystem,

...while the Ouse flows to the sea, it flows, in reality, like all rivers, only back to itself, to its own source; and that impression that a river moves only one way is an illusion. And it is also an illusion that what you throw (or push) into a river will be carried away, swallowed forever, and never return. Because it will return. And that remark first put about, two and a half thousand years ago, by Heraclitus of Ephesus, that we cannot step twice into the same river, is not to be trusted. Because we are always stepping into the same river. (Swift 145-6)

This perversely anti-scientific claim suggests that nature operates under its own peculiar deterministic and animate logic (“Because it will return”) rather than the impersonal and unidirectional flow of the river to the sea. The idea that the river Ouse itself is always the same, and somehow maintains a consistent character, and even a kind of material memory, retaining and returning – perhaps playfully, perhaps vengefully – “what you throw (or push) [in],” suggests a kind of blank and faceless personification that instills the river with life and agency. However, this sense of opaque character refuses the familiarity of comfortable anthropomorphism: the two rivers of the novel, the fictional Leem and the real Ouse, are “unconcerned with ambition, local or national,” and seem to operate on their own time, and their own unknowable agendas (Swift 145). Yet before we explore the curious character of

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<sup>5</sup> A surprising lack of critical attention has been paid to the ecological aspects of the novel; though Ronald H. McKinney’s 1997 *New Literary History* article, “The Greening of Postmodernism: Graham Swift’s *Waterland*” is suggestively titled, it does not directly address the role of environment in the novel. Rather, McKinney focuses on how Swift uses “The ecological metaphor of land reclamation as its central device for showing how postmodern praxis can avoid both mindless optimism and hopeless despair,” an argument that privileges “postmodern praxis” far beyond the “ecological metaphor” (McKinney 821).

the broader ecological revolt against human intervention, narrative or otherwise, let us begin with the specific place that acts out these opaque and indifferent urges of the mute natural world in Swift's novel: in Tom's words, "let me tell you [...]"

*"About the Fens"*

The novel unfurls in a temporally-shifting patchwork of short chapters, almost all of which announce their topics – like Chapter One, "About the Stars and the Sluice" – and are narrated by Tom, ostensibly in his role as a high school history teacher who goes off book to narrate his own personal history. One of the first stories Tom recounts is not a fairy tale at all, though we might easily read a desire for magical recuperation into its content: he describes his fairy tale's geographic location, "which, like the settings of all good fairy-tales, must be both palpable and unreal": the Fen country, and the struggles of living there (Swift 8). Chapter Three, "About the Fens," offers a brief geological and technological history of the Fens, "which are a low-lying region of eastern England, over 1,200 square miles in area," that "advance... to meet the North Sea at the Wash. Or perhaps it is more apt to say that the Wash summons the forces of the North Sea to its aid in a constant bid to recapture its former territory" (Swift 8). This martial image is evocative of the ongoing battle between the Fens and their inhabitants, for the particular flatness of this "fairy-tale land" is not an unmediated one; throughout the novel, Swift expounds on the continual process of drainage and geographic reshaping required to make the Fens livable and arable. As Tom informs us, "The chief fact about the Fens is that they are reclaimed land, land that was once water, and which, even today, is not quite solid" (Swift 8). Following immediately on the heels of the initial, aestheticized and mystified initial description of the Fenlands that began this chapter, the novel slides into a surprisingly historiographical account of the shaping of the Fens, by geological forces and human ones.

The opposition of earthly magic to human magic is clearly outlined in this chapter, in the shifting relations of silt, water, and men. Describing the geological formation of the Fens, Swift writes that silt first began the work of pushing back the waters:

The Fens were formed by silt. Silt: a word which when you utter it, letting the air slip thinly between your teeth, invokes a slow, sly, insinuating agency. Silt: which shapes and undermines continents; which demolishes as it builds, which is simultaneous accretion and erosion.

It came first from the coast of Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, borne on the inshore currents which flowed southwards into the ancient Wash... (Swift 8-9)

The "slow, sly, insinuating agency" of the traveling silt implies the curious liveliness and the unsettling element choice that characterizes the natural world through the rest of the novel. What this "agency" dictates is unknowable to the human population of the Fens, who work tirelessly, fighting a losing battle against the encroachment of rising waters. Misunderstanding and misfortune dog the human project of draining the Fens, from the arrival of the seventeenth-century Dutch engineer Cornelius Vermuyden, who was hired by King Charles I and successfully cut several rivers, "cuts, drains, lodes, dykes, eaus and ditches and converted 95,000 acres into summer, if not winter, grazing." However, Vermuyden's interventions were rapidly subverted by the insidious silt, which "obstructs as it

builds, unmakes as it makes,” as well as the shrinkage of reclaimed land and peat, and with it the danger of flooding (Swift 11-12). Tom’s family history follows the unceasing work of drainage on both sides; his Crick ancestors, who began as rebellious river-dwellers, eventually “threw in their lot with the drainers and land-reclaimers” as laborers, and “joined in the destiny of the Fens, which was to strive not for but against water,” while his striving Atkinson forebears spearhead the drainage efforts in order to control commerce and travel on the waterways (Swift 10, 12).

The unremitting work of drainage takes on an oddly intimate tone throughout the novel, such that the constant battle of human innovation versus natural obliteration, takes on the character of a personal antagonism; water and silt are framed as a creeping, unrelenting enemies, who demand grudging respect for their persistence: “When you work with water, you have to know and respect it. When you labour to subdue it, you have to understand that one day it may rise up and turn all your labours to nothing” (Swift 13). The seeming element of choice and contingency (“it may rise up”) that haunts this description curiously suggests that the battle is being fought between rival intelligences, one of whose goals are unnamed and unknowable, and will never be resolved, for “you do not reclaim a land overnight. You do not reclaim a land without difficulty and without ceaseless effort and vigilance. The Fens are still being reclaimed even to this day. Strictly speaking, they are never reclaimed, only being reclaimed” (Swift 9-10). The sinking ground of the Fens never offer more than a sense of temporary security, and Swift’s landscape seems always to be sliding back into itself, tracing its own evolution backwards. This ambiguous feeling of transience is summarized by Tom’s interrogation of what it means to inhabit a present moment:

...what is this much-adduced Here and Now? What is this indefinable zone between what is past and what is to come; this free and airy present tense in which we are always longing take flight into the boundless future?

How many times do we enter the Here and Now? How many times does the Here and Now pay us visits? It comes so rarely that it is never what we imagine, and it is the Here and Now that turns out to be the fairy-tale, not History, whose substance is at least for ever determined and unchangeable... the Here and Now, which brings both joy and terror, comes but rarely – does not come even when we call it. That’s the way it is: life includes a lot of empty space. We are one-tenth living tissue, nine-tenths water; life is one-tenth Here and Now, nine-tenths a history lesson. For most of the time the Here and Now is neither now nor here. (Swift 60-61)

Serenity and stasis, in the rare moments when they appear, are always framed in terms of transience, ephemerality, and nostalgia, as in Tom’s conditional evocation of the river water held temporarily in the lock-pen, which “would be smooth and placid and it would give off that smell which is characteristic of places where fresh water and human ingenuity meet... A cool, slimy but strangely poignant and nostalgic smell. A smell that is half man and half fish” (Swift 4).

*“About the Story-Telling Animal”*

Contemplating the ambivalent and slippery “Here and Now,” Tom also makes the mystifying claim that, “only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man – let me offer you a definition – is the story-telling animal” (Swift 62). By claiming that “only animals live... in the Here and Now” and that nature has no concept of “memory or history,” he seems to suggest that humans are alone in their ability to process a sense of the past or future. However, the claim that follows, that “man... is the story-telling animal” troubles these sentiments, and cleaves back to the novel’s magical ecosystem; the idea of the “story-telling *animal*” re-collapses that distinction between the human being and the rest of the natural world, suggesting that the only thing that actually separates the two is a question of rhetoric. After all, as we have seen, the earth does “remember” and retain things – histories, artifacts – even if the terms “memory” and “history” do not exactly apply to its mode of doing so.

The particular landscape of the novel evolves a particular kind of animal – indeed, “half man and half fish.” The Crick family appears to be fully integrated into the landscape from which they emerge; they are “fishermen, fowlers and reed-cutters who made their sodden homes in those stubborn swamps, took to stilts in time of flood and lived like water-rats... water people” (Swift 10). Once they join the colonizing forces of the land drainers, they do not cease to be water people, but instead “became amphibians. Because if you drain land you are intimately concerned with water... perhaps at heart they always knew, in spite of their land-preserving efforts, that they belonged to the old, prehistoric flood” (Swift 13). Playfully – or not so playfully – Tom suggests that the muddy river waters that they belong to even creep into the bodies of the Cricks, in the form of “phlegm. A muddy, silty humour... Perhaps because of that old watery phlegm which cooled and made sluggish their spirits... they did not forget, in their muddy labours, their swampy origins; that, however much you resist them, the water will return” (Swift 15-17). Tom links this innately “prehistoric,” phlegmatic ancestral character to the propensity to embrace the magic of the landscape. If the native Fen dweller of Tom’s description is a kind of evolutionary mystery, an amphibious, itself mythical animal, it is also equally a superstitious one, invested in magic and mythology. Living at the mercy of both the rising waters and the flattening expanse of the land, they are a magic-believing people influenced by their magical setting. This superstitious character, in turn, leads to the compulsion to tell fairy tales, an association that plays out most clearly in the figure of Tom’s father, Henry Crick, who is “a superstitious man, [who] liked to do things in such a way as would make them seem magical and occult. So he would always set his eel traps at night. Not because eel traps cannot be set by day, but because the mystery of darkness appealed to him” (Swift 1). Fairy tales thus become an artificially placatory mediation between people and people, as well as people and nature; of explaining how to relate to other mystifying humans,<sup>6</sup> and somehow reaching out, in perhaps an appeasing way,<sup>7</sup> to the terrifying incomprehensibility of the numinous natural world – “the mystery of darkness.”

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<sup>6</sup> The novel’s very first “fairy-tale words; fairy tale advice,” spoken by Henry Crick, are an admonition that, “whatever you learn about people, however bad they turn out, each one of them has a heart, and each one of them was once a tiny baby sucking his mother’s milk...” (Swift 1).

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the elder Crick’s ritualized setting of the eel traps has a sacrificial quality to it.

Like the simultaneously intimate and antagonistic work of land reclamation, story telling is also a double-sided endeavor, whose two faces seem paradoxically opposed to each other. At once, story telling is an intimate embrace of the unknown, a way of connecting to the magical and inexplicable elements of the “fairy-tale land” – yet it is also a mode of distancing and differentiation. For example, one of the things that Henry “explains” via story is the origin of the stars:

Do you know what the stars are? They are the silver dust of God’s blessing. They are little broken-off bits of heaven. God cast them down to fall on us. But when he saw how wicked we were, he changed his mind and ordered the stars to stop. Which is why they hang in the sky but seem as though at any time they might drop... (Swift 1-2).

The heavens here are the comfortingly explicable product of a humanized and surprisingly whimsical “God,” yet also a signal of that same God’s austere judgment and difference from us; suspended forever in between these two modes, the stars remain familiar and terrifyingly alien.<sup>8</sup> The telling of stories is also a magical distancing act on a personal level, as well as a cosmological one. While Tom’s narration seems at first to aim for a clear-sighted revelation of history via meticulous excavation of the past, it increasingly becomes an attempt to linger at the beginning, to return to a static “once upon a time” – and arrive at a better version of the un-pin-downable “Here and Now.” Though his renarrated and recycled accounts of his own life and the lives of others appear to strive towards a closer view of events, they also contrarily create a sense of distance. Generating narratives becomes a method of disembodiment and disconnection, exemplified by Tom’s habit of slipping into the third person when describing moments that are either extremely embarrassing, to comic effect, or that are too traumatic to process in the first person (for instance, when he narrates the death of his mother, the narrative slips between its accustomed “I” and distanced images of “little Tom’s reaction to his Mother’s death,” Swift 283). This narrative out-of-body propulsion again futilely resists the idea that man is an animal, and, by focusing its energy on the generation of imaginative narrative, cleaves to the notion that the human mind can function outside of its bodily environment, and thus attempt to control it.

Yet despite the best efforts of humans to prove otherwise, the “story-telling animal” always remains just as much an animal as a storytelling consciousness. This formulation resounds rhetorically with Nietzsche’s description, in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, of the “paradoxical task” of nature: “To breed an animal *which is able to make promises*” (Nietzsche 38). Thinking through this idea of “making promises,” Nietzsche proposes that in order to become a promise-making animal – a remembering animal – the human must necessarily also be a “necessarily forgetful animal, in whom forgetting is a strength” (Nietzsche 39). Both sides of this paradoxical creature are evident in Swift’s story-telling animal, for, as we have seen, the telling of stories is both retention (memory) and rejection (forgetting). In addition, in Swift’s formulation, there seems to be a mediating recognition between these

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<sup>8</sup> “God” plays no conventional role in the novel as a whole, and remains, if anything, the distant and unhelpful fairy tale character depicted here. Though He makes an appearance via the grown-up Mary’s madness and religious fervor (in which she claims to believe that God commands her to take the baby, though she also admits, when pressed, the surprisingly banal truth: “All right, all right. I got [the baby] from Safeways. I got him from Safeways in Lewisham” (Swift 269).



two modes, for Tom offers “Another definition of Man: the animal who craves meaning – *but knows* – ” (Swift 140; italics are mine). This last modification on Tom’s definition of man as an animal suggests the fetishistic quality of this search for meaning; the unspoken ending of what we “know – ” is, of course, that there is no such thing as meaning. This unfinished admission discredits the building of historical narratives yet again, a thematic refrain of the novel that is also exhibited in its cynical debunkings of received narratives of “significant” historical events, such as its brief and cursory description of the anticlimactic fall of the Bastille (“Seven prisoners released...two madmen, four forgers, and a hapless roué,” Swift 178), in the chapter “Quatorze Juillet,” a sentiment echoed by a later chapter fittingly titled “Forget the Bastille.” Try through Swift’s story-telling animals may to explain away the ineluctable creatureliness of their situation, the stories they generate are always insubstantial and meaningless, when seen in counterpoint to bodies, events, and objects.

In addition to land reclamation and storytelling, a third attempted process of harnessing natural forces appears in the novel: fermentation. The Atkinson family, Tom’s maternal forebears, are both brewers and reclaimers, the proprietors of the Atkinson Brewery and Atkinson Water Transport Company. In addition to water and phlegm, beer is the third liquid element of this novel, and it functions in a similarly uncontrollable way. Fermentation, a natural process, is cultivated and raised to an art form by Tom’s grandfather, Ernest Atkinson, and his father, and his father’s father. It is that original Atkinson, Thomas (the present-day Tom’s great-great-grandfather and namesake) who cemented the family’s commercial interests in drainage and brewing, joining them in the company’s emblem, “crossed barley ears over a symbolic representation of water.” However, he also unintentionally confirmed the dangerous aspect of the relationship between these two processes that foolhardily strive to harness nature to human desire, by choosing an ambiguous motto: “*Ex Aqua Fermentum*,” which was carved over the brewery gates, and appeared on their bottles (one of which, in Dick’s hands, was later the weapon used to kill Freddie Parr). As Tom translates, the intended motto is “Out of Water, Ale,” or at a slightly more distant stretch, “Out of Water, Activity.” However, the final interpretation, which proves most true, is the disturbing observation, “Out of Water, Perturbation” (Swift 86).

“Perturbation,” in this case, arises not only out of the river’s rising waters, or out of the tide of human history, but out of the fermentation of alcohol itself. A climactic scene unfolds when Tom’s grandfather Ernest (grandson of the original Thomas), a disillusioned recluse and failed politician (“a brewer: a fermenter”), develops the beer known as his “Special,” or Coronation Ale, to celebrate the accession of George V in 1911 (Swift 171–172). “The Special” is special indeed, and possesses the power to send drinkers “with astonishing rapidity through the normally gradual and containable stages of intoxication: pleasure, satisfaction, well-being, elation, light-headedness, hot-headedness, befuddlement, distraction, delirium, irascibility, pugnaciousness, imbalance, incapacity – all in the gamut of a single bottle” (Swift 171). The Coronation celebration devolves rapidly into a scene of carnivalesque madness, culminating in a mob of intoxicated villagers, like dumb animals, “eyes glazed as much by their intake of ale as by the glare of the flames,” watching the Atkinson Brewery burn to the ground (Swift 174). Drunkenness, which is framed continually through the novel as another human attempt at coping with the incomprehensible in a way that is “normally gradual and containable,” is here shown as an uncontrollable and animalistic, *inhuman* yet somehow natural bodily reaction. Again, readers are reminded that, though humans may be the story-telling animal, or the meaning-seeking animal, or

Nietzsche's promise-making animal, they are animals nonetheless, who cannot control what their bodies make them do.

*About Bodies, Earth, and Water*

Questions of humanity and the body are rendered even more complex as the novel moves forward. In some ways, "animal" is only a liminal category in the novel, a way station on the spectrum between the human and the earth. For ultimately, adding to the impossibility of location, organization, and certainty in this fairy tale ecology, the most pressing concern is the increasingly unanswerable question of where the land ends and the human body begins. After all, human bodies, as mentioned earlier, "are one-tenth living tissue, nine-tenths water" just like the boggy earth of the Fens (Swift 61). The barely-there, largely symbolic character of old Bill Clay, a kind of primitive bog-man whose name suggests his full integration with the earth, is a clear embodiment of this problem of differentiation. To Tom, Clay is "the living image of [his] ancestors," preserved, like a lone surviving representative of the Neolithic "bog people,"<sup>9</sup> by the peat bog he dwells in. Clay is

a shrunken, leathery carcass of a man, whose age was unknown... who had witnessed in his lifetime the passing of all but the dregs of the old wild fens in our area; who stank, even with his livelihood half gone, of goose fat and fish slime, mud and peat smoke; who wore an otter-skin cap, eel-skin gaiters and whose brain was permanently crazed by the poppy-head tea he drank to ward off winter agues. (Swift 11)

Through the figure of Clay, we can see the troubled role that the human body plays in the peculiar fairy tale ecology of the novel; at its most extreme, it suggests that the human body is in fact more closely related to the inanimate, natural world (if not indistinguishable from it) than to the human mind.

Like the opium-addled river-creature Clay, Tom's brother Dick Crick is also framed as a mindless creature of the silt, largely undifferentiated from the landscape that reared him. Dick is also depicted as a kind of biological throwback, a truly "amphibious" creature that is more fish than human. The source of his monstrosity is incest between his and Tom's mother and her own father – a human taboo that again suggests that the body's urges cannot be controlled by the moral judgments of the mind, as well as a cyclical doubling-back of nature, a rejection of evolutionary progress – which implicitly results in his unnamed mental disability.<sup>10</sup> Rather than ever try to explain what the nature of Dick's disability is, he is only

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<sup>9</sup> The bog people or "bog bodies" are exceptionally well-preserved, naturally mummified bodies discovered in the peat bogs of Northern Europe and the United Kingdom, dating primarily from the Iron Age; celebrated examples include the Tollund Man (housed in the Silkeborg Museum, Denmark) and Lindow Man (British Museum).

<sup>10</sup> The novel's incest and disability plotline resonates intriguingly with Julian Barnes' treatment of disability, which results from a quasi-incestuous union in *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). Barnes' novel also proliferates in images of nature in revolt, like the Severn Bore, a tidal phenomenon in which the Severn river temporarily reverses its flow. In it, Barnes' first person narrator bears a close resemblance to Tom Crick in his denarrative desire to constantly revisit the past, and "go back to the beginning and change things... make the blood flow backwards" (Barnes 142). This image of the

referred to as a “potato-head” throughout the novel, a demeaning and unscientific moniker that also refers yet again to his bodily connection to the fecund landscape that yields fields upon fields of potatoes and beets. The peaty soil of the Fens seems to be a part of Dick, as though, golem-like, his flesh is actually made of the same sluggish and waterlogged earth of the Leem’s banks; when he attempts to woo Mary, he first “attempts to expunge from his person, like some incriminating stain, all vestige of that stubborn and degrading smell of silt... But to no avail. Because, scrub and rub though he might, there is still – others can detect it – that residual whiff of the river-bed” (Swift 255).

This implication that human bodies belong more to the earth than to their conscious minds is enacted in varying instances throughout the novel, some ludic and some grim. Taking a cue from magical realism, Swift describes a mysterious yet absurd moment of childbirth, in which Tom’s grandfather, Ernest Atkinson, is born prematurely, in the midst of a disastrous rainstorm and flood. Tom suggests that, while conventional explanations like shock or grief (the birth follows upon the funeral of Tom’s great-great grandmother) might account for the early onset of labor, it is also possible – likely, even – that “the swelling waters of the Fens, the bursting dykes, the rising river... awoke a mysterious affinity in Mrs. Atkinson’s system and caused her own waters to break in sympathy” (Swift 105). This speculation intriguingly insinuates that the body is somehow more attuned to the forces of the natural world than to either its own logic or its inhabiting consciousness.

Darker reminders that human bodies are no different from other natural things also lurk throughout the text. From the very first chapter, the human body is ranged with a confusion of objects that the river offers up at the Cricks’ lock: after witnessing the catalogue of debris that sweeps down the Leem River – the miscellany of “Willow branches; alder branches; sedge; fencing; crates; old clothes; dead sheep; bottles; potato sacks; straw bales; fruit boxes; fertilizer bags” quoted above – Freddie Parr’s body arrives in the lock, announced not by any special distinction, but rather as “something [that] floated down the Leem, struck the iron-work of the sluice, and, tugged by the eddies, continued to knock and scrape against it till morning” (Swift 4). Though Tom immediately says that this particular “something” is “extraordinary and unprecedented, and not to be disposed of like a branch or potato sack or even a dead sheep,” his disclaimer comes too late to dispel the disturbing image of the body as an anonymous thing, barely distinguished from “even” the dead sheep (Swift 4). Later on, in the novel’s chapter “About the Eel,” a condensed history of the unsolvable mystery of the European eel’s mating and migration habits, Tom also ominously alludes to the idea that in death, human flesh is no different from any other raw organic matter, commenting on the thriving of eels in the boggy fields of Flanders: “even at the very epicenter of the slaughter, on the infamous Western Front itself... they are not to be dissuaded. If eels, indeed, were born out of mud, here they should have teemed; if eels sprang from putrefying flesh, here should have been a bumper crop” (Swift 201).<sup>11</sup> In this

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backwards flow of blood or the river directly speaks to Tom’s framing of incest: “...when fathers love daughters and daughters love fathers it’s like tying into a knot the thread that runs into the future, it’s like a stream wanting to flow backwards” (Swift 228).

<sup>11</sup> The eel also stands in for the monstrosity, as well as the fascination, of the natural world: following Mary’s botched abortion at the hands of the Fen “witch,” Martha Clay, Tom is forced to dispose of the fetus. Horrified, he describes it as, “A red spittle, floating, frothing, slowly sinking. Borne on the slow Ouse currents. Borne downstream. Borne all the way (*but for the Ouse eels...*) to the Wash. Where

extraordinary chapter, we are also reminded of the implicitly magical and unknowable quality of the natural world; the eel is invested with a heightened degree of enchantment and mystery, as though it *knows* something that its human observers will never be able to understand. This slippery and uncertain suggestion of the eel's animistic power is also highlighted in the implication, already mentioned, that Mary's childless fate is predetermined by the playful, but ultimately damning, adolescent prank played by Freddie Parr, who suggestively places an eel in her knickers (Swift 192-193).

The competing magics of human invention/intervention and the earthly powers at work in the novel suggest a singular ecological system, wherein the only foreign element amidst the intertwined, curiously vital matter of earth, water, and flesh is human consciousness. This resistance between the mind and a body that extends through all bodies, and through the planet itself, resonates deeply with what Timothy Morton has termed "dark ecology": a kind of ecological thought disassociated from a conventional notion of separate, capital-N Nature, that acknowledges that "We should be finding ways to stick around with the sticky mess that we're in and that we are, making thinking dirtier, identifying with ugliness, practicing "hauntology" (Derrida's phrase) rather than ontology" (Morton 188). Tom's incessant generation of narratives resists this perspective, and neurotically reinforces the attempt to meticulously separate the artificial, organizational impulses of human consciousness from the world of "sticky mess" and matter for which Morton advocates, that appears to be the "dark," fairy tale ecological system that Tom himself inhabits.

Through this complication, we see again how storytelling is rendered problematic, or even unethical. As observed above, with regards to Tom's use of third-person narrative as a distancing device, we see that telling stories disembodies the teller – and to make that claim more extreme, the act of narration strives to take us out of our earthbound flesh. The human body, against the will of its inhabitant, acts in curious sympathy with natural forces, and vice versa, often in perverse opposition to the desiring mind. Thus, the novel makes the fatalistic claim that, though we may try to keep ourselves separate from "nature" – and deny our own ineluctable position as *things* in nature, whether animals, or earth, or water – the attempt (to make narratives about it, or to shape it to our ends) is always doomed.

*"About Natural History... and Artificial History"*

So what, then, is the point of instantiating these different kinds of narratives and different kinds of controlling devices, if they are all ultimately powerless in the face of unknowable forces of nature that rise up in the land, as well as our own bodies? The reader increasingly suspects that the continuing multiplication of different narrative strands is Tom's uncontrollable, neurotic attempt to energetically resist the primal conviction of his phlegmatic Crick ancestors, that, no matter what one does, "the waters will rise again." Nick Bentley helpfully outlines the various genres of history that the novel sporadically engages, including "a wider 'official history, which acts as a largely chronological backdrop to the other kinds of history in the novel," which includes the French Revolution as well as various accounts of "the rise and fall of Britain as an industrial and imperial power from the end of the eighteenth century through to the present"; "local history of those living on the Norfolk Fens"; and finally, the genealogical history of Crick's paternal and maternal forebears, the

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it all comes out"; the moment is another reminder that the natural world – the ravenous eels – make no distinction between the human body and anything else (Swift 317; italics are mine).

Cricks and the Atkinsons. Bentley suggests that, overall, despite its anxieties and internal arguments about what constitutes “real” history, the novel “is certainly not dismissive of history as a way of engaging with the past and it encourages a way of thinking historically,” and while “Tom’s understanding of it rejects the idea of a monolithic official narrative of the past,” it instead suggests a model of history “as a process of accretion of seemingly disparate stories which only gradually are shown to relate to each other” (Bentley 131; 133). However, I propose that the novel neurotically enacts the very *impossibility* of generating any kind of definitive history, “monolithic” or not. This impossibility is announced by its first epigraph, an unattributed dictionary entry that offers an increasingly vague series of definitions of “Historia”:

*Historia, -ae, f.* 1. Inquiry, investigation, learning.  
2. a) a narrative of past events, history. b) any kind of narrative; account, tale, story.  
(Swift epigraph)

The maddening generality of this would-be definition suggests that “any kind of narrative” might be confused for history. Ironically, the novel, though it proliferates in narratives upon narratives (like the paired images of “a bruise upon a bruise” and “marks upon marks” that symbolize the palimpsestic accretion of stories under stories at various points in the novel) ultimately suggests that narrative is not the proper form for history to take after all. One wonders, given the abundance of different kinds of discredited “histories,” the novel ultimately suggests that history can only be reckoned in bodies – human bodies, bodies of water, bodies of things.<sup>12</sup> And in fact, the actual events of the novel’s central plot, when strung together, can be bluntly summarized by a body count: one murder, one abortion, and one suicide; three corpses that all return to the circling waters of the Leem. As Damon Marcel Decoste notes astutely, commenting on a passage that summarizes this logic of the body count (“Twenty nine people are drowned, eight missing, presumed so. Eight hundred head of cattle and twelve hundred head of sheep perish”), that “the real is thus disclosed in carnage, in the end of human life and the eradication of humanity’s purposive labors” (Swift 100, Decoste 382).<sup>13</sup>

The kind of “real” history, occluded and glimpsed only momentarily in the novel, that counts bodies as they return to the sea and the silt, perhaps pushes against and clarifies what Tom means by “natural history” in the novel. The latter is, counter-intuitively, an interestingly anti-scientific mode of accounting that is both anti-revolutionary (in the conventional sense of the term) and anti-evolutionary. As A.S. Byatt writes in *On Histories and Stories*, the novel’s vision of natural history is one that “sets cycles and migrations against linear History... something which doesn’t go anywhere, adheres to itself, and continually returns to its source,” proposing that revolution is always return, the perpetual cycling of the same wheel, a refutation of evolution (Byatt 70). Tom’s perversely revisionist, recidivist

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of *Waterland* in relation to Hayden White’s “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” which addresses this issue of historiographic genre, see Eric Berlatsky’s “‘The Swamps of Myth... and Empirical Fishing Lines’: Historiography, Narrativity, and the ‘Here and Now’ in Graham Swift’s *Waterland*.”

<sup>13</sup> Again, we might return to the “Quatorze Juillet” chapter, which enumerates not only the few prisoners released from the Bastille, but also states – twice in only one page – the material sum total of the event: “seven heads on pikes and mountain of rubble” (Swift 179).

natural history embraces returns to origins, rather than evolutionary development, suggesting that everything, eventually, reverts back to type. This certainly appears to be the case regarding Dick, who, as we have seen, is framed as a kind of silt-monster, “a fish of a man,” who reaches his creaturely apotheosis in the moment of his suicide. Diving from the deck of a dredging boat, Dick’s plunge is a strangely cathartic moment of aesthetic elevation: he dives “in a long, reaching, powerful arc... sufficiently reaching and powerful for us to observe his body, in its flight through the air form a single, taut and seemingly limbless continuum, so that an expert on diving might have judged that here indeed was a natural, here indeed was a fish of a man.” His suicidal dive is perversely triumphal – Tom, watching, knows that he won’t resurface, for “He’s on his way. Obeying instinct. Returning. The Ouse flows to the sea...” (Swift 357). Dick’s devolutionary, ancestral return to the waters again emphasizes the recessive quality of Tom’s view of narrative, history, and nature; all things revert back, not to idealized, utopian origins, but to dumb and inexpressive primeval beginnings, ultimately finding, like the eel, paths of return that are eternally obscured and unknowable, rendering progress impossible.

*About Nature’s Illusions: Three Resonant Landscapes*

Swift’s seemingly unfeatured vista of undifferentiable land and water – stories and occluded histories – can thus be seen as a comforting but unsustainable illusion of emptiness, that, like Ackroyd’s London pavements, is simply a thin layer (the ineffable and untrustworthy “Here and Now”) that separates us – barely – from the geological depths of the past. Nothing, this view suggests, is actually nothing; no apparent emptiness is truly empty. However, despite the physical and atmospheric presence of the literal *matter* of the past, the novel ultimately does not engage with its significance. Though *Waterland*, published in 1983, takes place in a specific historical moment – loosely coinciding with the years of Margaret Thatcher’s first term<sup>14</sup> – the novel is determinedly apolitical and oddly ahistorical. This is particularly surprising given its thematic interests in history and revolution, and the fact that Lewis’ refrain, “We’re cutting back History,” is ostensibly rooted in government-mandated budget cuts (though, as Tom tells us, it is motivated primarily by his and Mary’s personal situation). Likewise, the novel is loosely concerned about the aftermath of empire-building (both on a family scale and on a global one), yet does not address the fact that the submerged human violence that seethes below the surface of the smooth, interlaced land and water of the Fens has its origin in a specific human malaise – imperialism – as well as a general one. The novel ultimately exhibits a kind of loosely negative indeterminacy regarding its many proposed and debunked narratives of human progress, suggesting implicitly that the impulse to seek beginnings and explanations is a comforting, yet never-ending and never-productive one.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Thatcher’s first term as Prime Minister was from 1979-1983.

<sup>15</sup> The perhaps innately conservative notion of story as a comfort-giving device emerges more and more as one observes Swift’s later works, which move away from the critical perspective assumed by Hutcheon’s definition of historiographic metafiction (a genre whose critical perspective that is, as we have seen, questionable even in *Waterland*). As Catherine Pessa-Miquel comments, we might see this turn as a move away from stories that question the role of stories to “bedtime stories,” “from a postmodern stance to a more subdued, straightforward conception of the novel as story-telling” (Pessa-Miquel 136). Swift himself echoed this observation in a 1997 interview for *Contemporary*

As Swift himself comments, the novel is “very skeptical,” and it espouses a sense of suspicion towards “moments that are going to change things overnight – revolutionary moments” (Swift, Craps interview 641). As a result, its stance is observant, yet noncommittal, despite the seemingly provocative questions regarding the idea of historical accumulation that it initially appears to ask. Ronald H. McKinney resists this notion, claiming that the very act of generating narratives demonstrates that, “Far from advocating a mere contemplative and passive stoicism in the face of life’s mud and floods, Swift rather promotes an exciting life of radical curiosity, which continually challenges the status quo without giving in to the illusion of being able to make radical progress,” (McKinney 832). However, it is hard to see “excitement” or any degree of radicalism, even of an apolitical type, in a novel that concludes by leaving its reader mired in “phlegm,” “or mucus. Or slime. An ambiguous substance. Neither liquid nor solid: a viscous semi-fluid. Benign... yet disagreeable” and silt, “the builder and destroyer of land, the usurper of rivers, the foe of drainage” (Swift 344, 346). Even the novel’s penultimate scene of would-be protest is shockingly apolitical and limited to the personal: Crick’s students, faced in school assembly with the announcement of his forced retirement, take up Price’s constant refrain, chanting “Fear is Here! Fear is Here!”<sup>16</sup> (Swift 333). However, Price and his compatriots in the banned “Holocaust Club” (a reference to the students’ Cold War fear of nuclear holocaust) have no specific political message, and make no attempt to intervene in the history of their present moment. This sense of generalized helplessness echoes Crick’s own inconclusiveness and inactivity; though his 1980s students deeply feel their specific period’s broad anxiety about the “end of history,” they are as helpless to act as he is, and their futile protest is just as ineffectual as his constant spinning of fairy tale yarns.<sup>17</sup> In the end, both Tom and his students are left yearning for the comfortable inaction of the relation between storyteller and listener that he invoked at the beginning of the novel:

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*Literature*, commenting that, “we’re constantly telling stories, constantly comforting ourselves, each other, entertaining ourselves and each other, strengthening ourselves and each other through telling narratives of one kind or another; they don’t have to be sophisticated” (Bernard 231).

<sup>16</sup> One wonders if the amorphous and generalized fear of fear that Price and the other students feel might propose a kind of anti-nostalgia, drawing upon Susan Stewart’s evocative definition of nostalgia as “desire for desire” (Stewart 23). This speculation is supported by the students’ resistance to the concept of history, which they blame as the agent that has rendered the idea of a future impossible. Nostalgia is problematized in the novel as both something naïve (and tied to the revolutionary dream of return to an unreal origin), yet it is also precisely what Tom indulges in at times in his stories, though he attempts – or makes a *show* of attempting – to resist it.

<sup>17</sup> The novel’s undoing of its own desires (narrative or otherwise) is central to its final note of ambiguity. Robert K. Irish comments on this tendency’s effect on the reader’s own desire in his inventive article, “‘Let me tell you’: About desire and narrativity in Graham Swift’s *Waterland*,” drawing upon Barthes’ *Pleasure of the Text* to describe the constant appearing-as-disappearing act of the novel’s many flirtatious but ultimately unforthcoming lines of possible narrative: “the text flirts with me by seducing me continually through its language, its carefully wound and intricate construction, and its many connections and inside jokes that it shares with me only because I am inside it. Then suddenly it bares all its naked ugliness, and as if offended it backs away, covering itself in mock modesty and making me desire it more, making me want the text, making me succumb to its narrative despite its gaps, its narrativity, but also making me wary lest I, in fact, grasp the text and find myself naked, exposed with only a dangerous and slippery (eely) collection of signifiers able to undo not only its own narrative but mine as well” (Irish 932).

Children to whom, throughout history, stories will be told, chiefly but not always at bedtime, in order to quell restless thoughts; whose need of stories is matched only by the need adults have of children to tell stories to, of receptacles for their stock of fairy-tales, of listening ears on which to unload those most unbelievable yet haunting of fairy-tales, their own lives... (Swift 7)

Ultimately, Swift's figuration of the flat landscape as a metaphor for the deceptive illusion of narrative control is an intriguing but apathetic one. Tom's incessant and neurotic generation of narratives neither succeeds in reconciling him to the past, nor with explaining it away, thus landing somewhere between "happy memory" (*ars memoriae*) and "happy forgetting" (*ars oblivionis*) as elegantly outlined by Paul Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Ricoeur's dissection of this desire for "happy forgetting" concludes that this "barbarous dream" of "writing to extinguish – the contrary of making an archive" is "worse than forgetting through effacement" and that "the art of forgetting, if there is one, could not be constructed as a distinct project, alongside the wish for happy memory" (Ricoeur 503-504). We then must wonder how much of Tom's writing is "writing to extinguish," or at least to occlude, through his multiplication of misleadingly ludic, or tangential, or outright deceptive other narratives, that all swarm around the single plot through-line of murder, abortion, and suicide (again, considering history or "the real" as a brutal arithmetic of bodies in the ground). Swift's addition to this philosophical argument is, in fact, its end point: despite our reasons for actively trying to forget, whether "happily" or not, we are, in fact, not *allowed* to forget, for the earth itself does not forget, and will persist in reminding us in its own unpredictable ways.

However, *Waterland* makes no claim about what we are then to do with the things that the earth returns to us, and how to respond to the knowledge that under our feet, at any moment, the lingering bodily traces of violent pasts are waiting to erupt. The central conceit of this formulation of hybrid human-non-human landscapes,<sup>18</sup> however, becomes more provocative and challenging in other literary and filmic incarnations. Via comparative readings, we can see that the imagery of submerged histories of violence, and the revolt of the natural world that Swift's novel proposes and troubles is far from apolitical or ahistorical in itself. On the contrary, the paradoxical model of the earth as both an agent of physical forgetting (burial and submersion) and violently resurging memory can in fact be mobilized to critical ends. While Swift's version of an earth that remembers and brings the past to the surface is ultimately marked by the futility of resistance and the impossibility of learning and change, other versions of the same trope offer more clearly pedagogical suggestions, that, while definitively resisting reductive progress narratives, suggest a possibility of, and a vociferous demand for, a critical perspective on the accumulated material, ethical, and philosophical burdens of these submerged histories.<sup>19</sup> I would like to conclude with three

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<sup>18</sup> Though my discussion here cleaves to the literary, in this formulation, it becomes clear that considering Swift's apolitical landscape with other philosophical depictions of "hybrid" landscapes, such as Walter Benjamin's various figurations of natural history (particularly in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*) or Bruno Latour's claims about hybridization versus purification in *We Have Never Been Modern* could also generate further critical perspectives on the novel's curiously (or perhaps appropriately) flat political affect.

<sup>19</sup> Ironically, Swift's tale of his history teacher is ultimately anti-pedagogical; the best Crick can do is implore his students to remain curious, though their curiosity will never be satisfied by either



brief landscapes that bear suggestive family resemblances to Swift's Fens, yet make clearer and more specific, less allegorical claims about the dangers of being deceived by fairy-tale illusions of safety and regeneration, not simply in the metafictional, super-literary terrain that Swift lays out.

First, let us consider Swift's model of landscape alongside a war memoir, Sidney Rogerson's *Last of the Ebb* (1937). In the opening pages of Rogerson's account, readers encounter eerily peaceful, abandoned World War I trenches, where, only a year after a battle,

Nature had reasserted herself and cloaked the grosser evidences of battle with a mantle of green. Only the actual front-line trenches, dug in chalk, seared the landscape with white scars... in the shellholes grass had grown and water-plants. Near the gun emplacements in the reserve line grew lilies-of-the-valley, forget-me-nots, larkspur, and honeysuckle. The whole battle area had become a shrubbery fashioned by artillery. Among the reeds of the Aisne River I hunted swallow-tail butterflies and rare Camberwell Beauties, and even found a whitethroat's nest with eggs. (Rogerson 4-5)

Rogerson's description summons up a vision of Romantic, anthropomorphized "Nature" that absorbs and purifies the manmade scars of battle; however, as he goes on to report, this pastoral scene is in fact an insidious illusion, creating a dangerous "general impression that in such a setting hostilities were impossible," that lulls its inhabitants into a feeling of safety before the onset of the bloody 1918 Battle of the Aisne (Rogerson 5). Rogerson's simultaneously idyllic and violent image of "a shrubbery fashioned by artillery" suggests a peculiarly menacing collaboration between the natural and manmade forces to construct a new world, a kind of monstrously beautiful landscape that grows out of destruction, and at once deceptively conceals and clearly reveals its origins in human violence. The dangers that Rogerson's brief description conjure are very real ones; the thin blanket of verdant cover that creates this unsettlingly commingled pastoral setting both highlights its uncanny underlying violence, and blinds its inhabitants to the threat of war's return. The unsettled and unsettling image of the trench-as-bower reminds readers never to turn a blind eye to the lingering traces of destruction, for, even when rendered deceptively beautiful, they are portents of destruction yet to come.

The disconcerting idyll-nightmare of Swift's "fairy-tale land" also brings to mind filmic resonances, like the luminous, black and white storybook vistas of Austrian director Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* (2009), which teem with an ominously opaque and inexplicable violence. Set in rural northern Germany directly before the onset of the First World War, it addresses the threat of war implicitly rather than explicitly, via a series of mysterious, horrific events. As in Swift, the illusion of flatness and domesticated control in the gorgeous, bucolic landscape breaks down in the face of an amorphous violence that seems to come from within the earth itself, a threat suggested by the film's opening scene: the town's doctor is gravely injured when his horse trips on an invisible wire threaded across an open field, a crime that goes unsolved. Later, a farmer's son destroys a crop of cabbages with a scythe, a scene that viscerally suggests the decapitation of humans, through their visual proxies, the heads of cabbage. This bewildering scene of cabbage murder is

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explanation nor lessons applicable to the future – for, as the novel concludes, the future can never be any different from the resurgent past.

inexplicably chilling; it is at once a grimly absurd mockery of agricultural labor, and a figure of the Grim Reaper come to crazed life, scythe-bearing and garbed in black. The scene's vegetable body-doubles again recall the unsettling integration of human flesh and earthly matter that Swift's novel suggests, while the perpetrator's unexplained rage towards both the natural world and society (the ruination of the year's harvest) is also expressed through the uncanny overlap of the plant bodies and visually implied human ones. Haneke's film never articulates the source of these alarming eruptions of violence, but menacingly suggests that it is somehow inherent – at once wholly natural and chillingly *unnatural* – in the very bodies of both the country and its inhabitants. The film begins with the overt claim that this violence is generational and biologically determined, and that its mystified forms in the film will be replicated in clearer and more horrifying terms across the rest of the century; as the film's seemingly bucolic setting opens before us, a voiceover suggestively muses that "...I believe I must tell of the strange events that occurred in our village, because they cast a new light on some of the goings-on in this country..." (Haneke).<sup>20</sup> These "goings-on" are implicitly the brewing First World War, but also the war that the village's menacing population of children will participate in, the Second World War. As with Rogerson, viewers are asked to imagine that human violence, though buried and hidden, never leaves the circulating body of an ecosystem, once introduced, and will out itself in landscape and in bodies inevitably, given time. The film's "new light" is not an explanatory one, but rather reveals the inexplicability – the true horror – of an atmospheric violence that exhibits itself in a kind of uncontrollable and unstoppable possession, showing again, more chillingly and with greater didactic force, that even our bodies are not our own. The accretion of histories of violence under any seemingly serene surface can never be diffused or dissipated, and like genetic flaws, always reemerge through the body of the land and its inhabitants<sup>21</sup> – most terrifyingly, in Haneke's reckoning, through the supposedly innocent bodies of children.<sup>22</sup>

The third landscape that resonates with a darker depth than Swift's hide-and-seek, fairy tale panorama appears in Alain Resnais' landmark 1955 concentration camp documentary, *Nuit et Brouillard*. Resnais' film opens and closes with slow, panning shots of the deceptively verdant Polish countryside, bright under a picture-book blue sky, ten years

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<sup>20</sup> "... dennoch glaube ich, dass ich die seltsamen Ereignisse, die sich in unserem Dorf zugetragen haben, erzählen muss, weil sie möglicherweise auf manche Vorgänge in diesem Land ein erhellendes Licht werfen können."

<sup>21</sup> W.G. Sebald expresses an analogous anxiety about the irruption of historical violence in the human body in *The Rings of Saturn* (1994). Writing on Joseph Conrad's travels, he makes a that, "Korzeniowski [Conrad]... now saw the capital of the Kingdom of Belgium, with its ever more bombastic buildings, as a sepulchral monument erected over a hecatomb of black bodies, and all the passers-by in the streets seemed to him to bear that dark Congolese secret within them. And indeed, to this day one sees in Belgium a distinctive ugliness, dating from the time when the Congo colony was exploited without restraint and manifested in the macabre atmosphere of certain salons and the strikingly stunted growth of the population, such as one rarely comes across elsewhere. At all events, I well recall that on my first visit to Brussels in December 1964 I encountered more hunchbacks and lunatics than normally in a whole year" (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 122-3). The question implicit in these observations on the ties between Belgium's imperial past and physical corruption, is how Germany's perpetration of the Holocaust might haunt the bodies of its present-day inhabitants, including Sebald himself, whose slow recovery from a mysterious, undefined illness begins the novel.

<sup>22</sup> This message, and its innately didactic quality, is evident in the film's full German title: *Das Weiße Band: Eine Kindergeschichte* ("The White Ribbon: A Children's Story").

after the closing of the concentration camps. The voiceover, scripted by poet Jean Cayrol, also begins with images of natural harmony that are quickly unsettled:

Even a peaceful landscape... Even a meadow with crows circling overhead, harvests and grass fires. Even a road where cars and peasants and lovers pass. Even a resort village, with a country fair and a steeple – can lead all too easily to a concentration camp. Strüthof, Oranienburg, Auschwitz, Neuengamme, Belsen, Ravensbruck and Dachau were names like any others on maps and in guidebooks. The blood has dried, the tongues have fallen silent. The blocks are visited only by a camera, a strange grass covers the paths once trod by inmates, no current passes through the electric wires; no footstep is heard but our own.<sup>23</sup> (*Nuit et Brouillard*)

The vision of a perverted, half-idyllic, half-horrific landscape that Resnais and Cayrol present – the images of fields in harvest that give way seamlessly to ruined watchtowers and cracked pavements – suggest an inextricability of landscape and construction that parallel the fully-integrated schema of natural and artificial waterways that Swift sketches out in his opening pages, or the “shrubby fashioned by artillery” of Rogerson’s. However, Resnais’ figuration of the pastoral illusion of the abandoned concentration camp gives equal weight to the blanket of greenery and the tortuous metal scraps and concrete slabs its half-covers. The images offer a nauseating compulsion to both remember and forget: the viewing eye strives to only see the vivid resurgence of natural life, yet cannot unsee the lingering metal skeletons of the camp’s machinery of death. The film’s closing scenes return to this inextricably intermingled landscape of aftermath, cutting directly from an unbearable sequence of images of the emaciated inmates’ bodies stockpiled and eventually bulldozed inhumanely into mass graves, to the verdant ground that, presumably, covers those same bodies ten years later.<sup>24</sup> The final lines of the voiceover implore viewers not to forget what is buried, for though, at the time of filming,

...the icy water of the marshes and ruins fills the hollows of the mass graves, a frigid and muddy water as murky as our bad memory. War nods off to sleep, but keeps one eye always open. The faithful grass flourishes again on the inspection ground around the blocks, an abandoned village still full of menace... Nine million dead haunt this countryside... There are those among us who sincerely regard these ruins as though the old monster of the camps lay crushed beneath the rubble. We who pretend to take up hope as the image recedes into the past, as if we were cured once and for all

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<sup>23</sup> “Même un paysage tranquille... Même une prairie avec des vols de corbeaux, des moissons et des feux d’herbe. Même une route où passent des voitures, des paysans, des couples. Même un village pour vacances, avec une foire et un clocher – peuvent conduire tout simplement à un camp de concentration. Le Strüthof, Oranienbourg, Auschwitz, Neuengamme, Belsen, Ravensbruck, Dachau furent des noms comme les autres sur des cartes et des guides. Le sang a caillé, les bouches se sont tues; les blocks ne sont plus visités que par une caméra, une drôle d’herbe a poussé et recouvert la terre usée par le piétinement des concentrationnaires, le courant ne passe plus dans les fils électriques; plus aucun pas que le nôtre.”

<sup>24</sup> Included in this montage is a brief shot of a field full of orderly rows of human skulls, which, seen alongside Haneke’s cabbage field, makes the latter’s filmic quotation of Holocaust imagery horrifyingly clear.

of the plague of the camps. We who pretend it happened only once, in only one time, in only one country. We who are blind to what is all around us, and are deaf to its never-ending cry.<sup>25</sup> (*Nuit et Brouillard*)

The images of marsh, grass, and ruins that roll across the screen are visual twins of *Waterland*'s Fen, fields, and crumbling mills, yet *Nuit et Brouillard*'s powerful imperative to remember is by necessity a far more urgent and active one. While *Waterland* proposes that the retention of memory is somehow unavoidable and necessary, yet ultimately unproductive, the final landscape of Resnais' film is an impassioned plea and warning: look, viewer, and remember, so that you can *resist* when "the old monster" rises up once again.

In all of these cases, the illusion of safety presented by the image of flat and verdant ground is a fairy tale mirage; these pastoral idylls are rendered uncanny by the reader and viewer's suspicion of what lies beneath them – looking ahead to Chapter Four's discussion of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, we might see all earth as composed of a "density of men in the ground" (Mitchell 440). The grim fairy tale landscape of *Waterland* is thus only a single literary enactment of a greater, deeply uncanny historical and ecological anxiety: that the earth remembers what we strive to actively forget, and that it might at any moment, in its own uncannily active and unpredictable way, bring the horrors of the past back to the surface.

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<sup>25</sup> "...l'eau froide des marais et des ruines remplit les creux des charniers, une eau froide et opaque comme notre mauvaise mémoire. La guerre s'est assoupie, un œil toujours ouvert... L'herbe fidèle est venue à nouveau sur les Appelplatz autour des blocks. Un village abandonné, encore plein de menaces... Neuf millions de morts hantent ce paysage... Il y a nous qui regardons sincèrement ces ruines comme si le vieux monstre concentrationnaire était mort sous les décombres, qui feignons de reprendre espoir devant cette image qui s'éloigne, comme si on guérissait de la peste concentrationnaire, nous qui feignons de croire que tout cela est d'un seul temps et d'un seul pays, et qui ne pensons pas à regarder autour de nous et qui n'entendons pas qu'on crie sans fin."

### Chapter 3 Practical Alchemy

An object of wonder draws readers in to A.S. Byatt's *The Children's Book*: a fantastical, bizarre candlestick, teeming with weird animation, housed in a museum vitrine. It is a magical, eerily energetic thing, one that takes on life with depth of description:

It was dully gold. It seemed heavy. It stood on three feet, each of which was a long-eared dragon, grasping a bone with grim claws, gnawing with sharp teeth. The rim of the spiked cup that held the candle was also supported by open-jawed dragons with wings and snaking tails. The whole of its thick stem was wrought of fantastic foliage, amongst which men and monsters, centaurs and monkeys, writhed, grinned, grimaced, grasped and stabbed at each other. A helmeted, gnome-like being, with huge eyes, grappled the sinuous tail of a reptile. There were other human or kobold figures, one in particular with long draggling hair and a mournful gaze. (Byatt, *The Children's Book* 5)

The object that Byatt brings to life before our reading eyes is the Gloucester Candlestick, a real-life 11<sup>th</sup> century artifact housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, known as the South Kensington Museum at the novel's starting point in 1895, where this opening scene unfolds. This passage of ekphrasis, the first of many in the book, quickly rolls from the inert regard of an inanimate thing in a case into a frenzied mêlée of activity; it is first seen at a distance as "The lump of gold, in the centre of that case," then, in the passage above, as "dully gold" and "heavy" (*Children* 4,5). Immediately, though, the tiny figures that make up its structure seem as though they can barely be contained by static description, and break out into a violent jumble of action ("writhed, grinned, grimaced, grasped... stabbed... grappled"). Finally, the "mournful gaze" of the lonely humanoid figure reaches out beyond the tangled, struggling bodies that shape the Candlestick, and connects with the onlooker's astounded eye.

The eyes that bring readers to the Candlestick belong to three of the eponymous "children" of the novel: Philip Warren, Tom Wellwood, and Julian Cain. The book opens with the image of the boys regarding each other regarding the artifacts in the museum: "Two boys stood in the Prince Consort Gallery, and looked down on a third" (*Children* 3). This brief introductory scene seems at first to be arbitrary, and has the feel of a boys' adventure story, rather than a discourse on art; following this reflective moment, Julian and Tom dash after Philip, and discover his secret hideout in the Museum's fantastical, jumbled storehouse of cached artifacts. Yet, despite its cavalier tone, this opening scene forecasts the aesthetic and ethical questions about relations between people and things that the novel addresses. The three perspectives represented by Philip, Julian, and Tom are sketched out in a casual manner here, but in a fundamental way, they are at the heart of the debate about art and its relation to life that the rest of the novel conducts, between the differing gazes of the maker, the curator, and the enthralled viewer. Each of the adolescent boys regards the Candlestick through a different set of eyes and expectations. Julian belongs to and in the Museum, as the son of Prosper Cain, the Special Keeper of Precious Metals. He demonstrates something of his father's curatorial persona in this scene, and regales his visitor, Tom, with his description of two mysteries: the Candlestick, and its intent watcher, Philip. Julian, the critically minded

observer, knows things about what he shows Tom, telling his companion the odd history of the Candlestick, and, detective-like, sharing what he's observed about Philip: the strange boy is in the museum "every day. All by himself. But you can't see where or when he goes" (*Children* 4).

It soon emerges that Philip, a would-be potter, is a runaway from the northern Potteries region of Stoke-on-Trent, hiding out in the cluttered depths of the Museum so that he can be close to the works of art that speak to him. As he tells Julian and Tom, he is there "to draw. I saw the Museum was for working-men to see well-made things... I like these things" (*Children* 7-8). The son of a porcelain painter (his mother, who is slowly dying of lead poisoning) in a Burslem ceramic factory, and himself formerly a child laborer, Philip is notably both an artist and a real "working-man," introducing the role of craft into the novel's continuously evolving definition of art. For him, looking involves the whole body, not just the eye; his act of looking is inextricably tied to his desire to *make* – as he later expresses inarticulately but honestly to the adults, "I wanted to make something –" (Byatt 13). Olive Wellwood, Tom's mother and a successful writer of fairy tales, interrupts and extends this utterance, saying, "You wanted to make something of your life, of yourself... That's natural" (*Children* 14). Significantly, however, her surface reading of Philip, which follows a conventional, Dickensian narrative of the orphan boy, is wrong; what he wants to make "of [his] life, of [himself]" is only "*something*" (*Children* 14; italics are mine). Things, to Philip, are indistinguishable from his desires, and from his person. This congruity of human bodies and object bodies is sketched out in a preliminary fashion by the cluttered, subterranean lair that Philip inhabits: "The passage opened into a dusty vault, crammed with a crowd of white effigies, men, women, and children, staring out with sightless eyes. Tom thought they might be prisoners in the underworld, or even the damned" (*Children* 6). Philip himself sleeps on a medieval, bed-shaped "tomb or shrine," a reliquary that houses the bones of a medieval saint; when Julian suggests that the entombed saint might still be in there, Philip responds "flatly" that "He hasn't bothered [him]" (*Children* 8). While Tom is disturbed by the strange cohabitation of the living and the dead, the animate boy amidst inanimate statues and corpses, Philip himself is unperturbed, recognizing that human life is inextricable – even indistinguishable – from both the mysterious life of objects, and from the mysterious presence of death.<sup>1</sup>

Tom's imaginative sensitivity marks his status as an over-sympathetic viewer, whose gaze encapsulates the dangers of looking that occupy the entire novel yet to come: regarding the treasures in the Prince Consort Gallery of the museum, he thinks "of Snow White in her glass coffin. He thought also, looking up at [a portrait of Prince Albert], that the vessels and spoons and caskets, gleaming in the liquid light under the glass, were like a resurrected kingly burial hoard" (*Children* 3). An incipient question swirls within his imaginings: is the artwork frozen forever, or is it simply waiting to be awakened by a magic kiss? Turning to the Candlestick, Tom's regard is neither the critical gaze of the curator, nor the deeply embodied one of the artisan; instead, he is enthralled by the thing, and sees it in more abstract and numinous terms. "He tried, and failed, to memorise the shapes," and instead of seeing its material path through history or the physicality of its form, he sees "that the thing was a

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Philip understands this better than the other boys because he has been a living thing among dead ones; "if you have slept on one mattress, end to end with five other children – a mattress moreover on which two brothers and a sister had died, neither easily nor peacefully, with nowhere to remove them to – a few old bones weren't going to worry you. (*Children* 13)

whole world of secret stories” (*Children* 5). It is Tom’s rapt impression of the object’s inhabitation of a twilight realm of “secret stories” that demonstrates his susceptibility to art as a kind of fairy tale escape, an alternative to the real.

All three of these differing modes of looking gesture towards an abstract central problem: is the Candlestick dead or alive? On one hand, it is, like the other massed treasures lying in their glass coffins, a mere thing serenely shining in the silent museum. However, its strange life is implicit in the way that each of the boys experiences it. Julian’s curatorial speculations situate the Candlestick as an item on the move, from its mysterious origins, through the hands of revolutionaries, thieves, and noblemen, to its current (though not necessarily final) resting place in the Museum’s collection. Like Philip, the other object of Julian’s inquiry, the unknowable details of its past life imbue it with a certain sense of peculiarly individual agency. Philip’s obsessive, craftsman’s study of it recalls the moment of its making; in sketching out its details, he replicates the act of its birth over and over again, and generates some of its savage life force on the page, with “all the intricacies of the writhing and biting and stabbing” (*Children* 14). Tom’s imagining of its own secret, shadowy world, and his sympathy for “the little man... the elderly one with the thin hair and the sad look” suggests that the thing itself contains not a kind of object-life, but a social world of characters and relations (*Children* 14). And indeed, Byatt’s own ekphrastic conjuration of the Candlestick emphasize its uncanny liveliness; its multiform figures are both fixed and constantly shifting, and this compelling sensation of ontological uncertainty prickles the eye and troubles the mind. Ultimately, the Candlestick and the other works of art that the novel reveals to its readers ask us to consider whether art is fixed in a moment of ongoing death or somehow active with a sense of continuing life— or paradoxically, both at once. The vast hoard of art objects that we encounter in *The Children’s Book* all inhabit this middle ground between life and death. They are compelling to both the characters who experience them “in person” and to the reader, who sees them through the lens of Byatt’s prose, because they are imbued with the same quality of uncanny life that the Candlestick radiates, to varying degrees. More oddly still, the human beings that move through the novel’s pages also exude varying degrees of liveliness; certain among them are *less* lively than the objects that we see alongside them. All told, the novel is peopled by an enormous cast of beings – both humans and objects – in various stages of life and not-life. The paradoxical juxtaposition of things that *are* alive, next to people that walk and talk but are somehow *not* alive, asks readers to consider how and where we see that mysterious animating force we call “life,” both in and out of the novel.

*“More lifely than life”*

Making art, then, can be seen as the struggle to contain or affix life in a given medium, whether on the page or on the glazed wall of a pot – and keep it somehow *living*. This is both an aesthetic and an ethical problem, and for that reason, *The Children’s Book* is populated by ethically ambiguous artist figures, on a sliding scale from strangely neutral, like Philip (to whom human matters are secondary to art) to positively diabolical. As the most opaque of Byatt’s artist characters, the German puppetmaster Anselm Stern, says, “art is more lifely than life,” a claim that can be read as either magical or horrifying, or both. The marionettes that Stern himself makes enact this dictum; like the puppets in Kleist’s essay, “On the Marionette Theatre,” a concise reading of which Byatt inserts via another

character's voice,<sup>2</sup> Stern's inanimate actors are disturbingly like – or even *more real* than – human actors. Stern goes on, rather menacingly, to hint at the consequences of this imbalance between art and life, saying in his awkward English that “not always the artist pays” (*Children* 68). But if the artist does not pay, then who does? Margaret D. Stetz addresses this question of “payment” in her article, “Enrobed and Encased: Dying for Art in A.S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book*,” which concludes provocatively by asking, “Did Byatt herself pay for her success in rendering ‘lively’ *The Children’s Book*, this artifact of historical fiction, and for the energy that infuses its structure, action, and narrative voice? Or did someone or something else? Who was left for dead?” (Stetz 95). While the question of whether or not Byatt “paid” the price of art here is rather objectionably sensational, the line of inquiry is intriguing. Aside from the artist, the possibilities for “who was left for dead” seem to be the subject, or the work itself, two situations that Byatt’s novel explores relentlessly in its quest to answer the ethical questions raised by this conception of art: namely, can you make art without destroying life? The triangulated, adversarial relationship between artist, subject, and work is emphasized by the rhetoric we use to describe the work of art – for how can the artist truly “capture” a subject and contain it in static captivity without killing it?

Into these tangled questions about the nature of art, Byatt also inextricably weaves a thread of similar questions about a different process of rendering life from not-life, and the inevitable threat of death: parenting. The parallels between artists and parents, as makers of living things, is richly drawn out in the novel’s six hundred pages, expressed variously through a heavily populated family saga, an elaborate, highly academic framing of the historical, political, and cultural tensions surrounding the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>3</sup> and lengthy excursions into the world of art history and museum studies.<sup>4</sup> Among the many characters that dwell in Byatt’s busy world are artists who embody the life-endangering ethical quandaries posed by both art-making and child-rearing. Readers meet brilliant artists who are terrible parents, like the mad potter Benedict Fludd, and the novel’s central author-figure, Olive Wellwood, whose art sucks life from its subjects (in both cases, their children). On the other hand, Byatt also presents characters who offer other, more generative possibilities for the dangers posed by the making of both art and life, like the ambiguous puppeteer (and father) Stern, or most notably, the children, real or surrogate, of the other artists: Philip, who becomes Fludd’s apprentice, and Dorothy Wellwood, who becomes a doctor, and as such, is framed as a kind of craftsman of human life.

The novelistic framework that supports this dizzying weight of aesthetic and philosophical concerns is multiform and headily complex. *The Children’s Book* follows the intertwining lives of five families, their artistic productions, and their historical period: the working-class Philip Warren and his sister, Elsie, who escape from lives of factory work in the Potteries; the unconventional, sprawling Wellwood clan, who live in naïve Fabian

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<sup>2</sup> One of the many “real” historiographic touches that at once root this novel so deeply and convincingly in its cultural and historical milieu, yet also maintain a kind of scholarly distance.

<sup>3</sup> James Bristow’s introduction to the *Journal of Victorian Culture’s* roundtable collection of articles on *The Children’s Book* examines the novel’s emphasis on dates, historical accuracy, and its curiously historiographic style.

<sup>4</sup> Morna O’Neill asks readers to consider the novel within a methodological framework of art history in her article in the same issue, “The Craftsman’s Dream: Objects and Display in *The Children’s Book*.”



splendor in their fairytale house in the Kent countryside, “Todefright”;<sup>5</sup> their well-to-do, conventional cousins in London; the widowed curator of the fledgling Kensington Museum, Prosper Cain, and his two children; and the strangely unsettling family of Benedict Fludd who dwell at eerie Purchase House, dominated by the artist’s violent and unpredictable temper. The novel traces the relationships of no less than twenty-five members of these families,<sup>6</sup> as well as their countless satellites (some of whom include diverse real-life figures of the period, from William Morris to Emma Goldman). Byatt’s prose is often historiographic to the extreme, beginning each new period in her characters’ lives with a rapid-fire rundown of notable dates and events, and analytical accounts of the social and political developments of the period that might seem more at home in a work of popular history.

The central conflict of the novel, however, is actually *not* the heavy, inevitable momentum towards war and destruction that freights the history of the years 1895-1919. Rather, the building cloud that lurks over the early sections of the novel and breaks out into a deluge of tragedies in the later ones is generated by the possessive nature of the relationship between parents and children, artists and subjects. The issues that crystalize in their relationships with their children are thus not only about the poisonous relationship between generations, but also about the aesthetic representation of both childhood and the passage of time. The networked quality of these individual relationships – the “artist” (parent”) to the “work” (child) – come together in a kind of “collection,” the family, whose memories are both individual and shared. Byatt depicts the family as a curated set of objects and feelings, rendering the communal history of human relations, even on the domestic scale, on essentially aesthetic terms:

A family, and a human being inside a family, put together a picture of their past in voluntary and involuntary ways, carefully constructed, arbitrarily dictated. A mother remembers one particular summer gathering on a lawn, with iced lemonade in a jug and everyone smiling – as she puts in the album the one photograph where everyone is smiling, and keeps the scowling faces of the unsuccessful snapshots hidden in a box... Odd things persist for inexplicable reasons. A pair of shoes that never quite

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<sup>5</sup> The Todefright Wellwoods romantically and loosely read the etymology of their house’s peculiar name as a compound of “Tod,” which “they supposed... meant toad” and a Kentish variation on “fryth,” or forest. However, a reader of modern German and modern English cannot help but see a curious and ominous Anglo-German compound of death (“Tod”) and “fright”: the house itself bespeaks the fear of death that infiltrates the parents’ generation in the novel from start to finish. Speaking to a journalist, Olive rather protests too much in her assertion that the house’s name has nothing to do with death; the journalist reports that “I suggested to her that there was something witchy about the name Todefright and she immediately put me right. Todefright comes from the amphibian and an old Kentish word for ‘meadow’. No death or spectres!” (527)

<sup>6</sup> A brief genealogical note on the “main” characters: the Todefright Wellwoods adults are Humphry, Olive, and Olive’s sister, Violet, and the children, in order of age, are Tom, Dorothy, Phyllis, Hedda, Florian, Robin, and Harry; the Fludd parents are Benedict and Seraphita, and their children are Imogen, Geraint, and Pomona; the London Wellwoods are Basil and Katherina, with children Charles and Griselda; Prosper Cain’s two children are Julian and Florence; the Warren orphans are Philip and Elsie, who become wards/caretakers of the Fludd family. The sons of Anselm Stern and his sculptor wife, Angela, (who turn out to be Dorothy’s half-brothers, as it eventually emerges that she is the illegitimate daughter of Olive and Stern) are Wolfgang and Leon.

fitted. A party dress in which a girl always felt awkward, though the photographs are pretty enough. One violent quarrel of many arising from the unjust division of a cake, or the desperately disappointing decision *not* to go to the seaside. There are things, also, that are memories as essential and structural as bones in toes and fingers. A red leather belt. A dark pantry full of obscene and lovely jars. (*Children* 299)

Again, we see the convergence not only of the object world with human life, but also of the physicality of things (both real and imagined), as “memories as essential and structural as bones in toes and fingers.” Furthermore, each small-scale, curated family collection is connected intrinsically to another set of curated memories, “public memories, which make markers. They were all Victorians, and then in January 1901, the little old woman, the Widow at Windsor, the Queen and Empress died. All Europe was full of her family, whose private follies and conceits and quarrels shaped the lives of all other families” (*Children* 299). The linking of the historical, the domestic, and the aesthetic across the novel’s tale of decline is evident in the titles of its main sections: echoing Hesiod, the novel moves quickly through its “Beginnings” to linger on a reverse-alchemical historical process, from “The Golden Age” to “The Silver Age,” then finally, briefly and grimly, to “The Age of Lead.”

#### *Distilling Life*

This invocation of alchemy provides a structural framework that is not only useful in terms of the novel’s downward historical progression, but one that also serves as a compelling model for the problem of art as suspended or enchanted life that Tom evokes, a model that recurs throughout the novel: artistry as alchemy. Let us return to the Gloucester Candlestick. It is a kind of alchemical marvel; though it gleams like gold, it is made of unknown metals (“some kind of gilt alloy,” Julian posits), and though it is inanimate – a “lump” – it writhes with curious life. These qualities recall two of the central aims of alchemy: to make gold from base metals, and to create a mystical source of everlasting life, the Stone. As painter and art historian James Elkins recounts in *What Painting Is*, his odd and compelling study of painting as alchemy,

The final goal of alchemy, the Stone, is one of a family of transcendently difficult compounds with different properties... Each of these is a step on the path to the Stone. Together they form a family of nearly impossible objects: they exist on earth, but only barely, in the recipes and legends of the alchemists. (Elkins 181)

The Candlestick is just such a “nearly impossible object,” a magical and mysterious thing of unexplained provenance and intriguing history: “No one knew exactly what it was made of... There was nothing, anywhere, like it” (*Children* 5). It is an elemental and central art object in the world of the novel, and through it, we can sketch out a broader scheme of aesthetic vision that is articulated most distinctly in this novel, but whose traces can be seen clearly in Byatt’s earlier work: art, like alchemy, is a series of miraculous paradoxes, beginning with the central problem of the artwork as both life-giving and life-taking. Its physical forms – such as the candlestick – can suggest at once the sacred and the domestic, the utterly unique and the utterly commonplace<sup>7</sup>; it is gold forged from base metal, animation from the

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<sup>7</sup> Following the Candlestick, Byatt’s text continues to offer examples of objects that are both aesthetic and pragmatic, and both “art” and “craft,” from her rich descriptions of clothing, to a set of everyday dinner plates made by master potter Benedict Fludd.

inanimate. Alchemy is a slippery but ultimately productive central metaphor for art in the novel, for it requires a philosophy of paradox, joining science and magic, practice and abstraction, diabolical and holy, concerned with bringing gold from lead, and life from death.<sup>8</sup>

What Byatt argues obliquely in *The Children's Book*, however, is not the relatively straightforward claim that the making of art is like the practice of alchemy; the notion that art brings the inanimate to life is only one side of the coin. As Elkins comments, on one side, "in alchemy, distillation is when the substance gives up its mundane body and becomes spirit, and in painting, it is when the paint ceases to be paint and turns into colored light... distillation is transparently a metaphor for resurrection. It means cleansing, purification, and renewal" (Elkins 125). This transcendent, life-giving transformation of dull matter into a thing with its own life is the goal of Byatt's alchemical artists. On the other, though, "One of the aims of alchemy, and one of its most basic metamorphoses, is to make the volatile fixed: to cut the limbs from the lion, or clip the wings from the dragon, or shear the feathers from the phoenix. The alchemists thought of fixation as hobbling, chaining, and mutilation... And [they] were right to imagine [it] as a violent process." (Elkins 123-124). The act of fixing a "volatile" element of liveliness in the work is also potentially "violent" to Byatt; how the threat of violence plays out depends on the intentions and methods of each of her particular artists. Thus, the making of art in her formulation, like Elkins', is always the spinning of this coin, between the liberating potential of generating life out of nothing, and stifling the life that one desires to portray.

In addition, through the varying types of readers, critics, and observers that Byatt presents, we see that for an artwork to truly be "alive," both the artist and the viewer must cultivate an alchemical way of experiencing the artwork, to see life in it that is distilled and fixed, but not killed.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the alchemy of art is a *transfiguring mode of perception*, by which one sees the animating life of things and people, recognizing first that the boundary between the categories is permeable, then that a sense of life or spirit can move between them. The making of an art object is only the practical dimension of this kind of vision; its transfiguring magic lies in the relation of this vision to the desire of the artist. What results can be a miraculous transformation or a diabolical one; considering the many artist figures in *The Children's Book*, it is hard for the reader to resist Glinda's question from *The Wizard of Oz*: "Are you a good witch or a bad witch?" The life-giving side of art-making is the ability to see the life, or what the novel refers to often as the real *shape* of a thing or a person (an implicit shorthand not just for physical form, but essence or spirit) and distill that into a work. Its

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<sup>8</sup> "Very rarely, even the alchemists had to admit they had burned every scrap of life from their samples, and then they called their refuse scoria, recrement, or *caput mortuum*, Death's Head... the alchemists did not keep clear of the Death's Head, but sought it out whenever they could. The object was to achieve as thorough a death as possible and still be able to resurrect the ashes, because the result would be something even stronger. One of the few common threads that runs through all alchemical procedures is the requirement that the substance be rotted until it is a black putrescent mass, and then revived until it is golden and pure. This is the alchemical death, Putrefaction or *putrefaction*. The substance has to be brought within a single breath of dying, and then revived – or in the typical hyperbole, it has to be killed and resurrected. 'Revivification' is the way alchemists said 'resurrection' when they mean substances instead of human souls" (Elkins 142).

<sup>9</sup> Byatt's fascination with the concept of the still life – which is, of course, not at all "still" in some ways – is most overtly reflected the title of her 1985 novel, *Still Life*.

life-taking side is the flawed desire to encase that life in an object, and in so doing, steal it from the subject. The challenge of *looking* at art, then, is to see what kind of life animates the work, and imagine how that life entered into it.

It is inevitable that this mode of perception should be dangerous, for seeing the object world and the human world as the same has its own perils: either people become objects, or objects become people – and depending on the direction of this translation, it can be either degrading or liberating. This view of the transfiguration of life into art as a mystical and dangerous process is certainly not a new idea to Byatt; the moral threat of art to the artist and to the life of the subject is one of the threads that run through her work, from its earliest days to the present. Commenting specifically on her negative depiction of writers, Byatt observes that, “In [her] work, writing is always so dangerous. It’s very destructive. People who write are destroyers” (Byatt, “Writing in Terms of Pleasure”). Similarly, in response to Glenn Adamson’s question, “...is there something here about craft being a kind of black magic, a kind of animation of matter that we constantly need to try to constrain?” Byatt responds in the affirmative, stating, “I think that’s right. And of course, making pots is bringing dead earth to life... I bought a book about making pots in Rye, and it really did say that the best potter’s earth comes from the graveyard. It is things like that that put my metaphor exactly where I want it – but it wasn’t a metaphor” (Byatt, *JMC* 76). This anxiety plays out both in the literary and visual arts in *The Children’s Book*, where readers encounter proliferating frozen figures of stolen life, from Tom’s view of the artwork as Snow White onwards: the novel’s focal points, both in terms of plot and aesthetics, are children trapped in fairy tales, thwarted youth captured and exploited in sculpture, tiny creatures mummified and encased in porcelain. Byatt’s past work also repeatedly evokes images of suspended or frozen life-in-art (or death-in-art, as the case may be). The question of whether or not life lingers in a work proliferates in *Possession*, from the stolen letters between long-dead poets that strike the spark of life in the plot simply because “they were alive. They seemed *urgent*,” to porcelain dolls that present a mocking simulacrum of life, with their watching eyes and “their tiny heads heavy, their tiny limbs trailing, rather horrid, a little deathly” (Byatt, *Possession* 56, 93). Byatt’s short stories also offer seemingly endless variations on this question, from the simple image of plant life trapped in a glass paperweight (“The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye”) to taxidermied wildlife (“Crocodile Tears”) and art assemblages made from preserved fetuses and prosthetic limbs (“Body Art”), to the most extreme and fantastical example of a woman who slowly, gorgeously and terribly, turns into stone (“A Stone Woman”).

In her critical writing, she also comments on this obsession. In “Ice, Snow, Glass,” she reflects positively on the frozen image’s potential for reanimation, saying, “Ice and snow are part of the cycle of the seasons, and life-forms frozen and dormant are also preserved in the cold. Neither Kay [in the Grim tale “The Snow Queen”], nor Snow White are dead; they are part of a vegetation myth, waiting for the spring (Byatt, *Histories and Stories* 159).” However, no resurrection is ever guaranteed, and art can just as easily kill as preserve, as she writes in *Portraits in Fiction*, where, reading Balzac’s *Le chef d’oeuvre inconnu*, she reminds us that “Life and death are struggling with each other, all over. Here it’s a woman, there it’s a statue, and over there it’s a corpse (... *la vie et la mort luttent dan chaque detail: ici c’est une femme, là une statue, plus loin un cadavre.*)” (Byatt, *Portraits in Fiction* 24). The difficulty of distinguishing between the woman, the statue, and the corpse is a fundamental problem of art in Byatt’s

world; again, we see that the barrier between people and objects in the world of her work can seem both thrillingly and disturbingly permeable.<sup>10</sup>

In *The Children's Book*, she elaborates on the exhilaration and terror of discovering that one is part of a singular, strangely vital object world. We see the tremendous vitality of this world through Philip's artist's-eye-view:

Here seeing the horizon, feeling the precariousness of his standpoint, he suddenly had a vision of the thing – *a huge ball*, flying, and covered mostly with this water endlessly in motion, but *held to the surface* as it hurtled through the atmosphere, and in its dark depths, blue, green, brown, black, it covered other colder earth, and sand and stone, to which the light never reached, where perhaps things lived in the dark, and plunged and ate each other, he didn't know, maybe no one knew. The round earth, with hills and valleys of earth, under the liquid surface. It was pleasant, and frightening, to be alive in the sun. (*Children* 137)

His visceral response to this sudden vision of vibrant geological sublimity is to take a stone away from the shore with him, for, “It is an ancient instinct to take a stone from a stony place, to look at it, to give it a form and a life that connect the human being to the mass of inhuman stones” (*Children* 137). Part of the alchemical process that Byatt participates in and reveals is the clarifying revelation that any barrier between the human world and “the mass of inhuman stones” is in itself a construction – she reminds us that people are undeniably *part of* the object world, and that some mystical (but markedly not divine) life exists in and between both categories of entity. Stones, as “life forms,” hold a particular fascination for Byatt, rendered most clearly in “A Stone Woman,” where the narrator highlights the intimate relation of stones to the human body:

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<sup>10</sup> In this sense, we might see Byatt's undifferentiable ecology of things and people as participating in a current theoretical dialogue around things and our relation to them – relevant areas of discourse include Bill Brown's writings on “thing theory,” Jane Bennett's “vital materialism,” and the community of scholars working on Object Oriented Ontology, such as Graham Harman and Timothy Morton. It is surely significant that Brown invokes Byatt to introduce his influential 2001 essay, “Thing Theory,” using the opening scene of *The Biographer's Tale* (1997) to enact the desire for a kind of “relief” from the burden of capital-T Theory, “Something warm, then, that relieves us from the chill of dogged ideation, something concrete that relieves us from unnecessary abstraction” (Brown 1). Brown summarizes what is both a darkly comic and (particularly to a reader of critical theory) a tragically familiar academic frustration: “Fed up with Lacan as with deconstructions of the Wolf-Man, a doctoral student looks up at a filthy window and epiphanically thinks, “I must have *things*” (Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale* 2). For Brown, this is an unfulfillable and naïve desire, living as we do in a time after theory; we cannot “remain content with the ‘real, very dirty window’ – a ‘thing’ – as the answer to what ails us without turning it to an ailment of its own,” and instead, we must realize that “taking the side of things hardly puts a stop to that thing called theory” (Brown 3). Byatt's own answer to this desire is ambivalent; while she, like her unfortunate graduate student, resists theory and abstraction, that novel ends with a kind of descent into metanarrative mania, as the student-turned-biographer discovers that “things” are never as irreducible or singularly apparent as they seem. Things can never just be simple things in Byatt, and the desire to believe that they can be separated from the murk of human relations is an unfulfillable one.

The minds of stone lovers had colonised stones as lichens cling to them with golden or grey-green florid stains. The human world of stones is caught in organic metaphors like flies in amber. Words came from flesh and hair and plants. Reniform, mammilated, botryoidal, dendrite, haematite. Carnelian is from carnal, from flesh. Serpentine and lizardite are stone reptiles; phyllite is leafy-green. The earth itself is made in part of bones, shells and diatoms. (Byatt, *Little Black Book of Stories* 127)

As Ines, the protagonist, converts from flesh to stone, “she saw that there were reciprocities, both physical and figurative. There were whole ranges of rocks and stones which, like pearls, were formed from things which had once been living... these were themselves living stones—living marine organisms that spun and twirled around skeletons made of opal” (*Black Book* 126). This idea of “living stones,” and the interchangeability of the animate and inanimate, is echoed in *Possession*, intriguingly tied into the idea of textuality: in a moment of Barthesian readerly bliss, Roland sees the words of a poem as “living creatures or stones of fire” (Byatt, *Possession* 512). In his discussion of alchemy as a science of water and stones (like painting or ceramics), and the idea of “the Stone” as the ultimate life-giving quantity, Elkins similarly observes that

Even something as fundamental as a stone is hard to define. What makes stones stony? If we think how the lumpish human body – which is nothing but slabs of steak and flaccid viscera – is animated by a spirit, then we can also conceive of an essence of stoniness, something that might creep into the damp earth and make it more stony. Agricola, the seventeenth-century metallurgist, was thinking along those lines when he spoke of a “juice” (*succus*) that was a “stone-forming spirit” (*lapidificus spiritus*). Robert Boyle, one of the founders of modern chemistry, called it a “petrescent liquor,” from the Latin word *petra*, rock; and he thought there might be special juices for metals and other minerals (those he called Metallescent and Mineralescent juices)... Anything might be turned into stone, and European collectors had specimens of men’s tongues and hearts invaded by “stone-forming waters” (Elkins 27).

Elkins’ alchemical reasoning echoes Byatt’s; there is something both terrifying and irresistible in the magical fungibility of flesh and stone, and in the possibility of the one transforming into the other, as different but unnervingly equivalent states of life.<sup>11</sup>

However, the fairy tale-obsessed late Victorians of *The Children’s Book* (the parents of the Edwardian “children” that give the novel its title) misconstrue this sense of interwoven worlds, rejecting the strangeness and intermingled terror and ecstasy of seeing the alien “life” of stones that Philip experiences. Instead, they frame it in terms of the more comprehensible, anthropocentric terms of the “fair folk”: for example, one of the adult

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<sup>11</sup> Intriguingly, Byatt also addresses the reverse transformation, from stone back into flesh, that happens in Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale*; in her interview with Philip Hensher for *The Paris Review*, she claims that it frames art as a kind of excessive consolation. She works against this idea in her own writing, saying, “I have spent my life writing against *The Winter’s Tale*” (Byatt, “The Art of Fiction”). *The Winter’s Tale* tellingly also appears in *The Children’s Book* – the characters stage a production of it at the turn of the century, as the children’s generation is on the cusp of adulthood, and the parents’ generation seek impossible consolation for the passing of time.

characters, Toby Youlgreave (an expert in British mythology) claims that “he had seen uncanny creatures, not only in woods near Cambridge, but passing between market stalls, or peering out of windows, in the Mile End Road. Our world was *interpenetrated*, he said. We had known it in the past. We have lost the knowledge” (*Children* 32). Toby’s formulation of a world that is “interpenetrated” recognizes that there are other forces at work aside from the human (or the divine, which plays no role in this novel). However, he can only conceive of this other world in creaturely terms, as animate life of a supernatural kind. Similarly, Olive, the author of fairy tales who is the novel’s main writer-figure, teaches her children

that rabbit warrens opened into underground lanes to the land of the dead, and that spider webs could become fetters as strong as steel, and that myriads of transparent creatures danced at the edge of the meadows, and hung and chattered like bats in the branches, only *just* invisible, only *just* inaudible. Any juice of any fruit or flower might be the lotion that, squeezed on eyelids, touched to tongue or ears, would give the watcher or listener a way in, a power of inhuman sensing. Any bent twig might be a message or a sign. The seen and the unseen world were interlocked and superimposed. You could trip out of one and into the other at any moment. (*Children* 81-82)

The “unseen world” that the Wellwood clan imagines is markedly *not* the mysterious world of “colder earth, and sand and stone, to which the light never reached, where perhaps things lived in the dark, and plunged and ate each other” that Philip speculates about, as he connects to the “mass of inhuman stones” on the beach. The “bent twig” does not have life in itself, but instead must be “a message or a sign” from the “myriads of transparent creatures” that are at once not people, yet are relatable to people. Like Toby, Olive understands this other world to be comfortingly animate and oriented towards the human world, striving to communicate with it. She is comfortable only with the domesticated strangeness of “the imagined, interpenetrating world, with its secret doors into tunnels, and caverns, the otherworld under the green fairy hill,” the folksy supernatural rather than the alien natural, and strives to push away thoughts of the actual “terrifying strata of underground rocks and ores – flint and clay, coal and schist, basalt and grit, through which snaked rivers and branching tributaries of cold water and gleaming ores – liquid silver and gold – she always imagined them liquid, like quicksilver though she knew they were not” that her home actually rests on (*Children* 141-142). It is her willful manipulation of this understanding – the deliberate substitution of the artificial fairy world for the living object world, and the controlling superimposition of human narrative structures and strategies over the non-human – that casts suspicion on Olive’s intentions and ethics as a maker of art.

### *The Spinning Fairy*

Olive’s retreat from the alien yet natural, inhuman world into her own, devised world of stories is explained in the novel by her personal history. The daughters of a Yorkshire coalmining family, Olive and her sister Violet Grimwith<sup>12</sup> arrived at their affluent lives at

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<sup>12</sup> A name that, like many of Byatt’s others, contains its own secret signs – both the grimness of the sisters’ family history, and the obvious reference to the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales, often alluded to in the text as darker, somehow truer versions of the English mythology that Olive reworks. As one

Todefright via Olive's marriage to the wealthy socialist Humphry Wellwood, a political writer. The geological depths below Todefright that she so dreads mirror the mines that took the lives of her brother and father; her horror of the incomprehensible, inhuman natural world appears in direct response to the kind of stories her father told her, magical tales about natural history that she writes against in her own fictions of enchanted forests and the densely peopled otherworld under the hill. Todefright and its fairy stories are clearly framed as a conscious escape from the tragedies of her past:

She packed [her childhood] away in what she saw in her mind as a roped parcel, in oiled silk, with red wax seals on the knots, which a woman like and unlike herself carried perpetually over a windswept moor... This vision was not a story. The woman never arrived, and the parcel was never opened. The weather was grey and the air was turbulent. When Olive Wellwood found her mind heading in that direction, she was able to move imaginary points on an imaginary rail and shunt her mind away from 'there' and back to Todefright, with its penumbra of wild woods and flying elementals. (*Children* 84)

Packing the memories she doesn't want to remember into this "closed, calm parcel, containing the obscene things" is both a fantastical and a practical process of enforced forgetting; the watertight "oiled silk" and "red wax seals" that contain her past are at once like the totem objects of a fairy tale (like Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumbs, or Cinderella's slipper), and the trappings of a working woman carrying her burden across the moor (*Children* 87, 84). And similarly, though she does not always realize it, her own artistic process of enchantment contains the ineradicable traces of her father's fantastical scientific tales of the coalmines that he worked. According to Peter Grimwith "the coal had once been living forests – forests of ferns as high as trees and brackens as fat as barrels and curling things that were scaly like snakes," and in it, magically, "You could find the ghost of a leaf, millions of years old, or the form of a thirty-foot dragonfly, or the footprint of a monstrous lizard" (*Children* 85). These images, like that of the "coal-ball" that he gave the young Olive – "a preserved knot of once-living things, compacted together, leaves, stems, twigs, seed-pods, flowers and sometimes even seeds, millions of years old" that she keeps but hides from everyone – are real life fairy tales in themselves, though not of the kind that Olive writes (*Children* 85). Notably, when she finally opens herself to her childhood knowledge of the coal pits in her masterwork, the play *Tom Underground*, she replaces these fossilized prehistoric plants and creatures with supernatural elements like sylphs and sprites, demystifying nature by peopling it with her humanoid imaginary familiars.

Yet ironically, it is this natural "art" of frozen or entrapped life that Olive replicates in her story-telling process. The lives of the plants and creatures trapped in the coal are, like the enchanted children that populate her tales, somehow suspended: "Most wonderful was the idea that their vegetable death had only been suspended. The three damps were the

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character notes, in contrast to "prettily whimsical, very English" fairy tales, "The Germans know that otherworld creatures aren't pretty little misses with wings and flower hats. They know that things lurk in dark woods and deep caves. Things we need to remember" (*Children* 341). This reminds us that two other significant "interpenetrating worlds" exist in the novel – those of England and Germany, linked by cultural, political, and familial histories (in the latter, both the Wellwood and the royal families) – until they are pitted against each other in World War I.



exhalations of the gases of their interrupted decay” (*Children* 85). And this is where the secret malevolence of her writing lies. Over the course of the novel, it becomes clear that Olive’s writing, which is not only for and about children in the abstract, but is in fact both for and about her children, particularly Tom, expresses a specific denarrative desire: to keep her children *children*, by writing to spin out time endlessly, generating narratives against the forward movement of a future.<sup>13</sup> She sees her children as beautiful objects to be possessed and held close, and writes them into her stories as such; for example, watching her children frolicking in the ocean one summer day, she is overwhelmed by a vision of Tom as a work of art: “The sun was high and shone directly down on her golden boy, who was not reflected in the moving surface of the sea, which he had broken into shining particles, myriads of slanting glassy fragments, a mosaic of surfaces”; this aesthetic reverie ends with the cold realization that “he would go away, and be changed” (*Children* 187). Resisting this projected future, Olive’s writing is born out of both defensive desperation and love, for

She and Violet alone knew that both worlds were constructed against and despite the pinched life of ash pits, cinders, rumbling subterranean horrors and black dust settling everywhere. The woods, the Downs, the lawn, the hearth, the stables were a *real* reality, kept in being by continuous inventive willpower. In weak moments she thought of her garden as the fairytale the prince, or princess, must not leave on pain of bleak disaster. They were inside a firewall, outside which grim goblins mopped and mowed. She had made, had *written*, this world with the inventive power with which she told her stories.

She could not, and did not, imagine any of the inhabitants of this walled garden wanting to leave it, or change it, though her stories knew better. And she had to ignore a great deal, in order to persist in her calm, and listen steadily to the quick scratch of the nib. (*Children* 301)

Her published tales have their sources in the private books (the “children’s book” of the title) that Olive writes for each of her sons and daughters, loosely inspired by their own interests and characters, but that become more about Olive’s own possessive, imagined relation to them. These papery “walled gardens” are increasingly oppressive for their inhabitants, as Olive observes but stubbornly ignores in the passage quoted above. The story books are framed as an imprisoning device from their introduction early in the novel; they “were kept in a glass-faced cabinet in Olive’s study” and tell of each child’s entry (or entrapment) in a magical otherworld – Tom’s story begins in Todefright’s cellar with a “small, silver trap-door, that would take a child, but not an adult,” Dorothy’s with a wooden door in the apple orchard, Phyllis’s by slipping in through a crack in a teapot, Hedda’s by

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<sup>13</sup> This formulation poses Olive as a Scheherazade figure, and recalls Byatt’s essay on the latter, “The Greatest Story Ever Told.” Here, she emphasizes the notion that “Narration is as much part of human nature as breath and the circulation of the blood... Storytelling in general, and the *Thousand and One Nights* in particular, consoles us for endings with endless new beginnings. I finished my condensed version of the frame story with the European fairy-tale ending, ‘they lived happily ever after,’ which is a consolatory false eternity, for no one does, except in the endless repetitions of storytelling” (Byatt, *On Histories and Stories* 166). In the essay, Byatt highlights storytelling’s life-asserting possibilities in the face of “real death,” the reverse side of the imprisoning mode of storytelling that Olive participates in.

slipping inside a grandfather clock, and Florian's in the chimney (*Children* 80). These clandestine entryways (through which escape may or may not be possible) are telling; Hedda's grandfather clock hints at the stopping of time implicit in the world of Olive's stories, while Phyllis's teapot is a point of departure from a mundane domestic world, into a suspended place where "there were princes and princesses all waiting in castles, frozen or sleeping" (*Children* 81). These personal tales, shared between mother and children, "were, in their nature, endless... Every closure of plot had to contain a new beginning. There were tributary plots that joined the main stream again, further on, further in. Olive plundered the children's stories sometimes, for publishable situations, or people, or settings, but everyone understood that the magic persisted because it was hidden, because it was a shared secret" (*Children* 80). However, her terrible betrayal of this "shared secret" is ultimately what makes the destructive quality of her writing clear.

Tom, her eldest and favorite child, has the longest story, and the one that captivates Olive herself the most, that tells of a young prince who, Peter Pan-like, loses his shadow. The prince, who is sometimes called Tom and sometimes loosely veiled in fiction as "Lancelin," must search through underground realms to reclaim his shadow, and implicitly, to regain a sense of himself. The story of *Tom Underground* possesses the real Tom and keeps him in a kind of suspended, enthralled youth, and instead of metaphorically finding his shadow and growing up, he unnaturally remains the "boy eternal" of his mother's fantasy (*Children* 52). As writer and reader, both Olive and Tom participate in the dark alchemy of the story's conversion of life into fiction. As the "real life" of the novel grows more complicated, with the revelation that the Wellwood children are not all true siblings,<sup>14</sup> Tom slides deeper and deeper into the world of the story, retreating from the "aboveground" reality of family dynamics and arguments:

Tom did not think clearly. He felt his world was threatened, and his world was Todefright, woven through and through with the light from the woods and lawns, summer and winter, golden and frosty, *and also woven through and through with the web of his mother's stories*, stories whose enameled colours and inky shadows, hidden doors and flying beasts made the real Todefright seem briefly like a whited, plaster-cast sort of a place, a model of a home merely, which propped up the constant shape-shifting of the otherworld, whose entrance was underground. (*Children* 149-150; italics are mine)

As in our first glimpse of Tom in the museum gallery, his mode of looking or reading cannot be separated from this imaginary shadow realm; like his regard of the Candlestick, which sucks him momentarily into "a whole world of secret stories," we find him lost inside the realm of fiction here. His mode of experiencing any art, not only his mother's writing, is total absorption; listening to a reading from *The Aeneid*, "Tom saw in his mind's eye gradations of shadowy matter, thicker and thinner irreality, coiling like steam from a train or smoke from a chimney, but in the dark, under dark branches, *cava sub imagine formae*" (*Children* 174). His susceptibility to the deception of art – the dangerous illusion that the printed word or the painted image is "more lifely than life" – reveals the perils of viewing art as a one-way

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<sup>14</sup> Some are the children of Olive and Humphry, some the children of Violet and Humphry, while Dorothy is the daughter of Olive and the marionette artist Anselm Stern

alchemical transaction, in which life must be drawn out of the animate world in order to be entrapped or encased in the art object.

Tom's absorption into the specific "otherworld" of Olive's story grows more and more debilitating as time goes on; the older he gets, the more he, like Tom Underground, his fictional counterpart, resists and willfully stays the Boy Eternal. His main traumatic break with external reality occurs when he is sent away from Todefright to Marlowe (a fictionalized version of a boys' public school, modeled on institutions like Harrow and Eton). There, he is submitted to a sadistic regime of psychological and sexual abuse between "what at Eton would have been prefects and fags [and] were at Marlowe archets and butts," following conventional narratives and stereotypes of the English public school (*Children* 196). In this foreign prison of rules and punishment, Tom hides within the story, which Olive sends him with her letters. At school, "The story was a necessity. Tom reading *Tom Underground* was real: Tom avoiding Hunter's eye, Tom chanting declensions, Tom cleaning washbasins and listening to smutty jokes was a simulacrum, a wind-up doll in schoolboy shape" (*Children* 198). This self-effacing migration into the story – leaving his body a "wind-up doll," which seems less alive even than one of Anselm Stern's puppets, marks a change in Tom; while he had one foot outside the story up to this point, he now fully divests from the world "above ground." After his dramatic escape from Marlowe, in the years that follow, as Dorothy observes, there continues something strangely, even distressingly resistant about "Long-legged Tom, running and running with purposeful absence of purpose. He had sensed that the Garden of England was a garden through a looking-glass, and had resolutely stepped through the glass and refused to return" (*Children* 364). Of course, it is a looking-glass of Olive's construction, and it is her enchanted, suspended version of Tom and his world from which he cannot and *will* not break free.

By 1907, the twenty-four year-old Tom lives a reclusive life mainly in the woods around Todefright, strange and separate from his family and former friends. As Byatt describes,

He wanted, but he did not know he wanted... to stay in a world, in a time, where every day was an age, and every day resembled the one before. Some of the time, he lived in the old story. He found himself muttering and murmuring with his back to an oak where Tom Underground had faced a pack of wolves with a faming brand, or running easily along tracks as though he was himself a wild creature, a wolf. (*Children* 399-400)

As we see in this disconcerting passage, it is his full incorporation into Olive's story that keeps him trapped. The charmingly imaginative tendency to slip into the "secret stories" that made the boy Tom, looking at the Candlestick in 1895, a compelling character and a sympathetic stand-in for the reader, here makes him a disturbing one, who exemplifies the terrible danger of reading too deeply. Furthermore, his childlike impulse to live in a fictional world without time—one that recalls the fairy tale trope of the lost land<sup>15</sup>—supposes also a

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<sup>15</sup> This image clearly recalls Olive's story "The Shrubbery," in which a lost child disappears into a fairy land where he is both young and old, and all time passes, yet none at all. Tom, who always plays Puck in the family's traditional productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is clearly aligned with the boy Pig, who gets lost in a fairy world within the eponymous Shrubbery, where he is renamed Pucan and becomes "ageless, neither boy nor man" (*Children* 102).

land without history, or the marking of events. It is an illusory world of aesthetic possibility, in which time can be stretched and made malleable, but not one that can be reconciled with the crushing forward momentum of time in the novel. Fittingly, the other kind of writing that Tom gets lost in is the nature writing of Richard Jeffries and W.H. Hudson, whom Byatt calls “men of a Silver Age, elegiac,” whose writings on the English earth are marked by

...an intense, sometimes purposeful nostalgia for an imagined Golden Age... They wanted to go back to the earth, to the running rivers and full fields and cottage gardens and twining honeysuckle of Morris’s Nowhere. They wanted to live in cottages (real cottages, which meant old stone, mossy cottages) and grow their own fruit and vegetables, getting their own eggs and gooseberries... Ford Madox Ford living on a smallholding in Winchelsea, wrote movingly about digging the bones of a buried Viking out of the cliff at Beachy Head. Ford’s bones in the cliff are like the human bones in Kipling’s chalk, or the bones turned up on the downs by rabbits in Hudson’s *Shepherd’s Life*. They are a dream of humans as part of the natural cycle, as they no longer seem to be. (*Children* 391-392)

As described by Byatt, we see the interpenetration of nature with myth in this “Silver Age” figuration of the natural world. It is this dream of a nostalgic, imaginary, wholly integrated human-natural world that Tom loses himself in; as Olive does, he mistakenly sees nature as a world of human relations and human stories, rather than as the vibrant but utterly *other* kind of life and thingness that Philip’s earlier description of the earth evokes. As he grows older and stranger, Tom lives more and more in the woods, where he develops his own fairy tale relations with the world of trees and animals. When Dorothy, worried by her own first experience of love, asks if he has ever fallen in love, he offers an odd response that gestures towards his total conflation of the human world and natural one, saying, “‘Once I was in love, for about a month, I think. With a vixen.’ He saw her look of puzzlement, and said, ‘Oh, a real vixen. A young one, very graceful, covered with soft red fur, with a thick brush, and a creamy white chest...I’m not telling you very well. It was love, that’s what it was’” (*Children* 473-474). Tom’s account recalls the fairy tale trope of the prince or princess transfigured into an animal form, yet his answer, given in all seriousness, fails to distinguish that there is anything outside the story world – namely, a non-story, adult world. And always, beneath the mythologized, gently mystical English earth that he treads, “in an imaginary realm of rock tunnels and winding stairs, the shadowless seeker, with the trusted Company, never growing older, never changing their intent, travelled on towards the dark queen weaving her webs, and snares, and shrouds” – the dark queen that, readers intuit, is Olive herself (*Children* 234-5).

Tom’s private, imagined realm, shared only with Olive through the dubious lifeline of the ever-continuing story, is an unsustainable one in the greater narrative of Byatt’s novel, in which political and social events (like the increasing tension of Anglo-German relations, or the building urgency of the women’s suffrage movement that so inflames his sister, Hedda) takes greater and greater precedence. The final, inevitable collapse of this world is Olive’s publication of his personal story – a betrayal of the intimate trust between mother and son, artist and subject. Faced with financial troubles, Olive agrees to adapt *Tom Underground* for the stage, where he becomes the basis of a theatrical spectacle along the lines of Barrie’s *Peter Pan* that enchants all of its viewers but Tom himself. Again, the

unintentionally malignant nature of Olive's art-making becomes clearer than ever to the reader. She herself recognizes that her process is ethically compromised. On one hand, she proudly states that "stories are the inner life of this house. A kind of spinning of energy. I am this spinning fairy in the attic, I am Mother Goose quacking away what sounds like comforting chatter but is really – is really what holds it all together." However, in the next breath, she is forced to admit that her "spinning" is not purely out of love – the tales that she weaves from the living matter of her children and her household are commodities, and "it makes money, it does hold it all together" (*Children* 358).

Olive's exposure of the private world for profit is the final step in the slow death-by-art that she has unintentionally contrived for Tom. The staging of the secret story reveals its artifice; the magical creations of Anselm Stern that bring Tom's imagined companions to uncanny life only reveal to Tom the artificiality of the enchanted, constructed world that has always been more real than reality – "more lifely than life" – to him. While the other spectators are delighted and amazed by the cleverness of the production, Tom "was both not-thinking, and not-believing. Something had been taken from him, certainly, but in these lights, against this backcloth, it was something fabricated and trivial, which it made no sense to mourn" (*Children* 524). This realization – that the world that he has inhabited wholeheartedly is so easily translated into artifice, and thus revealed as such – drives him away from the theatre, and away from the crowded, unnatural environs of London. On foot, Tom embarks on a final pilgrimage, away from London, through the familiar Downs and the Kentish Weald, leading unintentionally but inevitably to the wild convergence of land and sea at Dungeness.<sup>16</sup> On his way, he speculates with a strange calm about how "Walking over this earth was like being in an English story... He did now have in his head an image of a story. Not more than the skeleton of a story, a walker walking through England." The England of his "English story" is one marked by human history and human mythology; he runs through litanies of place-names that reflect the domesticated wildness of the English landscape – "through English mud, and English chalk, and ancient English woods" that lead him past the evocative, story-telling names of places like "Hoad Wood, Bethersden, Pot Kiln, Further Quarter, Middle Quarter, Arcadia, Bugglesden, Children's Farm, Knock Farm, Cherry Garden, Maiden Wood, Great Heron Wood" (*Children* 531).

However, this England that Tom walks through is no longer the green and gold Morris tapestry of his enchanted, attenuated childhood; rather, it has become "shades of cream, and white, and silver, a bleached, leached blached story, the colour of the skeletons of seaweeds, or indeed, of humans and beasts" (*Children* 531).<sup>17</sup> This austere image of the "blached story," reflected by the stony beach where he ends up, recalls and rewrites Philip's experience of the terrible and gorgeous stone-and-water world of the ocean, rather than the familiar, secret lives of animals and enchanted forests that Tom has inhabited up to this point. It is this alteration of perspective – being *shown* the artificiality of the humanly-

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<sup>16</sup> Dungeness Spit is a heavily inflected location in the novel; it is the same place where Philip has his vision of the earth in space, and where the potter Benedict Fludd drowns himself.

<sup>17</sup> Tom's suicide is the fatal fracture in the glass casing of Todefright's fairy tale world – a world that is wholly shattered by the arrival of World War I. Even before the war, following his death, the narrator takes up the same language of Tom's vision, describing a diminished version of the world of the novel, where "Life – for the living – went on. Leached of much of its colour, still where it had been full of movement." (*Children* 543)

constructed, imaginary prison that bound him – that breaks Tom. Having lived his whole life inside the enchanted glass coffin of Olive’s story, he cannot live outside of it; once he sees, as Philip or Anselm Stern, or, in fact, the reader does, that the human world exists alongside and within an utterly *different* object world, he simply cannot process it. Finally, at the Channel—“the end of England,” a formulation that directly recalls Philip’s earlier feeling that he was at “the edge of England”—he stops and contemplates this beautiful and terrible thingness (*Children* 137). The skeletal, bleached tones of Tom’s vision stand out in direct opposition to the vivid riot of colors that Philip saw at Dungeness before – “ochre-pink, seakales sprout with fantastic fringes of frills or leaves that are purple or rich green or blue-green... viper’s bugloss, spiky blue and sinister (maybe only because of its name) which he knew from meadows in Staffordshire, but which here seemed bluer and livelier... cotton lavender, and scarlet poppies and clumps of pink valerian” – for unlike Philip, Tom’s eye is trained to look for secret magic hidden by things, where instead the magic of things is, in fact, *in* the things themselves (*Children* 136). Again, like Philip at the beach years earlier, “[Tom] examined some pebbles. A broken one with a marbly sheen on its fragmented facet. A pale one that was almost perfectly round. One with a hole – these were, or once were magic, you could see the unseen world through the hole... Tom picked it up and looked at the sea through the hole” (*Children* 532).<sup>18</sup> What he sees through the hole in the magic, or once-magic, pebble is the forceful sea, alien and moved by its own, inhuman, incomprehensible volition, rather than by the elemental sprites of the story-life that once possessed him. Faced with this transfigured world where nature is not inhabited by fairies or sprites, but by actual stones, waves, stars, with their own private and unknowable thing-lives, Tom chooses to walk on – out of Olive’s story-world and into the sublime, violent indifference of the rocks and the sea, giving himself up to the waves.

Tom’s death is the death of writing for Olive. With it, her constructed fantasy world can no longer be safely kept from the horrors of reality, as “She remembered the tale she had told herself of the young woman... walking endlessly in grim weather across the moors, with the unopened packet. There was no room in that packet, for this.” She realizes finally the price that her dark alchemical process of writing as enchanted imprisonment has exacted, and sees that because her story has killed Tom, “There would be no more stories” (*Children* 536).

### *The Mad Alchemist*

Olive’s imprisoning story is not the only example of the dangers of art – and of parenting – in the novel. The potter Benedict Fludd is depicted as a fiery, unpredictable genius, whose volatile temperament is inextricable from in the volatility of the compounds and kilns he works with in his studio at Purchase House.<sup>19</sup> Fludd is an alchemist by name

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<sup>18</sup> The magic pebble is another reference to Olive’s earlier story, “The Shrubbery”; what leads the little boy astray, and takes him to the land of the fair folk is a similar self-bored pebble, through which “he could see things that were invisible” (*Children* 97).

<sup>19</sup> This name, like so many of Byatt’s, is purposefully multivalent. In Tom’s last walk, he thinks about the mutability of the English language, for “Purchase House was not a religious reference to the redemption of sinners, but an old word for a meeting-place of puceles, little Pucks. Or maybe... it was both, the English language works like that. It mixes things up” (*Children* 531). Of course, also “mixed up” in the murkiness of Purchase House is the more obvious connotation of

and by trade. His surname references Robert Fludd (1574-1637), who was, among other things, an English physician, occult philosopher, and noted alchemist – at once a scientist and a magician. As Elkins writes,

Robert Fludd took water as his *materia prima*,<sup>20</sup> though he did not mean the Greek element water, but the primary waters that light brought forth out of chaos in the book of Genesis... Fludd... believed *materia prima* must be like the nebulous silent waters that felt the shadow of God's spirit floating overhead – 'and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters,' as it says in Genesis 1:2: 'The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.' Alchemists loved those words, 'without form and void...' (Elkins 77).

This description of the historical figure resonates with Byatt's fictional one; her Fludd is a man who lives by the sea, and both loves and hates it, to whom water, like art, is both unknowable light and unbearable darkness. While the historical Fludd's God is a "shadow," obscure and enigmatic, Byatt's Fludd is even further distanced from a God who "has removed his presence as though it had never been. He sheds no light, he illuminates nothing, all is thick grey cloud, or empty night full of pointless points of brightness whose order is nothing to do with me, but not yet menacing" (Byatt 113). Yet this Fludd creates life-filled wonders out of his *materiae primae*, water and clay (which begins, like the alchemists' cosmological vision of earth, "without form"). Fittingly, the first image we see of him is of his work, a marvelous vessel covered with tadpoles and water-snakes that resides at the Wellwood's home, Todefright: "The glaze was silver-gold, with veilings of aquamarine. The light flowed round the surface, like clouds reflected in water. It was a watery pot" (*Children* 23). The "watery pot" reflects a deceptively pacific relation to water, for here it is liquid light; more consistent with the darkness of his character is a moment that Philip witnesses later, when he has become the potter's apprentice. At the pebbly beach, he sees "the bent figure of Benedict Fludd, struggling along at the water's edge, shuffling his feet amongst the stones, gripping his hat. He appeared to be shouting at the sea" (*Children* 138). If water is also this Fludd's original source, then it is one that both inspires and torments him. Fludd's final act is to confront the sea once again, a confrontation from which he never returns, dissolving back into his *materia prima*; all that returns from the waves are a solitary, clay-caked boot and his artist's smock, "Flotsam, jetsam, retrieved from the sea" (*Children* 458).

Yet it isn't only Fludd's name that links him to alchemy. He himself invokes the slippery idea of art as a kind of alchemy in the novel, as he shares the maddening pursuit of ceramic art with Philip. Recounting the life of his idol, the French Renaissance potter Bernard Palissy,<sup>21</sup> Fludd begins by telling Philip that the craft is "a form of madness,"

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commodification – like Olive, who must sell Tom's story (and Tom himself) to keep the Wellwoods in Todefright, Fludd is tormented by the requirement that he sell his art to support his household.

<sup>20</sup> *Materia prima*: the primordial starting material for the alchemist's work; different alchemists believed different materials to be this pure starting point.

<sup>21</sup> Byatt's potter is representative of a larger movement in ceramic art that valorized the achievements of Palissy and sought to imitate him: "By the late 1850s a new school of potters imitating Palissy was flourishing, the artist's complete writings had been reprinted, and the historian Lamartine considered Palissy of such heroic achievement as to link his name with those of Joan of Arc, Homer, and Gutenberg" (Baker and Richardson 200).

claiming that “Palissy was a madman, and in my book supremely sane, and you’ll come to see – if you stay here – that I too am a madman” (*Children* 130). Fludd’s description of Palissy’s – and his own – all-encompassing pursuit of the art is primal and almost shamanistic; describing Palissy’s desperate search for a pure white enamel, Fludd muses that

...failure with clay was more complete and more spectacular than with other forms of art. You are subject to the elements, he said. Any of the old four – earth, air, fire, water – can betray you and melt, or burst, or shatter – months of work into dust and ashes and spitting steam. You need to be a precise scientist, and you need to know how to play with what chance will do to your lovingly constructed surfaces in the heat of the kiln. ‘It’s purifying fire and demonic fire,’ he said to Philip, who took in every word and nodded gravely. ‘*Very* dangerous, very simple, very elemental – ’ (*Children* 131)

This description suggests an alchemical philosophy: “Elemental” signifies both science and the occult here, for no matter how much of a “precise scientist” the potter becomes, the pot must always stand the unseeable and mysterious trial of the kiln’s “purifying fire and demonic fire.” Continuing his narration of Palissy’s tragic and triumphant life, Fludd describes the discovery of the sought-after white glaze, and its first failed firing. Palissy, like a failing but dogged God, “works for six days and nights” before losing his first kiln-full of pots, then is forced to repeat and repeat this process of glazing and firing, until “In the end, he had to feed his furnace with his own floorboards, and smash up his kitchen table... he was thought of as a mad alchemist or forger, and reduced to extreme poverty” (*Children* 131-132). Despite his claim that Palissy “hated alchemists” because “he knew they were looking for something simply mythical,” Fludd describes him nonetheless as a kind of practical alchemist, who looks for ideal order, purity, and beauty in his white glaze and in the life-capturing forms of his pots and platters – goals that might seem, in their own ways, just as mystical as the philosopher’s stone.

Fludd is just such an alchemist, one who sacrifices everything in the pursuit of his art. In one of his suicidal rages, the only appeal that reaches him is Philip’s plea to remember that “...you’ve made amazing things. The sun and clouds pot, remember? And the one like flaming damask. Remember? Those pots wouldn’t be, if you’d drowned yourself.’ [...] It did not strike Philip as odd that he had made no appeal to Fludd to save himself for the sake of his wife and daughters” (*Children* 241-2). This holistic identification with the craft and its materials that drives both Fludd and Philip, and its connection to the earthly world – outside the human relations of love or blood – is the opposite of Olive’s insidious anthropomorphism. Instead of imposing human imagination on the natural world and striving to contain it, Fludd revels in the elemental wildness of the natural world, privileging it over the world of people. This opposite perspective is no less dangerous – it is, perhaps, even more so. For, while Olive sees people and stories in every place or object, Fludd seems to see nothing but raw matter in every person. He articulates this idea in a lecture on ceramics, emphasizing the notion that human beings are nothing but “the cold stuff of Earth... mould”:

Potters, like gravediggers, are marked by clay. We work with the cold stuff of Earth, which we refine by beating and mixing, form with our fingers and the movement of



our feet and then submit to the hazards of the furnace. We take the mould we are made of and mould it to the forms our minds see inside our skulls – always remembering that earth is earth, and will only take those forms proper to its nature. I hope to show you that those forms are infinitely more extensive than most people may imagine – though not infinite, as earth is not infinite. We are chemists – we must know metals and ores, temperatures and binding elements, weights and measures. We are artists – we must be able to be exact and flourishing together, with a brush or a cutting tool. We are like the alchemists of old – we employ fire, smoke, crucibles, gold, silver, even blood and bone, to make our vessels, our simulacrae, our fantasies and those containers necessary for daily functions, food and drink...  
(*Children* 430)

This speech, the longest Fludd makes in the novel, is his manifesto. In it, he describes his mission as an artist: to take the raw material of the earth (which is the raw material, in his eyes, that we are all made of and to which we return) and to violently, through beating and through fire, find “those forms proper to its nature,” paradoxically destroying in order to find the secret life of the thing. The clay is, perversely, somehow *more alive* and contains a greater volition than the other people in his world (his family or friends). Teaching Philip early on, he encourages his apprentice “how to recognize the form to which the clay aspired,” yet he never even considers helping his children find the forms to which *they* aspire (*Children* 129). His form of alchemy is an exacting black magic, and takes all of Fludd’s energy and attention – even requiring the sacrifice of “blood and bone” to create the life of the artwork.

The darkness inherent in Fludd’s philosophy of art is echoed throughout the novel in his relations not only to objects, but also to people. He treats everything with an egalitarian brutality, and his lascivious regard of Elsie Warren is just as indifferent to her personhood as his rapacious interaction with a Rodin sculpture at the Paris Exposition in 1900 – Philip sees Fludd “considering the Crouching Woman, who squatted, clutching an ankle and a breast, her female opening displayed and lovingly sculpted. He spoke to Philip’s thought. ‘Shouts out to be touched,’ said Fludd, and touched her, running his finger in her slit, cupping her breast in his hand” (*Children* 269). For Fludd, the consequence of the permeability between the object world and the human world is that everything is reduced to a kind of abject thingness; he views people and things with the same, possessive eye, dangerously transforming them all into the objects of primal aesthetic lust. This lust is unilateral, seeking always to violently affix whatever life and beauty he sees in objects of his own making, regardless of the cost at the subject’s expense.

The latter is illustrated first by Fludd’s disturbing confessions to Frank Mallett, the local curate. As he gleefully tells the young priest, in his youth, “[he] had terrible imaginings. [he] liked to hunt things. Creatures. Frogs and Rabbits. [he] made clay images of them with love, and [he] destroyed them ingeniously, also with love... [he] went to Art School, and made drawings of the naked – men and women both – and imagined, aha, *drawing* them in another sense, like chickens” (*Children* 114). This convergence of “love,” artistry, and sadism marks Fludd’s practice of art. As the narrator comments when describing Olive’s artistic inspiration, “All writers perhaps have talismanic phrases which represent to them the force,

the intrinsic nature of writing”<sup>22</sup> – and the same can be said for the other artists in the novel. In his confession to Mallett, which is also a declaration of his formation as an artist, Fludd’s “talismanic phrase” is an image of utter dehumanizing horror: he describes a scene that may or may not be real, where he sees his lover, who he may or may not have murdered himself, “quite dead. She was a mass of raw, open wounds and blood, and blood. The edges of the pools of it were congealing, like glaze, on the surface of her thighs, and on the linoleum” (*Children* 115). This image is at once revolting and, in Fludd’s telling, aesthetically forceful; his invocation of “blood, and blood... like glaze” vividly and unsettlingly takes away the woman-ness of the dead woman, and replaces her in the reader’s eye with a ceramic object glazed in a vivid blood-red (perhaps even the long-lost *sang de boeuf* glaze that Fludd is trying to replicate when he first meets Philip).

This alarming substitution of the dead lover for the brilliantly glazed pot sums up the unethical, dark magic of Fludd’s art. His alchemical process is one that steals life from people in order to put it into living things, seeing only how they can be dominated and contained. If his pots have life, it is a kind of *stolen* life; like his hero Palissy, who, as Prosper Cain tells Olive, used real animals in the modeling of his porcelain dishes (“the ceramic creatures are built round real creatures – real toads, eels, beetles”), Fludd models from life, a process requires the death of the subject (*Children* 11). This sacrificial element is clearest in his incestuous abuse, through art, of his daughters, Imogen and Pomona. The reader never finds out exactly what transpires between Fludd and his daughters, and only sees the terrible results: the two girls, trapped in the house, are repeatedly described as dead or ensorcelled. Philip sees Imogen as an incomplete and lifeless ceramic work, “a figure half-baked, fried in biscuit, not yet glazed or coloured, a pale first attempt at a living creature,” and describes Pomona, who recurrently sleepwalks and finds her way into his bed, as repellently “somehow inert, meaty, kind of dead” (*Children* 133). Pomona herself, in a rare burst of verbosity, says of their entrapment, “I feel we’re under a spell. You know, behind one of those thickets in stories. We trail out to the orchard and back to the kitchen. And up to bed, and out to the orchard, and back to the kitchen. We sew. That’s part of the spell. We have to sew things or something dreadful will happen” (*Children* 338).

Of course, “something dreadful” has already happened, though it is not immediately revealed to the reader. The violence that Fludd enacts upon the subjects of his art – especially on women, as in the questionably true or false originary image of his dead lover – frames him as a kind of Bluebeard,<sup>23</sup> an analogue noted early on. Philip, upon first entering

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<sup>22</sup> Notably, Olive’s “talismanic phrase,” like Fludd’s, is a grotesque and deathly one: she returns and returns to “the ballad tale of True Thomas, who had been taken under the hill by the Queen of Elfland.

For forty days and forty nights  
He wade thro red blude to the knee,  
And he saw neither sun nor moon,  
But heard the roaring of the sea.

She wanted to write that – the wading through blood – the absence of sun and moon, and the roaring of the sea –” (*Children* 142).

<sup>23</sup> Fludd’s depiction as Bluebeard recalls the rewritten Bluebeard of Angela Carter’s 1979 short story, “The Bloody Chamber,” who is also framed as an artist of sorts. Carter describes the hidden torture chamber as an artist’s studio, where art objects and corpses are interchangeably arranged; the heroine observes that “Wheel, rack and Iron Maiden were... displayed as grandly as if they were items of statuary and I was almost consoled, then, and almost persuaded myself that he had installed these

into Fludd's employ, notices that there is a mysterious locked pantry in the potter's studio, to which Fludd claims there is no key: "Philip remembered this when he read "Bluebeard." He noticed for himself that people in stories always did what they were told not to do, and went where they were told not to go. He couldn't see why, and had no intention of trespassing. But, perhaps because of Bluebeard, he thought the pantry was *odd*" (*Children* 34). Philip's own peculiar, distanced relation to human activity and impulses keeps him from exploring the pantry. However, no such distance affects his sister Elsie, installed as the caretaker at Purchase House, and she later discovers the secret of what lies behind the locked door:

On the shelves were pots. Elsie had expected something secret and different... The pots were obscene chimaeras, half vessels, half human. They had a purity and clarity of line, and were contorted into every shape of human sexual display and congress. Slender girls clutched and displayed vase-like, intricate modellings of their own lower lips and canals. They lay on their backs, thrusting their pelvis up to be viewed. They sat in mute despair on the lips of towering jars, clutching their nipples defensively, their long hair falling over their cast-down faces... Some of them had Imogen's long face and drooping shoulders: some of them were plump Pomona. The males were faceless fantasms. Elsie crunched towards them over the destruction of other versions, and saw that the wavering arms and legs, the open mouths and clutching hands were not all the same age, went back years, into childishness. (279)

In this cabinet of horrors, the nature of the grim enchantment that Pomona inarticulately hinted at is finally revealed. The details of whatever incestuous and pedophilic abuse went on between Fludd-as-Bluebeard and his entrapped daughters are never made explicit;<sup>24</sup> what emerges most clearly is the diabolical nature of his artistic process. By transfiguring Imogen and Pomona violently into these "obscene chimaeras, half vessels, half human," that have greater life in their "purity and clarity of line" than his daughters do in their human bodies, Fludd has drained the girls of their life force – like Palissy, suffocating living subjects to create enchanted, living objects. Even more than Olive, he is guilty of what Byatt, in an interview with *The Journal of Modern Craft*, describes as "sucking the life out of somebody and putting it down on paper as Olive does... It's very very dangerous. Lalique cast from life too, apparently. These two very great craftsmen [Palissy and Lalique] who created these very lively creatures, mythical creatures, were doing at the expense of live creatures" (Byatt, *JMC*

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monstrous items here only for contemplation" (Carter 28). The bodies of his wives are also part of these gruesome art "installations," and, like the obscene sculptures of Imogen and Pomona, or the severed limbs of Fludd's mistress, they are described as at once horrific and beautiful. It is tempting to read Fludd's hidden cupboard as an allusion to Carter, for Byatt comments on the importance of Carter's work to her in her interview with Sam Leith, remarking that, "I can't say how important it was to me when Angela Carter said 'I grew up on fairy stories – they're much more important to me than realist narratives.' I hadn't had the nerve to think that until she said it, and I owe her a great deal" (Byatt, "Writing in Terms of Pleasure").

<sup>24</sup> As June Sturrock notes in "Artists as Parents in A.S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* and Iris Murdoch's *The Good Apprentice*," this aspect of Fludd's character is drawn from the real-life history of Eric Gill, a sculptor and designer of the Arts and Crafts movement, who also sexually abused his two daughters and depicted them in erotic drawings (Sturrock 111).

75).<sup>25</sup> When Fludd dies, Pomona enacts a symbolic self-interment, burying the obscene pots in the orchard. One last time, we see Fludd's crime in action; even awake, the girl moves like a sleepwalker, "dreamily, mechanically," in contrast to the "creature," a pornographic vase shaped like a girl, described in kinetically human terms – "lovely, with coiling hair, open lips in an ecstatic face." Philip silently assists her as she buries the objects that kept her captive, "neither kindly nor unkindly," attempting to finally escape the deathly enchantment of being her father's daughter (*Children* 463).

*The Sight of Death, the Sharing of Life*

Yet not all artist-parents in the novels are killers. The marionette-maker, Anselm Stern undergoes his own kind of alchemical transformation in the reader's eyes, beginning as its most menacing figure (the "father" to an uncanny cast of dead-alive puppet "children"), but ending up perhaps its most sympathetic parent. Increasingly, Stern is depicted as the truest artist of the parents' generation; he clearly sees the deathly potential of art that Olive refuses to acknowledge, and that Fludd exploits, and unflinchingly incorporates that very vision into the life of his work. As a result, Stern's puppets are at once unsettling and enchanting; they are vibrantly alive, yet, like the German fairy tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann and the Grimm brothers that they enact, death is undeniably present in them.

Stern first enters *The Children's Book* at the wild Todefright Midsummer party that introduces readers to the social world of the Wellwoods. Stern, who appears unexpectedly with his collaborator, August Steyning (a theatre director and neighbor of the Wellwoods), is initially an unsettling figure; unlike the other gaily costumed guests and family members, he is "clothed in black drainpipe trousers and a long black jacket, and a black felt hat with jay feathers in the band. He had a theatrical pointed beard and groomed moustache. His feet did not crunch on the gravel" (*Children* 44). This thin, mysterious man in black is the opposite of the richly colored and ornamented Olive and Humphry Wellwood, who are garbed in Pre-Raphaelite splendor as Titania and Oberon, and his otherworldliness here (his feet that seem not to touch the ground) gives him the threatening air of a wicked enchanter – a Mephistopheles or Caligari. The gift that he presents to the Wellwood children is also rife with menace and uncertainty, and eerily foreshadows the anxieties of artistry and parenting that occupy the rest of the novel. He presents the little girls with a surprising and alarming toy:

...a very large shoe made of stitched leather, dark russet-red, with a large tongue and a big steel buckle with a sharp spike.

Inside were what Dorothy at first took for mice. She took a step back.

The shoe was crammed full with little stuffed dolls, each with a round head, and staring beady eyes.

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<sup>25</sup> A sentiment echoed in the novel, in the voice of the theatre director August Stern. Looking at Jean Weber's controversial painting *Les Fantoches*, which depicts a room full of dolls or puppets, a living man, and a dead woman, Steyning suggests that "You could see this artist as a vampire... He has sucked the life out of that poor girl and is giving it to wooden limbs and painted faces" (*Children* 268). The image of this malevolent "vampire" puppet maker before the woman's corpse (a clear stand-in for Fludd) is countered by the appearance of a life-giving puppet maker, Steyning's friend, Anselm Stern.

They wore either small lederhosen, or small enveloping aprons. Phyllis laughed uneasily. The dolls stared out. Hedda said

“It’s the Old Woman who lived in a Shoe. Only there’s no Woman, the children are on their own in there.”

She grabbed the shoe and held it to her chest. The other girls felt relief. (*Children* 45)

While the craftsmanship of Stern’s gift is undeniable, its oddness is unsettling. It is both fanciful and alarming, and like the other works of his that we see, it takes the whimsy of the English fairy story and exposes the darkness at its core – the implicit threat of the buckle’s “sharp spike,” and the missing Woman, the anonymous children “on their own.”

The marionette show that Stern and Steyning present that evening, an interpretation of Aschenputtel (Cinderella), is also fantastical and disquieting. Most compelling, and most frightening, is the complete intermingling of human and not-human elements in the miniature world of his stage; the puppets themselves are half-human, half-object (not unlike the “obscene chimaeras” of Fludd’s invention), “delicate creatures, with fine porcelain faces, real human hair twisted or plaited into elaborate coiffures.” These living dolls move with seemingly real emotion and sensitivity, as “Aschenputtel shuddered, sat on a stool, put her sweet china face in her fine china hands. The shudder was human and disturbing, as the little limbs swayed and folded” (*Children* 49). Stern’s art is already differentiated from Olive’s or Fludd’s by this “shudder,” both recognizable and frighteningly alien at once; his works do not freeze or suspend life, but rather demonstrate a kind of strange but generative collaboration between things and people – after all, Aschenputtel’s “human shudder” is not created by stealing life from a living subject, but is rather *shared* life, transmitted directly from the artist (the actual hand of the puppeteer) through the strings and into the puppet. Stern haltingly voices this idea, saying that, “One gives the energy to the figures. It is one’s own energy, but also kinetic” (*Children* 268).

This unconventional sharing of “kinetic” life is difficult to parse, and Byatt exposes its potential for both fascination and revulsion; in Dorothy’s eyes, “the little creatures had taken on a sinister life, which perturbed her,” and, resisting the magic of the illusion, she “blinked and refused to imagine” (*Children* 49-50). The puppets are rendered even more unsettling by the brutal, Brothers Grimm ending of the tale, where tiny “doves flew down... cooing and shrilling, and mobbed the haughty sisters... obscuring with commotion faces that were then revealed to be eyeless, with bloody sockets” (*Children* 51). The children protest that it “was all wrong, there had been no pumpkin, no godmother, no glass coach,” none of the things that make Charles Perrault’s French version of the tale (the one popular in English translation) so palatable and facile. Yet it is the intimate brutality of Stern’s performance, integrated with the beauty and wonder of its craftsmanship, that ultimately renders it so captivating to its spectators, and so “lifelily.” Similarly, the second Stern-Steyning performance that the characters (and readers) witness also exposes not only the congruence between the human world and the object world, but the necessary violence of the moment of comprehension involved in breaking of the illusion that one of these worlds might be privileged above the other. The pivotal moment of the second play, E.T.A. Hoffman’s *Der Sandmann*, comes when the hero’s beloved is revealed to be an impossibly lifelike automaton; in Stern’s version, the “girl,” Olimpia, is torn apart by in a struggle between her “father” and

her malevolent maker, Copelius.<sup>26</sup> The horror of Olimpia's "death" is signaled by another all-too-human shudder – "Olimpia trembled, but did not struggle; the representation of her minimal movement was very fine." Then, shockingly, "Suddenly and terribly she came apart in their hands, exploding all over the stage, her head flying upwards with floating hair, her trunk flying sideways, extruding a coil of metal wires" (*Children* 74).

This loaded moment enacts more than one of the novel's central dramas. On a surface level, the struggle of parents/artists over the child/artwork is an obvious foreshadowing of the Wellwood and Fludd family sagas to come. More interesting, however, is a reading of this scene as a statement of Stern's aesthetic, his "talismanic phrase." On one hand, this revelation of artifice is itself magical, and evokes the audience's enthralled wonder at a moment of supreme craftsmanship – while on the other, the abrupt transfiguration of the person (Olimpia) into the thing (the exploded automaton) is "terrible" and violent. These responses both seem to be fundamental aspects of Stern's alchemical way of looking, and his way of showing life through art. Olimpia's dissolution not only recognizes the idea that life can exist both in human forms and object forms, but dramatizes the lack of distinction between the two, and it is this moment of self-conscious demonstration (at once enchantment and disenchantment) that is both shocking and strangely moving to the audience. This complicated mode of perception, wherein the marvelous fungibility of things, people, and environment is embraced, rather than denied, can perhaps be rendered clearer through Timothy Morton's claim that "The aesthetic dimension, in other words, is where death happens. If birth is the sublime, beauty is death..." (Morton 188). If the uncannily "human shudder" of Aschenputtel's china hands, telegraphed physically and spiritually through the puppet's strings from her human maker, evokes the "sublime" and incomprehensible fusion of human life with object life, then Olimpia's marvelous dissolution into an burst of energetic *things* is a reminder of the deathly aspect of the aesthetic realm – a death that contains its own energy. Both are fundamental to Stern's practice.

Stern's understanding of the necessary presence of death, and its paradoxically *enlivening* role in the depiction of life, harmonizes with what T.J. Clark, writing about Nicholas Poussin's *Landscape with a Man killed by a Snake*, refers to as "the sight of death." The painting depicts an expansive pastoral landscape, half in shadow and half-lit by dawn, with three central figures: a half-hidden corpse, still embraced and weirdly animated by the writhing, larger-than-life snake that killed him; a washerwoman looking up from her work with surprise and dismay; and a running man, his hand outstretched, about to utter something. Clark notes, like the Balzac quote that Byatt invoked in *Portraits on Fiction*, that "Everything depends... on the spaces between the woman and the running man, and the live body and the corpse. It is the precise terms of the triangulation that matter – just how far, just how near, exactly where in the passage from death to life" (Clark 118). The picture expresses a kind of "doubleness," Clark argues, that reflects the doubleness of painting, which "revels, but it also recoils" from the deathliness of its own nature, the fixation of life in the still image, or in the case of *The Children's Book*, the object (vase or doll) or the written

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<sup>26</sup> Significantly, Hoffman's tale and Stern's retelling of it contains another alchemist figure – the hero's father is a good alchemist, and is murdered by the evil inventor, Copelius/Coppola (*Children* 73).

page.<sup>27</sup> The truly alchemical magic of Stern's work is in its demonstration of this doubleness – its refusal to privilege either the human or the object world, either life or death, but rather, to see the “interpenetrated world” all at once, and to project that vision on his miniature stage. Thus, while the closed, suffocating otherworlds of Olive's tales, or the encasing porcelain of Fludd's sculptures are deceptively vibrant sites of death, Stern's puppet theatre enables viewers to experience the *sight* of death, and thereby, also see life.

Stern's own alchemical transformation from menacing Mephistopheles to benevolent father occurs over the course of the novel, in tandem with its slowly refining definition of art and artistry. As Stern's ideas about the inextricable, inexplicable worlds of things and people are articulated, so too is his character further articulated and brought to sympathetic light. As he walks with Dorothy and Griselda in Munich's Englische Garten, accompanied by three of Stern's marionettes – “a wistful female child, a wolfman with a snarling smile and a fur coat, a strange mooncalf, luminous green with huge eyes” – he attempts to describe his relation to this object world to the two young women. As he carefully explains to his newfound daughter, “I do not know whether I believe they have souls, or temporary souls, or intermittent souls... I think I believe that we are all fragments of one great soul – that the earth is one living thing, and the clay and the wood and the catgut these are made of are forms of life, as is the movement we lend them” (*Children* 374). Stern's philosophy and artistic vision most closely reflect Byatt's own; as she tells Philip Hensher,

There are modern enchanters who know that there is nothing, no transcendent source of value, that Nietzsche is right... The sense I have of possible redemption now is to do with stopping us destroying all the other species. I've come right round to Coleridge's early vision of one life, which I used to think was just a metaphor, that we and the tree and the bird and everything are all one. It was a kind of pantheon. (Byatt, “The Art of Fiction”)

Stern, perhaps, is just such a “modern enchanter,” who realizes that there is no transcendent divinity, but rather a circulating, immanent “one life,” that is fluently translated between “the tree and the bird and everything” – the puppet and the puppeteer and the stage, which is itself “a kind of pantheon.” Stern's own transformation from a figure of fear to one of love is marked officially by a different kind of translation; Dorothy, thinking about her new father, says to her cousin Griselda that “His name suits him... he looks stern. Serious and Stern.” Griselda, laughing, tells her that “Stern in German doesn't mean stern... it's the German word for a star” (*Children* 373).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> This formulation recalls the innate wrongness of Fludd's approach – he *only* revels in his art's “deathliness, its freezing of movement into pose and of form,” and does not recoil from this darkness, but instead gives in wholly to it (Clark 236).

<sup>28</sup> We might see this weighted name as another point of contrast between the “good” alchemist (Stern) and the “bad” (Fludd) – while Stern sees the life circulates between the environment and the things that inhabit it, and finds significance and inspiration in it, to Fludd, the stars are simply “pointless points of brightness” (*Children* 113).

Upon first discovering that Stern is her father, Dorothy is particularly disturbed by the fact that, “From quite early, she had refused to play Olive’s game – to live in a fairy story, not on the solid earth with railway trains and difficult exams... It is just my bad luck, she thought, wryly and tragically, to have a mystery parent who turns out to make fairy stories – and sinister ones – with automata and *dolls*” (*Children* 365). However, her resistance to the uncanny life of things that Stern’s art reveals seems to spring from a hidden affinity between father and daughter; like Stern, Dorothy has the gift of seeing and feeling the life that circulates between the world of people and the world of things. Perversely, this clarity of vision is initially illustrated by her conscious resistance to the illusion of Stern’s miniature world. Alone among all the children, Dorothy refuses to wholly submit to the enchantment of the spectacle: reflecting on *Der Sandmann*, she thinks that she

...hadn’t liked Cinderella, and didn’t like this. Her head was full of the idea of spiders, and strings, and stings. She thought of the clever fingers controlling the story and its characters, and she thought, only half-consciously, of all such control as dangerous and to-be-resisted. She enjoyed the disintegration of Olympia. She told herself she couldn’t see the point, but she could, and didn’t like it. (*Children* 75)

Unlike most of the other watchers<sup>29</sup> who suspend their disbelief and give in to the illusion like “a shoal of fishes with huge eyes and flickering fins become one, wheeling this way and that in response to messages of hunger, fear or delight,” Dorothy sees not only the surface of the illusion, but the interactions between the puppet world and the human world, and the implicit danger that one side of that interaction dominates the other (*Children* 72). Later, though, walking with her new father and his puppets, she realizes that the puppets *do* have their own lives, and their own kind of strange volition. Taking the strings of the wolfman marionette, she feels with a start that “The strings were, after all, alive. Horribly alive. Once, with Tom at the brook, she had tried dowsing with a hazel fork, just for the fun of it, and had been terrified when the dead wood lurched at her fingertips and pulled” (*Children* 375). Dorothy, unused to coming into contact with the vibrancy of the object world, recoils from the unfamiliarity of it. What Dorothy feels and fears is perhaps akin to what Jane Bennett terms “Thing-power” – “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Bennett 6).<sup>30</sup> However, despite her alarm, she “let her

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<sup>29</sup> Significantly, the two other exceptions are Tom, who is overcome and “felt winded... and lost” and Philip, who sees the artifice as clearly as Dorothy, but is unlike her, is “*interested* above all by the china faces of the characters” (*Children* 74; italics are mine).

<sup>30</sup> It is also intriguing to consider the destructive adult artist-figures of Byatt’s novel alongside Bennett’s claim that, “*Thing-power* perhaps has the rhetorical advantage of calling to mind a childhood sense of the world as filled with all sorts of animate beings, some human, some not, some organic, some not. It draws attention to an efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or served. Thing-power may thus be a good starting point for thinking beyond the life-matter binary, the dominant organizational principle of adult experience... my goal is to theorize a materiality that is as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension... Vibrant materials” (Bennett 20). While Olive’s deathly storytelling-as-suspension attempts to reenter and prolong the experience of childhood, her mode of perception is a profoundly adult one, in Bennett’s terms. Though she claims, in discussion with Prosper Cain, that she still writes



fingertips listen, and the wolfman began to stride, and bow. He raised his paw. He threw back his head, to howl, or to laugh. Her fingers tingled” (*Children* 375). The wolfman’s triumphant howl or laugh marks a turning point for Dorothy, signaling her transfiguration from one of Olive’s enchanted children to Stern’s independent daughter.

Stern is not the only character with whom Dorothy shares the ability to see the life of things. Throughout the novel, she is linked to Philip, whose unsentimental sensitivity to the life of things mirrors her own. We see their affinity early on, when Dorothy visits Purchase House with her family, and goes to the studio to seek out Philip. Watching him work, she engages her tactile imagination, trying to conceive of the action of throwing a pot in bodily terms, rather than intellectual ones – “She touched the tips of her own fingers with other fingers, trying to imagine, in her skin, how this work would feel” (*Children* 87). When he invites her to try her hand at the potter’s wheel, she instantly perceives the life within the clay, which “was wet and clammy and dead, and yet it had a motion of its own, a response, a kind of life” (*Children* 188). The intermingling of life and death that she feels in the clay is later reflected in the way she approaches her chosen vocation, medicine. Her unflinching, unsentimental reflections on what doctors do is strikingly violent, and reminds readers that medicine deals in death just as much as life: “Dorothy thought of her future. Pulling blood-covered curled human beings, out of another woman, making them breathe, cutting the cord. Cutting into flesh with scalpels” (*Children* 447). The human beings that Dorothy “creates” through childbirth here are described much in the same terms as Philip’s creation of pots, or Stern’s animation of his puppets; always, as with any of the artists in the novel, the threat of the maker’s violence is implicit in the very act of creation (“cutting into flesh with scalpels,” after all, recalls Fludd’s aestheticized image of the disfigured corpse). The act of alchemical transfiguration that Dorothy imagines performing – taking the raw matter of people and “making them breathe” – is seemingly no different from the magical process of waking the mysterious thing-life (or “thing-power”) of a pot, or a puppet. Even though the *materiae primae* that they begin with is different, Dorothy realizes that “The only person she knew who understood the glamour and terror of *work* was Philip. They didn’t bother each other. They didn’t *know* each other. But they understood some of the same things” (*Children* 447).

Philip’s work, which the reader primarily sees in his own imagination through the novel, finally appears late in the novel. Grown to adulthood, the orphaned Philip is, like Dorothy, a craftsman of *living* things, rather than an artist of malevolent preservation as his teacher, Fludd, was. The purity of his joy in making things seems to relate to his marked distance from other people; unlike Fludd, Philip is not driven by the same sexualized aesthetic lust, nor by any desire to possess either people or objects; rather, his desires are satiated by looking, imagining, and making. The inextricable processes of seeing and making are everything to Philip, standing in for any spiritual or physical needs. For example, when he first arrives at Todefright, he is properly fed and clothed, yet feels unsettled and uncertain. However, as soon as he sees Fludd’s magnificent “watery pot,” a change comes over him. The pot nourishes him in a way that no physical sustenance can; looking at it, he knows that “*This* is what he had come to look for. His fingers moved inside its contours on an imaginary wheel. Its form clothed his sense of the shape of his body” (*Children* 23). Philip

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from her own “childish feelings, and a child’s surprise at the world,” her self-conscious severance from the past (the woman with the parcel containing horrors) suggests that any connection to her “inner child” is artificially constructed (*Children* 153).

himself is completely integrated with the object and its world; he, like Stern and Dorothy, feels the intimate connection between people and things, so much so that his sense of self is in complete sympathy with the objects that he regards, like the “one great soul” that Stern believes moves through all things alike. As he studies with Fludd, his ways of seeing grow more nuanced and sophisticated, yet he never loses his basic and profound identification of seeing with feeling, and sensing his own body through his art. This convergence of education and instinct is never clearer than in the novel’s excursion to the Grande Exposition Universelle de Paris in 1900.<sup>31</sup> There, Philip sees and feels completely new things, both as an artist and as a person. He has his first experience of European art – the electric shock of Art Nouveau, the “unbearable” sublimity of Rodin’s early casts of the *Gates of Hell*, “full of swarming human forms attached to each other in all sorts of predatory, desiring and revolting ways,” and ornate, delightful reproductions of Renaissance Italian majolica – as well as his first experiences of human intimacy, beyond his unspoken bond with Dorothy (*Children* 271). There, he makes his first friend in a kind of doppelganger, a young French designer named Philippe, with whom, lacking a common language, he communicates through images, as he does in his own mind. He also has his first experience with women, courtesy of Fludd, who takes him to a brothel. Unlike Fludd’s violent sexuality (one thinks again of his rapacious handling of Rodin’s “Crouching Woman”) that reduces women to things, Philip learns about the liveliness of the human form with “His fingers, with which he thought... feeling the difference between flesh and clay, the weight of a breast, the warmth and damp of her,” yet still maintains the total inextricability of his body and his art, understanding “the damp of sex like the slip on the clay” (*Children* 274-5).

This difference between Philip as a creator of life, and Fludd as a bringer of death recalls Byatt’s earlier short story “The Glass Coffin,” included in *Possession*. In it, two artisans are pitted against each other: a “little tailor, a good and unremarkable man,” who lives for the joy of his art, and a “black artist,” a magician who entraps living things. The black artist’s masterpiece is a marvelous glass dome, in which is encased “a whole castle... a brave and beautiful place, with innumerable windows and twisting staircases and a lawn and a swing in a tree, and everything you could desire in a spacious and desirable residence, only it was all still and tiny enough to need a magnifying glass to see the intricacies of its carvings and appurtenances.” The little tailor, who is “first and foremost a craftsman,” is awestruck by the beauty of this miniature world (*Possession* 70). Like Philip, who is astounded and inspired by the diabolical energy and perfection of Fludd’s work, or later, by the furious energy of Rodin, the tailor cannot help but admire the magician’s work. The black artist, like Fludd, also traps people in his deathly enchantment; the princess in the glass coffin of Byatt’s tale is initially seen as an eerily beautiful, inanimate thing, “a mass of long gold threads, filling in the whole cavity of the box with their turns and tumbles, so that at first the little tailor thought

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<sup>31</sup> The constrained infinitude of the Exposition itself is another image of paradox in a novel that proliferates in the latter: “The Exhibition could be seen as a series of paradoxes. It was gigantic and exorbitant, covering 1,500 acres and costing 120 million francs. It attracted 48 million paying visitors, took over four years to build, and included the elegant new Alexander III Bridge, arching over the Seine, the glass-roofed Grand Palais, and the pretty pink Petit Palais. But it had the idiosyncratic metaphysical charm of all meticulous human reconstructions of reality, a charm we associate with the miniature, toy theatres, puppet booths, doll’s houses, oilskin battlefields with miniature lead armies deployed around inch-high forests and hillocks. It had the recessive pleasing infinity of the biscuit tin painted on the biscuit tin” (*Children* 245).

he had come upon a box full of spun gold, to make cloth of gold” (*Possession* 71). Yet she returns to life with the tailor’s kiss; he successfully breaks the enchantment on the frozen castle and defeats the black artist. In the end, the little tailor’s conventional “happily ever after” is incomplete, even with the attainment of his revived princess and a whole kingdom, for “A craftsman is nothing without the exercise of his craft.” Only when he has “ordered to be brought to him the finest silk cloth and brilliant threads, and made for pleasure what he had once needed to make for harsh necessity” is he truly happy – like Philip, whose “rags to... works of art” story, as Julian puts it, parallels the tailor’s (*Children* 513).

The nature of the tailor’s craft-as-art, which combines humble domesticity and aesthetic pleasure, also seems relevant to Philip’s understanding of craft; readers must recall that he escapes from the factory region of the Potteries in order to make pots as art, yet still maintains a connection to the diminutive, quotidian nature of the teacups and saucers that his mother painted for a living. Ultimately, the work Philip produces is not in the sublime and terrifying mode of the Rodin pieces that he finds so inspiring, or even the flamboyant scale of the Fludd pots. Instead, his work is still contained in “little-trellis men and modest jars,” that brim over with kinetic force and energy. Rather than the larger-than-life, menacingly and masterfully captured “appalling energy – writhing, striving, pursuing, fleeing, clasp[ing], howling, staring... so strong it would destroy him” of the Gates of Hell, Philip’s work seems to contain the kind of life that has obsessed him throughout the novel – also intertwined and writhing, but somehow playful and vigorous, rather than tortured (*Children* 269). Philip’s patterned, living forms are temporarily paused mid-action, rather than frozen in the perpetual rigor mortis of the damned, like Rodin’s figures. At his first exhibition, we see Philip’s vibrant pots through Dorothy’s eyes, thrumming with a strange life, “covered with a lattice of climbing and creeping half-human creatures, not the little demons of the Gloucester Candlestick, not the tiny satyrs of the Gien majolica, but busy figures... unlike anything Dorothy had seen” (*Children* 511). Though Philip says that they are “still,” they also seem to have a manic life of their own – his definition of “still” feels somehow different from the frozen, suspended, or entrapped forms of Palissy or Fludd. Philip’s tiny, intertwining life forms are poised in tenuous, acrobatic equilibrium, perhaps something more akin to the “balanced stillness” that is “one goal of the alchemical processes” (Elkins 191). We see the insufficiency of this word in his exchange with Dorothy:

‘Pots are still,’ said Philip.  
 ‘Nothing keeps still on your pots.’  
 ‘I make things keep still. That don’t naturally, keep still. Sea water. Things in the earth. You need to hold the pots to see how it works.’  
 He reached over and picked up a round golden jar, covered with silver and soot-black imp[s].  
 ‘Here. Hold that.’  
 ‘I’m afraid to drop it.’  
 ‘Nonsense. You’ve got good hands. Remember?’ (*Children* 511)

And indeed, Dorothy’s doctorly “good hands” *do* feel “how it works,” which is itself a telling formulation of Philip’s idea of stillness – the pots may be “still,” but they are also active, like tiny dynamos, generating some kind of energy, doing some mysterious “work”

that is at once natural and unnatural. Watching Dorothy feel this life that works in the pot, we see how her own sense of things has developed:

Dorothy stood with the pot in their hands, which held the cool light weight of the shell. The moment it was between her fingers, she felt it three-dimensional. It was a completely different thing if you measured it with your skin instead of your eyes. Its weight – and the empty air inside it – were part of it. Dorothy closed her eyes, to see how that changed the shape. Someone said ‘Excuse me, sir, madam, you must put that back, it is not allowed to touch the exhibits.’ (*Children* 511-2)

As she does with the wolfman puppet, Dorothy feels the vibrant *thingliness* of the pot, as something both intimate and alien, yet she is no longer afraid of the “one life” that flows between her own body and the pot. The idea of “measur[ing] with your skin instead of your eyes” suggests the mode of perception that Philip, Dorothy, and Stern share as a mode of inhabiting the world more fully, feeling the relation of surfaces to the “weight – and the empty air inside” the thing. The removal of vision as Dorothy closes her eyes completes the idea that this way of “seeing” with the body, and wholly inhabiting the interpenetrating worlds of both human and thing, is the closest the world of the novel comes to spirituality. This liminal state of integrated being and feeling is, again, alchemical in nature – concrete and abstract, physical and imaginary, that “slips like a ghost between insubstantial ideas and forceful reality” – like the Stone itself, which is “only stone in the most undefined sense. Really it is neither a stone, nor a kind of stone, but stone as the principle underlying the universe of substances – the entire world, and everything in it” (Elkins 187, 183). Just so, “seeing” here is sight in “the most undefined sense,” as perceiving with one’s own body, and also in profound sympathy with “the entire world, and everything in it.”

In the end, Philip and Dorothy are two of the surviving characters of the children’s generation, which is decimated by the war (of all of the boys, only Julian, Charles, Florian, and Philip return, each uniquely broken by their experiences in the trenches). Their novel-long affinity for each other seems as though it may result in some form of companionship. However, there is no suggestion of sexual desire or reproduction between Philip and Dorothy; in a drastic rewriting (and denial) of sexual activity, Dorothy is the doctor who treats Philip when he is brought in from the trenches. Undressing him, she discovers that he has shrapnel wounds everywhere, and has “a deep bit... between the legs,” suggesting possible sterility (*Children* 608). Byatt herself comments on the irrelevance of any romantic possibility between Philip and Dorothy, saying that Philip and Dorothy (the characters she “really love[s]” in the novel) “know exactly what they want. And they don’t want to change anybody else... if it was a different sort of novel they would, have course, have fallen in love and it’s not certain that they won’t – but that’s not what they are *for*, either of them” (Byatt, *JMC* 71).

### *The Alchemist’s Eye*

Indeed, *The Children’s Book* is certainly not that “different sort of novel”; it offers no such comfort (again, we might think of Byatt’s vehement rejection of the idea of art as false consolation). While the novel doesn’t end with total destruction, it does leave readers facing a diminished world. Of the enormous cast of characters that gathered at the Wellwood’s

hedonistic Midsummer Party in 1895, only a handful remain living and present at the novel's conclusion in 1919. While there are still children in the world of the novel's end, they are notably holdovers from the generation of Victorian parents. The one child born in wedlock in the grim final section of the novel is the daughter of Prosper Cain and Imogen Fludd, while Elsie Warren and Florence Cain both fall victim to the seductions of Hubert Methley, another dangerous artist figure (a writer) of Cain, Olive, and Fludd's generation. Both of the young women bear Methley's illegitimate daughters, further emphasizing the War's obliteration of a generation of young men and boys.

While the possibility of procreation lies, perhaps dormant, with the two couples miraculously reunited in the novel's last pages (Charles Wellwood with Elsie Warren, and Griselda Wellwood with Dorothy's half-brother, Wolfgang Stern), the lingering taste of the novel's final scene is more bitter than sweet. The final image of Byatt's novel is a surprising domestic set-piece; we see the surviving characters gathered around a table at the home of the London Wellwoods, eating soup. This scene offers a surprising, leavening affirmation of human survival—the consumption of life-giving food—but one senses that it is momentary, and drained of regenerative possibility. This final scene also gestures unsettlingly towards the darkness of the coming century, for we learn that Wolfgang's brother, Leon, was killed fighting for his socialist ideals, while the Stern parents have moved to Berlin, hoping to escape the strengthening current of anti-Semitism in Munich. Dorothy wonders if they might move to England, but nothing is resolved, and the fear of what might befall them in the coming decades is enough to taint any sense of hope that the domestic scene offers. It is clear that, once transfigured by the passing of time, no alchemical art can truly change “The Age of Lead” back into “The Golden Age.” While a novel embracing Olive's mode of storytelling-as-suspension might have invented a fantastical way to look back to the moment of idealized, Edwardian “childhood,” Byatt's particular, at once magical and unflinchingly concrete alchemical process of revelation recognizes that such a denarrative return is impossible. Instead of looking back, Byatt turns her attention to the depiction of a directly *present* moment. Absent are the novel's earlier concerns about aesthetics, philosophy, and meaning-making, and the airy theoretical questions that obsessed the utopian Victorian progenitors of these remaining characters dissipate in the steam that rises from their bowls: “Katharina lit the candles which had been brought out for the occasion, and stood in silver candlesticks...Delicate dumplings lurked beneath the golden surface on which a veil of finely chopped parsley eddied and swayed. Steam rose to meet the fine smoke from the candles, and all their faces seemed softer in their quavering light” (*Children* 615).

It is surprising that this final image of simple, aestheticized domesticity appears as it does at the end of a novel that, up to this moment, has proliferated in extravagant images of rarified and astonishing art objects. Contrarily, it is the very *ordinariness* of this scene that renders it so extraordinary. Byatt shapes with her novelist's hand what she sees with her alchemist's eye; she depicts the transfigured soup in terms that echo the novel's many descriptions of art, most specifically its gentle allusion to the Gloucester Candlestick that opened the novel (the candles in their humbler silver candlesticks), and the evocations of Fludd's exquisite ceramic ware. The lively translucency of the “golden surface” and the fine pattern of parsley that “edded and swayed” in the shimmering light particularly recall the “watery pot” that readers saw through Philip's eyes in the novel's early pages (*Children* 23). The “delicate” dumplings are coyly evasive here, recalling the lively tadpoles that dart between glazed fronds on the limpid surface of the “watery” pot. And as always, this image,

which on the surface feels so bright and lively, is given depth and rendered, in Stern's word, more "lively," by the *memento mori* that hovers in the air like the shimmering steam. For even as the survivors sit at the transfigured dinner table, "Ghosts occupied their minds, and crowded in the shadows behind them. They all had things they could not speak of and could not free themselves from, stories they survived only by never telling them, although they woke at night, surprised by foul dreams, which returned regularly and always as a new shock" (*Children* 614).

The necessary distance of these things that can never be touched or told recalls the gallery docent's warning and plea to Dorothy and Philip – "Excuse me, sir, madam, you must put that back, it is not allowed to touch the exhibits" (*Children* 512). The imperative to look but not touch is a complicated one; while Philip claims that the pots *need* to be held in order to be understood, the reader might also think of the dangers of touching exemplified by the shocking violation of Fludd's lascivious fondling of Rodin's "Crouching Woman," which in turn recalls his molestation of his daughters. Fludd is also a destroyer of artworks, regularly breaking his own work and Philip's in fits of rage; there is a sense throughout the novel that art – and people – needs protection from this kind of destruction, whether from their creators or onlookers. This demand for distance also asks readers to reconsider the original setting of the novel, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and to return to those three original modes of looking that launched this inquiry – Tom's absorption into the object, Philip's craftsmanlike way of feeling through seeing, and finally, Julian's curatorial eye. We have seen the relation of the first two modes to the alchemical processes of looking, making, and, in Tom's case, being *made* – so where does Julian's historicizing, critically distanced regard fall into these networked modes of perception?

To fully consider Julian and the curatorial gaze, we must first turn to his father, Major Prosper Cain. Cain is, as many things are in the novel, something of a paradox. He is a military man and an aesthete, and by the end of the novel, he is in some ways a member of both the parents' generation and – by merit of his marriage to Fludd's daughter Imogen – the children's generation as well. Cain can thus be seen as a bridging figure between the generational groups, and between the life-taking mode of art-making that Olive and Fludd represent, and the life-giving mode of Dorothy and Philip. Yet, like Stern, readers are not entirely sure where to place him on the novel's shifting ethical scale. His own name seems to tear at itself through its overburdened weight of possible meanings. On one hand, its Biblical allusion suggests the wickedness of the post-lapsarian world – reading "prosper" as a verb reminds readers that humans are descended from the fratricidal Cain, rather than pure-hearted Abel. On the other, "Prosper" suggests plenitude and health, and indeed, he is the only parent (of both the Museum and of the actual children) who unambiguously works in the interest of his charges throughout the novel. Cain himself identifies as Shakespeare's Prospero, that ambiguous father and magician, for he appears at the Todefright Midsummer party "disguised as Prospero in a sumptuous black robe covered with signs of the zodiac. He carried a long staff, made of a narwhal tusk, with a pommel stuck with moonstones and peridots." Olive is pleasantly flustered by his gentlemanly flirtation, and the reader is just as puzzled by his intentions as she is:

"I borrowed this fantastic object from the collection, dear lady, but tell no one."

"I don't know whether to believe you."

He was still holding her hand.

“No one ever does. I encourage uncertainty.” (*Children* 41)

This self-declared magician persona, together with Cain’s title as Special Keeper of Precious Metals at the Museum, presents him as yet another kind of alchemist. Yet, unlike the other characters identified with this figure in the novel, Cain doesn’t *make* anything. He is a connoisseur, not a craftsman, and as such, the comparison becomes more abstract. Here again, the idea of alchemy as a transfiguring mode of perception, rather than production, becomes central. Cain, like Stern, like Philip and Dorothy, recognizes the life of things as they interact with the world of people. His love for things is not limited to their value, for, as Byatt writes, “His eye was eclectic and he had a weakness, if it was a weakness, for extravagance” (*Children* 9). The “extravagant” and “eclectic” nature of Cain’s taste allows him to consider objects as they interact with each other, not only as they are organized by human standards, making him an unorthodox voice in the museum culture of his time.<sup>32</sup> Lecturing art students, he emphasizes the fundamental importance of cultivating one’s eye, saying that, in addition to technical skill, the art-maker (and by extension, the art-looker) requires “a sharpness of vision – which couldn’t be taught, but could not be acquired, in his view, without incessant practice” (*Children* 218). When he and Olive meet in his chambers in the Museum, in the novel’s opening pages,

He was afraid she would find no scholarly order in his personal things. He didn’t believe that a room needed to be set slavishly in one style – most particularly when the room was, so to speak, a room within the multifarious rooms of the Museum, as the smallest eggshell might be in a Fabergé nest. You could set an Iznik jar very well next to a venetian goblet and a lustre bowl by Mr. de Morgan, and they would all show to advantage. (*Children* 10-11)

Like Stern, Cain has a gift for seeing how things *speak* to each other – though in his role as a curator, they do not do so as obviously as Stern’s vivacious puppets. All the same, he still brings things together in such a way that they “show to advantage” – a phrase that loosely recalls Fludd’s demand of Philip to find “the form to which the clay aspired” (*Children* 129). The irreducible need to really *see*, and to cultivate a specific art of seeing, emerges as Cain’s key character trait, and as his greatest lesson, both to the other characters, and to the readers.

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<sup>32</sup> For a greater discussion of the particular curatorial history of the V&A, readers can turn to Anthony Burton’s history of the museum, *Vision and Accident: The Story of the Victoria and Albert Museum* (1999), one of the main texts that Byatt drew on in her research for the novel. Caroline Patey and Laura Scurriati also comment usefully on the conventions of the late nineteenth-century museum and its relation to trends in the novel of the time in *The Exhibit in the Text: The Museological Practices of Literature*. “Sequentiality did not only become the dominant characteristic of the historicized narratives of public or national museums, whose displays were organized according to areas of knowledge and historical stages, with obvious teleological leanings; but, as Tony Bennett notes, sequence also characterized new modes of writing such as historiography and the historical novel. Moreover, while the narratives told by the objects displayed in public museums shared an increasing concern for the ability to be representative of a dominant and allegedly natural point of view, the rise of realism in literature seems to be the product of similar preoccupations” (Patey and Scurriati 3).

Cain is invested in the detailed narratives of how the things in his charge have traveled through the world; as he says to Olive, who visits him seeking inspiration for a story, certain objects have “a personal *mana*,” indicating again a level of strange liveliness or volition in things. However, she is disappointed by the level of detail and intrigue already included in the biographical narratives of the artifacts that Cain shows her. She laments that the real stories are “too strong,” and have “no need of [her] imagination,” thinking to herself that “there was too much fact, too little space for the necessary insertion of inventions, which would here appear as lies” (*Children* 12). Notably, Cain himself is a skilled detector of “lies,” as one of his passions is the study of forgeries, and he cultivates a “touchstone collection of fakes” that the Museum mistakenly purchased (*Children* 12). Cain’s particular magic lies in his ability to discern; he, like Stern, Philip, and Dorothy, is able to see a whole view of people, things, and the vibrant life that moves between them, and he consciously cultivates this “sharpness of vision” in both his professional life and his personal life.

This attitude of simultaneous intimacy and necessary distance in relation to art again brings to mind Clark’s descriptions of looking in *The Sight of Death*. He quotes Nietzsche’s writing on the Apollonian mode in *The Birth of Tragedy*, to highlight the strange demand of the artwork to both retreat and reveal itself:

The intense clarity of the image failed to satisfy us, for it seemed to hide as much as it revealed; and while it seemed to invite us to pierce the veil and examine the mystery behind it, its luminous concreteness nevertheless held the eye entranced and kept it from probing deeper. (Nietzsche 141; qtd. Clark 5)

As Clark comments, “The balance implied here is delicate. Like Nietzsche... I approve of luminous concreteness. And something in me flinches from the glamor of always probing deeper as a looker, piercing the veil, staking emotional ownership of the image” (Clark 5). The “intense clarity” of the work both invites and resists the viewer, and creates a paradoxical sensation of intimate closeness and necessary distance in interpretation. One suspects that Cain, and indeed his author, also “approve of luminous concreteness.” The role of the curator is that of the caretaker (or “Special Keeper,” as Cain’s official title phrases it); he does not take ownership, emotional or otherwise, over the objects in his care, but instead really *looks* at them to glean some understanding – never complete – of their autonomous lives. Cain’s true gift lies in his ability to see the life of a work, or a person, without breaching its boundaries or violating it; while he is not a maker of art, he is an enabler and preserver of it. This unique sensitivity is exemplified by his realization that Imogen Fludd’s strange and delicate drawings are art. Though at first they seem as though “they were trying to retreat back into the plane of the paper, they were blushing mildly to be present at all,” when suddenly “the shapes pulled together in his head, and he saw that she had, in a helpless way, exactly that sharp vision...” Taking up her charcoal, “he enclosed the frost-flowers in squared panes. And then he drew a circle round the spring flowers, almost as though they were on a plate, or inside the rim of a basket. It was surprising how the confinement brought them to life” (*Children* 219). Somehow, like the vitrines and cases of the museum he operates, or like the tiny parameters of Stern’s puppet stage or Philip’s small, living pots, the “confinement” of Cain’s drawn boundaries is somehow life-giving, rather than life-taking, unlike the suffocating confinement of art in Olive’s work or Fludd’s. This process of magical fixation preserves the paradoxical “luminous concreteness” of the living



object; by keeping it at a remove, it is allowed to remain at once mysterious and, as Cain comments, “to feel safe” enough to reveal, in Nietzsche’s term, its unique “intense clarity” (*Children* 220).

Cain’s mode of critical distance paired with intimate closeness of feeling also applies to his relations with his children. Unlike both Olive and Fludd, who make no attempt to truly know their children as independent beings, or indeed actively *prevent* them from becoming so, Cain curates his family with the same loving thoughtfulness with which he approaches the museum collections – as things to be shown to “their best advantage,” or in the case of Julian and Florence, to find the adult forms to which they aspire.<sup>33</sup> Florence herself comments on this model of family-as-collection, as she explains her history to her future husband, Gabriel Goldwasser:

“Where, then, do you belong?”

“In a Museum.”

“You are young, not old.”

“No, I mean it literally. I grew up in a Museum. My father is a Keeper. He knows about gold and silver.”

“An alchemist,” said Gabriel Goldwasser.<sup>34</sup> (*Children* 504-5)

While Florence’s lament that she belongs “in a Museum” is uttered in a low point of despair and uncertainty, Cain’s canny and alchemical curation of his family is ultimately, magically, *curative*, and succeeds in bringing together the most coherent “collection” of people at the novel’s end. His is the only family that doesn’t suffer a loss in the war (Julian loses a foot, but not his life), and in fact, the Cains are the only family to grow, rather than shrink, with the addition of Imogen, their daughter, and Florence’s daughter.<sup>35</sup> The Museum succeeds, in

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<sup>33</sup> James Woods finds Byatt’s depictions of Cain’s analytical digressions about both the Museum and his family contrived and overly-directed by the author’s presence, saying that he, and other characters, “are almost never allowed the freedom of involuntary memory; thought is largely directed thought, practical rumination” (Wood 8). However, I agree with Isobel Armstrong’s protest, in a letter responding to Wood’s review of the novel, that he misinterprets the novel’s sense of narrative exteriority; as Armstrong writes, “Byatt is unwilling to perform the move that imperceptibly merges free indirect discourse with a seemingly anonymous speaker... Recently she has spoken admiringly of the narrative distance that Thomas Mann’s writing sustains... This is not a postmodern novel as Wood suggests, but a major experiment in writing from the outside” (Armstrong n.p.). What Armstrong calls “writing from the outside” is precisely what I have referred to as “alchemical” vision, which sees people and things together as part of a single world, rather than the anthropocentric world that privileges interiority and the individual human experience for which Wood is so nostalgic.

<sup>34</sup> “Gabriel Goldwasser” is another of Byatt’s sly, over-loaded names – he is the archangel Gabriel, the messenger who comes the aid of a mother-to-be (in Florence’s case, a kind of *deus ex machina* who saves her from the shame of bearing a child out of wedlock), as well as an alchemical formula – “gold” and “water.”

<sup>35</sup> Notably, in a novel loosely structured thematically and temporally around Shakespeare plays (Characters correspond in multiple ways with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *A Winter’s Tale*, *The Tempest*, and *King Lear*), the names of the two children seem to offer a small measure of hope at the end of the novel’s proliferating trials and tragedies: Imogen and Prosper’s daughter is called Cordelia, while Florence names her daughter Julia Perdita.

its own way, in keeping them alive, just as it does the Candlestick or any of the other precious objects in its care.

One also gets the feeling that Florence and the other characters all *do* exist in a museum of sorts – that of *The Children's Book* itself. The ever-present Victoria and Albert Museum offers both a historical frame and a narrative one to the book. Byatt's novel is modeled on the museum as a liminal space that mediates sympathetically yet unsentimentally between the past and the future. It does so by revealing the interpenetrating nature of the human and object worlds, and showing collections of present moments and the ephemeral things – performances, fragile objects, and people – that compose them.<sup>36</sup> Considered as a whole, her book is a massive collection of historical and fictional items; characters and art objects are described in much the same way, and offered up to the gaze of the reader with a sense of “luminous concreteness” that combines critical distance with the intimate experience of the aesthetic. It thus theorizes the novel form as a kind of carefully curated museum of past life, where readers have the chance to really *see* an integrated collection of things, ideas, and people that inhabit a departed world. The novel-as-museum is simultaneously an enchanted and disenchanting space, which, like idea of the museum, belongs to nobody and everybody.<sup>37</sup> Morna O'Neill, summarizing Arts and Crafts writer and designer Walter Crane's idealistic poem *The Craftsman's Dream* (1889), writes that “The Museum is the revolutionary agent that encourages the craftsman to dream of a better world” (O'Neill 87). While this Edwardian utopianism<sup>38</sup> is written into the novel's discussion of the transformations of the V&A, the museum of the novel itself does not encourage the reader to dream of a better world, for such a thing is no longer possible. Rather, Byatt's

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<sup>36</sup> This idea of different present moments shown alongside each other as a kind of mourning is briefly enacted by Olive's vision, following Tom's death, of a “forest of coeval boys, all eternally present”: “every Tom that had ever been, the blond baby, an infant taking his first, hesitant steps, the little boy clutching her skirt, the besotted reader in too low a light, his brows pulled into a frown, the adolescent with his skin broken out, the young man walking, always walking or about to walk. They were all *equally present* because they were *all gone*.” Significantly, this is the moment when Olive thinks for the last time, “this is a story, there is a story in this,” but realizes that “there was not. There would be no more stories” (*Children* 536).

<sup>37</sup> In theoretical terms, if the museum belongs to anyone, it is the nation, for as Lucy Trench writes in *The Victoria and Albert Museum*, from its founding in 1837, the V&A was particularly invested in being “a new kind of museum, created not to house a collection but to achieve a purpose: the improvement of British design” (Trench 7). Similarly, Byatt's novel is an insistently *English* novel, one whose concerns are, like the “English earth... confined, even where it is wild, by what Melville called the masterly and alien ocean... none of it is pristine, all of it has been trod and trod and trod.” Though the novel is deeply concerned with England's close cultural connections to Germany, it is always through a distancing lens. If England is the novel's “here,” then Germany is its “there,” its uncannily familiar Other: “German earth is different, though Germans at this time, in a largely landlocked country, under its Kaiser with maritime ambitions, also felt the huge pull of earthly nostalgia” (*Children* 392-393).

<sup>38</sup> On utopianism: In discussion with Glenn Adamson and Tanya Harrod, Byatt remarks that she is interested in different moments of utopian thinking and organization, drawing a comparison between the Edwardians of her novel and her own university students in the 1960s, but she herself declares that she “decided that a kind of rather flat skepticism, and making things, making things well, is better than a utopian attempt to reform society.” She later moderates that claim intriguingly, admitting that, “I suppose my own utopianism is valuing things” (Byatt, *JMC* 71, 75).

novel-as-museum encourages the reader to reflect upon the things that are no longer here, and to recognize that they once were. While Carmen Lara-Rallo suggests that for Byatt “collections work as mirrors of their owners in different degrees, museums and cabinets fulfill a mnemonic role in their preservation of collective history and the individual past,” the museum in *The Children’s Book* fulfills a markedly different drive than the positive memorialization and preservation that Lara-Rallo sees in Byatt’s earlier depictions of museums and collections (Lara-Rallo 220). What we see here is not exactly a memorial impulse, and certainly not a nostalgic one – but rather, one of mourning at a distance, not consumed by losses, but looking closely and directly at the vacancies they leave.

This mode of unflinching perception and intimate distance is reflected textually in Julian Cain’s war poems, the last works of art that we see reproduced in the novel. From his first appearance in the Prince Consort’s Gallery, it is clear that Julian inherits his father’s powers of discernment; years later, looking at Philip’s pots on display, he feels the same charge of life in them that Dorothy and Philip himself do. As he admiringly says to Griselda Wellwood, “These are turbulent pots. Seething pots. Storms in teacups and vases. Creatures running through everything like maggots in cheese. Stately vessels with storms raging on them” (*Children* 512). In this brief description, we see many of the novel’s pet paradoxes converge; the pragmatic and the aesthetic; the domestic and the wild; the gigantic and the miniscule; the living and the dead. Like his father, Julian has the same impulse to explore the hidden life of objects, an impulse he acts out first as a member of Forster’s Apostles at Cambridge, then as a somewhat half-hearted scholar. It is only when Julian goes to war that he translates his sharpness of vision into the making of his own art, for, as he thinks to himself, “poetry... was something forced out of men by death, or the presence of death, or the fear of death, or the deaths of others” (*Children* 590). This revelation, read back into the other processes of art-making in the novel, is applicable across the range of artists – we might see Olive’s denarrative impulse to rewrite and suspend time by generating narrative as a fear of her own death, or Fludd’s aesthetic of violence as a celebration of death, while Stern’s determination to *show* death alongside life (again, the “sight of death”) is what brings his puppets such impossible vivacity. Julian becomes fascinated with the lives of names and how they relate to the lives of men; swimming in and out of consciousness in a field hospital, he has

a drugged vision of names, like scurrying rats searching the battlefield for the flesh they had been attached to, like the prophet Ezekiel’s valley of bones... men and their names were provisional: he realized he learned their names with a kind of dull grief, because there were already so many he did not need, any long, to recall, because they could not be recalled, they were spattered and scattered in the churned up mire that had been green fields and woodland. (*Children* 589)

While Elizabeth Hicks argues in her study of the still life in Byatt’s work that “Byatt’s desire for words to denote things is arguably the reason for the prominence of lists in her fiction,” we see here that it is precisely this impulse and its opposite – the knowledge that words exist for things that *no longer exist* – that are both equally at work in her list-making, and in the poems that Julian eventually writes (Hicks 11). He realizes that “you could write poems about vanishing names. He did not want to write poems about beauty, or sorrow, or high resolve.” Instead, the poems that Julian writes are curated collections of names – of

trenches, of men and boys – that signify vanished things, and in inscribing them, reinscribe the loss of the signified. His poems are directly aligned with his father’s curatorial persona; in his last days in the trenches, he finds himself in a deep German fortified dugout, walking through “storerooms full of piled bombs and tins of meat, of black and gold helmets and leather mask respirators: he was briefly reminded of the storerooms under the South Kensington Museum, with their order and disorder” (*Children* 591). Like the Museum, Julian’s poetry attempts to both preserve what remains and reveal what is lost: an mystical, alchemical process of seeing both what is there and what is gone (chemically thinking, the moment of precipitation and sublimation, or as Clark frames it, “the passage between life and death”).

Like the incessant litanies of names without depth of description in Julian’s poetry, the novel is a museum paradoxically filled with empty spaces, from which things have disappeared. This sensation is highlighted, strangely and evocatively, by the possibility of viewing the real-life objects that Byatt describes. While the Internet allows a curious reader to instantaneously find images of real things that appear in the novel, like the Gloucester Candlestick or Rodin’s Gates of Hell, or real people like Oscar Wilde or Sylvia Pankhurst, this very sense of visibility generates an uneasy, lingering feeling of irretrievability about the novel’s other objects (either the people or the things we encounter). The complete interpenetration of the historical with the fictional worlds makes this sensation of unseeable presence more marked, and, curiously, translates back into the realm of the real; the inaccessibility of the fictional objects make the ones that actually exist in the world feel more weightily like fragments of a disappeared world.<sup>39</sup> Again, we might think of Clark’s “sight of death” accompanied by the presence of life – it is the outstretched hand, the yet-unvoiced utterance, of the running man that reaches the viewer and telegraphs the unspeakable nature of death. As Byatt comments in her interview with *The Journal of Modern Craft*,

[The late Victorians] really felt they could recreate [a lost world]. I don’t think they felt, as I now do, it was lost forever. I am a writer in mourning for the earth I grew up on, which won’t exist for my grandchildren. I am in mourning for walking out in the fields and woods and seeing thrushes on the lawn. We have no thrushes here now. We have no house sparrows. They were here when we came. We had green finches. I have this kind of grief for the earth. I don’t know if I have a grief about human societies. (Byatt, *JMC* 68-69)<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> This relates in an esoteric fashion to Byatt’s comment in *The Journal of Modern Craft* interview that, “...I think we have got more interested in the activities of the mind and the production of things because we no longer live in a religious society. A pot becomes more valuable if that’s all that there is” (Byatt, *JMC* 70).

<sup>40</sup> Byatt’s innate attraction to the “lost world” that the late Victorians sought to recreate is clear in her interest in the nature writers of the so-called “Silver Age” that Tom loves: “... They loved the earth, but they loved it for something irretrievably lost, as well as for its smells and scents and filth and bounce and clog and crumble. Those great masters of the description of the English earth, Richard Jefferies and later W.H. Hudson, who can describe the whole expanse of the clean air, and the currents in it, and the rabbit-nibbled, sheep-cropped grass on the Downs, the close trees in coppices, the solitary thorns shaped by the wind, the fish fanning against the current, the birds riding the thermal flow, so that we think they are our guide to the unspoiled green and pleasant land – both of these are in fact men of a Silver Age, elegiac. They spend pages listing the species of birds and mammals erased from their land by pheasant-rearing gamekeepers. The goshawk, the pole cat, the

The sense of real finitude, rather than cyclical return, that Byatt expresses here communicates the sight of death as clearly as the running man's wide eyes and outstretched arm. The feeling of a world being slowly depleted – things and creatures going missing from it – signals the necessity of *showing* these lacunae, rather than ignoring them, and seeing the specter of death in its inextricable relation to life.<sup>41</sup> This feeling of simultaneous completion and depletion is what renders the final, painterly domestic scene of *The Children's Book* at once deceptively simple and unsettlingly ambivalent; it is light with the relief of closure, and heavy with the weight of absence. Byatt urges her readers to look unflinchingly at the world as a whole composition of presence and absence, life and death – to see the people and things in her novel through the neutral, archival glass of the collection case, rather than the enchanted glass coffin of the fairy tale, or the exquisite suffocation of the Palissy dish.

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pine marten, gone, gone away. Pike decimated. Trees tidied out of their wild shapes and habits. The Golden Age was when no humans interfered with anything" (*Children* 391-2). The implicit difference between that elegiac mode and Byatt's disenchanting mourning is that the present moment that she writes from recognizes that there is nothing left that humans have not "interfered" with, and that nothing can ever recover from that interference.

<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Byatt explores an aesthetic of paradoxical proliferation of terms to demonstrate depletion in greater and more clearly discernable depth in *Ragnarök* (2011); like *The Children's Book*, the text overflows with seemingly endless litanies of vivid items (names, things, colors), yet leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that it is a catalogue of things that are gone and will never return. Ursula K. Leguin comments on the appeal of the "cosmogony that is a tragedy—that kills off its entire cast of characters," and "moves from Darkness through Creation, War, and Destruction, to Darkness" (Leguin, "Towards Darkness").

## Chapter 4 Mapping the Clouds

At first sight, the work of contemporary English novelist David Mitchell seems to merely perform the yearning backward glance of denarrative desire; by sketching out detailed moments from a circular history of human violence and predation, Mitchell's novels all appear at first to elegize the failed possibility of human progress. However, his recent work also hints at a hitherto unexplored alternate solution to the unproductive backwards-cycling tendency of denarrative desire. Rather than attempting to denarrate the past (only to re-arrive inevitably at the same, horrifying present, as the works in Chapters 1 and 2 suggest in their various ways), this chapter will outline the ways in which three of Mitchell's novels, *Ghostwritten* (1999), *Cloud Atlas* (2003), and *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010) challenge readers instead to look beyond human conceptions of time, whether individual or generational, and renarrate visions of a future that moves beyond the cyclical relation of past to present. Through their experimental forms of narrative, these novels attempt the theoretical project of unmuddling what Elissa Marder has called the various "temporal disorders" of modernism and postmodernism (Marder 6). Out of this nest of tangled temporalities, Mitchell attempts to tease out the thread of a highly organized, forward-moving metanarrative that suggests linear progress towards an unknowable, unfathomably distant telos.

*"Dispersed in clouds..."*

It is, of course, impossible to invoke the idea of "metanarrative" without calling forth Jean-François Lyotard's infamously simple definition of the postmodern condition as "an incredulity towards metanarrative" (Lyotard xxiv). I will take up Lyotard's claims about the periodization of the modern and the postmodern in the final section of this chapter; for now, however, I will begin with the simple but provocative gesture beyond this definition that I read in Mitchell's work. On a purely formal level, Mitchell is highly invested in the construction of grand narratives in the realm of fiction, as evidenced by his claim that his novels together comprise a massive "macronovel" (Mason, "David Mitchell, The Experimentalist"). Rather than viewing his novels, which appear to be – and indeed, are most often read as – independent works, Mitchell's description of his oeuvre encourages readers to reorganize its elements into a single, superlatively complex, multi-stranded cable of narrative. Felicitously relevant to this reconfigured notion of the "macronovel" is Lyotard's evocative description in *The Postmodern Condition* of a cosmic scene in which narrative function "is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements" (Lyotard xxiv). Mitchell's project, through its interest in reinstating a belief in a kind of inevitable, though unknowable master narrative, happily recalls Lyotard's statement; his recurring fascination, made most evident with the eponymous image of the *Cloud Atlas*, with the seemingly irrational, impossible attempt to map the clouds echoes Lyotard's image of dispersed narratives that constantly shift and refuse to remain static for long enough to decipher obscured meanings. While Lyotard poses this as the primary condition of the postmodern, post-metanarrative phase he describes, Mitchell seems to see a kind of mad possibility in the effort to create a map of these narrative clouds. His novel(s) abound in overlapping patterns and uncanny repetitions, suggesting unknowable, but by no means

nonexistent, cosmic alignments. Though he repeatedly refuses to render any hidden master narrative clearly visible, the connections and clues that appear across his novels all suggest that some ultimate pattern might be found in ethereal drift of these proliferating narrative elements, beyond the limited sight of any mere human reader, and even beyond the sight of Mitchell, the self-consciously limited human author, himself.<sup>1</sup> While, as Zachry, one of Mitchell's six interrelated protagonists in *Cloud Atlas* observes, "Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an' tho' a cloud's shape nor hue nor size don't stay the same, it's still a cloud an' so is a soul," the novel maintains a conspicuous silence on the rhetorical question that follows: "*Who can say* where the cloud's blowed from or who the soul'll be 'morrow?..." (*Cloud Atlas* 308, italics are mine). Mitchell's novel suggests that we have as little control over our circumstances as we do over the weather; and all we can do, as a result is try and see the patterns written in them. As historian Richard Hamblyn muses in *The Invention of Clouds*,

...meteorology is not an exact science. It is, rather, a search for narrative order among events governed not by laws alone but by the shapeless caprices of the atmosphere. Weather writes, erases, and rewrites itself upon the sky with the endless fluidity of language; and it is with language that we have sought throughout history to apprehend it. Since the sky has always been more real than measured, it has always been the province of words. (Hamblyn 17)

It is natural, Hamblyn suggests, to associate the clouds with "the endless fluidity of language," as Lyotard does, but the more challenging impulse to find *narrative order* in seeming chaos seems to be the cosmic imperative that Mitchell's novels pursue relentlessly.

With regards to Mitchell's position as a human novelist dealing with more-than-human concepts of narrative, it is advantageous to add another grand, abstract image to Lyotard's ever-shifting clouds. In *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* (2010), Blakey Vermeule sketches out the idea of the "God-novelist." When in doubt, she claims, this fortunate figure – exemplified for her by Fielding – can always call upon higher powers to work things out, and furthermore, he can "unselfconsciously activate many of the mental mechanisms associated with religious beliefs." In addition to this fortuitous sense of certitude, the novelist provides the players, a cast of palpably human "lively characters rendered in delicious detail" (Vermeule 129). In Vermeule's view, these elements together construct "a complex organism, a moral sorting mechanism that offers a measure of challenge, adjustment, and hydraulic suspense in order to distribute social information in the

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<sup>1</sup> This idea of a narrative so vast it is unreadable to the human consciousness resonates with Timothy Morton's ecological/philosophical concept of the "hyperobject," which he defines as, "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans," and characterizes with four essential properties: "they are *viscous*, which means that they 'stick' to beings that are involved with them. They are *nonlocal*; in other words, any 'local manifestation' of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject. They involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to... Hyperobjects occupy a high-dimensional phase space that results in their being invisible to humans for stretches of time. And they exhibit their effects *interobjectively*; that is, they can be detected in a space that consists of interrelationships between aesthetic properties of objects" (Morton 1). Morton assigns this moniker to things as varied as a black hole, or Styrofoam, or the effects of capitalism. We might, with some literary rethinking (intertextually, instead of "interobjectively"?), perhaps view Mitchell's macronovel as a kind of textual hyperobject that extends beyond the idea of text itself.

most psychologically fascinating way” (Vermeule 130). The “God-novelist” not only falls back on divine providence as a plot mechanism (with capital-G God himself moonlighting as the ultimate *deus ex machina*), but also as a model for the novelist, who, in God’s own image, constructs a role for himself that is not only omniscient but omnipotent within the diegetic world of the novel; it is the novelist who works the gears and pulleys of the “moral sorting mechanism” that an assumed common belief in a Christian God provides him with.

Of course, today’s readers and writers are two and a half centuries removed from Fielding, and the utter confidence in divine authority that allowed him to function as the exemplary God-novelist no longer dominates Western intellectual culture. Nonetheless, recent innovations in the contemporary novel demonstrate that a writer no longer needs “God” as we know Him to aspire to God-novelist status. Though Vermeule contends, via the example of Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, that it is impossible to be a God-novelist in our contemporary, agnostic moment, I argue that Mitchell’s novels reassert the possibility of a new kind of God novel, or more specifically, a variant on the God novel given a makeover for a post-God age. Through the conspicuous evacuation of an overarching authorial voice, Mitchell attempts to reintroduce the concept of an exterior power in his novels—explicitly, one that is interested in the construction of a more-than-human grand narrative. Mitchell’s work, like the work of the God-novelist before him, relies upon the idea of *something else* out there; his novels zoom out from the human perspective and outline a blank, negative space for an undefined other force. However, unlike the examples of the nineteenth century and before, Mitchell does not (and simply *cannot*) assume that his readers will fill this space with the conventional notion of a paternalistic, Judeo-Christian God. Rather, this God-shaped hole is left obtrusively and sometimes uncomfortably vacant; Mitchell’s world is overseen by an unseen narrative consciousness, whose principle driving force seems not to be the old-fashioned demand for moral rectitude, but rather, the more complex demand for further plot development towards some unknowable and distant, possibly post-human denouement.

Mitchell’s work is thus exemplary of a very contemporary trend in literary fiction that attempts to re-open a space for a belief in a kind of narrative that is, for lack of a better word, religious and faith-based, though the “faith” in question has little to do with conventional understandings of religious belief.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the narrative-obsessed, vague religiosity implied by reading Mitchell’s body of work is closer to the abstract, highly literary definition Jean Ellen Petrolle offers in *Religion Without Belief*:

Religiosity itself is the impulse to create symbolic frameworks for ordering and interpreting vast expanses of phenomena and experiences – coupled with the impulse to perceive either symbolic frameworks or experience itself with a sense of numinousness or awe... Obviously, these are processes that touch every human endeavor, but particularly the creation and consumption of fiction. (Petrolle 6)

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<sup>2</sup> Another example from another medium is the 2004-2009 reboot of the television series *Battlestar Galactica*, which reimagines the overt Christian themes of the original series through a more abstract, narrative-focused lens. The abstraction of belief in these texts is particularly intriguing compared to an oppositional direction in contemporary popular culture over the last decade (particularly in the American context), the marked reemergence of a hyper-conservative fundamentalist Christian subculture. For another perspective on this relationship, see “Cause or Cure? Postmodernism and Religious Fundamentalism” in Jean Ellen Petrolle’s *Religion Without Belief: Contemporary Allegory and the Search for Postmodern Faith*.



This continuing theme of narrative system-building across Mitchell's novels is by nature negatively depicted, and, even after his prolific output of five novels in the last twelve years, it results in a curious blank space where readers are accustomed to seeing a consistently recognizable author figure emerge. This puzzling authorial vacancy in relation to his profusion of ventriloquistic, mimetic narratives has caused concern for some critics that is summarized in *Guardian* book reviewer Christopher Tayler's query: "Does [Mitchell] have a vision and voice of his own, or is he more of a mashup artist, a maker of structurally ingenious page-turners?" Tayler immediately dismisses this interesting issue, admitting that the sheer readability and exuberance of Mitchell's novels "make such questions seem churlish as well as simple-minded" (Tayler, rev. of *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*). In my reading, however, this odd mystery of persona—the God-shaped, as well as author-shaped hole—is central to the overarching project of his novels. The sheer multitude of intertwining but autonomous "I's" in Mitchell's work and the unending connections between them point to the foggy existence of a grand narrative that we can never discern completely, no matter how many times we read and reread his novels. Mitchell himself implies that a transcendent sense of metanarrative is inherent in his work: in his interview for *The Paris Review*, he asks rhetorically, "Is there such a thing as overreading? Just because it wasn't part of my grand design doesn't mean it isn't there. Things do happen in books that the writer is too submersed in bringing the narrative to life to notice. To put it a little pretentiously, *Cloud Atlas* is a novel about whose echoes, eddies, and cross-references even its author possesses only an imperfect knowledge" (Mitchell, "The Art of Fiction"). Mitchell's glib mention of his "imperfect knowledge" of his own "grand design" might remind us of the Lyotardian grand narrative, just as his claim, mentioned earlier, that his work constitutes a massive "macronovel" suggests a kind of macrocosmic literary metanarrative.<sup>3</sup>

These offhand suggestions, along with the carefully crafted connections within Mitchell's novels, hint at the possibility of the reinvented, twenty-first century God-novel. While, as Vermeule comments, "the most ancient and universal experience of God is that he is a moralist... Gods and spirits may be omniscient, but in practice, they are mainly interested in moral questions," this curious central vacancy in Mitchell's works suggests something else (Vermeule 146). Mitchell's unseen non-God is a mysterious storyteller who relates an unknowable metanarrative to unknown listeners, whose interest in human morality seems primarily to be bound up in the ways in which our moral failings keep us from making narrative progress. His cyclical narratives of human failure depict a frustrating evolutionary loop, in which human flaws (greed and solipsism on a phylogenic level) are obstacles to linear narrative progress. The exteriority of the novelistic viewpoint itself, however, coming as it does from a central vacancy—a kind of no-place or nobody—suggests that learning through repetition in order to somehow undo this narrative loop, might make it possible to continue on a trajectory towards some unimaginable, post-human historical telos.

*"Souls cross the skies 'o time": Relinquishing the human body*

This negative depiction of the "God," or rather, the amorphous *not*-God of the Mitchellian universe is markedly different from the moralizing father figure of Vermeule's God-novel, as well as from the oppositional figure of the human novelist-as-god in an exemplary postmodern novel like John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Fowles

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<sup>3</sup> One might view Mitchell's macronovel as an experimental descendant of Balzac's *Comédie Humaine*; perhaps Mitchell's project falls somewhere between Balzac's human comedy and Dante's divine one.

places particular emphasis on the shifting relationship between God and the novelist; the postmodern novel as Fowles sees it rejects the Fielding model of God as authority and “moral sorting mechanism,” and instead insists that the novel for the atheistic age of the late twentieth century is one in which “there is no intervening god beyond whatever can be seen, in that way, in [evolutionary processes and random mutation]; thus only life as we have, within our hazard-given abilities, made it ourselves, life as Marx defined it – *the actions of men* (and of women) *in pursuit of their ends* (Fowles 466). Thus, with the disappearance of God, the God-novelist is necessarily phased out and replaced with something else—an omniscient but *human* narrator, something more akin to a would-be novelist-god, in the rather unsavory pursuit of *his* own ends. This emphasis on human empowerment and human embodiment (rather than divine transcendence) is exemplified by the unsettling physical manifestation of the novelist in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*; one need only refer to Fowles’ photograph in the back of the book to confirm that it is not simply any blank “author” figure appears out of the ether, but a character who is John Fowles himself. This insertion of the novelist’s physical body in the text recalls Fredric Jameson’s brief but pithy reference in *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* to postmodernism’s quasi-pornographic tendency towards “a reduction to the body,”<sup>4</sup> a resonance played out further when Fowles’ novelist-character unleashes a penetrating gaze that suggests “something unpleasant, some kind of devious sexual approach” (Fowles 405).

This uncomfortable physical objectification of the previously divinely-aligned figure of the author – removed from the aegis of any long-dead divine Author – suggests that the relationships that govern the world can be reduced to the often sordid interactions of human beings with each other, and the non-recyclable physical detritus that one age leaves for the next. Fowles’ all-too-human author figure, however, seeks to retain the authoritarian qualities of the earlier, divinely validated God-novelist, all the while claiming that he renounces them. It is this postmodern understanding of the morally dubious, hypocritical novelist-god over which McEwan perseverates in *Atonement* (2001). In her analysis of the novel, Vermeule deftly uncovers the quandary of having God-novelist proclivities in the midst of not only a modern, but a *modernist* world, (for notably, the central character, Briony Tallis, experiences her artistic epiphany in 1935); Briony is revealed to be “a morally worried atheist” who realizes that “a modernist aesthetic... is incompatible with a moral point of view” (Vermeule 135). Vermeule’s account gestures towards the true quandary of the end of *Atonement*: Briony, the worried atheist, is simultaneously concerned and relieved by the fact that, as far as she is concerned,

...with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, [the novelist] is also God... There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt is all. (McEwan 371)

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<sup>4</sup>Other possible examples of this postmodern tendency that spring readily to mind, outside Jameson’s original reference to the *nouveau roman*, include the grotesque physicality of Bret Easton Ellis’ or Cormac McCarthy’s novels, or the comically allegorical qualities of Salman Rushdie’s magical realist bodies, such as the epic nose of Saleem Sinai in *Midnight’s Children*.

Briony's self-exculpating claim that "the attempt is all" cannot possibly understand the fact that, in this novel, there *is* an exterior entity – an Author to her author—that passes judgment on her.

This judging outsider is, of course, McEwan himself, who smites the elderly Briony with the diagnosis of dementia, a singularly appropriate fate for this controlling would-be God-novelist. McEwan ultimately leaves the door open to the possibility of this exterior judgment. He enacts his role as a proper Fowlesian, postmodern novelist-god, capable of manipulating his characters and his readers to no end, but by betraying his own vulnerability as an author through Briony's punishment, he also exposes a markedly un-Fowlesian anxiety that a God or godlike force exists outside the jurisdiction of the author—the very inverse of Briony's concern. The image that ultimately emerges from McEwan's novel is one of endless outward replication; the morally-worried atheist and would-be God-novelist, Briony, is thwarted by morally-worried, possibly believing novelist-god, McEwan, whose enactment of this punishment betrays his own fear of retribution for novelistic crimes from some next-order authority (or Authority). This outward expansion of responsibility, I argue, does not simply leave readers stranded at an endpoint of both God-novelists and novelist-gods,<sup>5</sup> but reopens the possibility of a new kind of atheistic (but notably not agnostic) God-novelist—a role adventurously taken on by Mitchell. If McEwan seems uncomfortable in the human body of the novelist-god that Fowles so gleefully inhabited, then Mitchell goes a step further and evacuates it completely. This rejection of the postmodern obsession with human embodiment reveals itself across Mitchell's novels in various, sometimes curious ways. By giving up the clear, often obtrusive sense of authorial individuality and subjectivity that we see in both Fowles and McEwan and many of their respective contemporaries, the author-shaped hole that Mitchell shiftily inhabits seems to indicate a fundamental alteration in narrative perspective.

In Mitchell's work, I identify something new and distinctly separate from the concerns that motivated the postmodern novel as outlined above, in the impetus to critically reexamine the possibility of something beyond the bodily processes of human life – on the most basic level, proliferation and consumption. Committing fully to the same outward movement that McEwan only tentatively undertakes at the end of *Atonement*, Mitchell's disembodied, expansive narratives demand a widening of perspective to accommodate a cosmic bird's-eye-view of humanity as a mere component of the world, rather than its center.<sup>6</sup> This shift from occupying the human body to an exterior, as yet unknowable and abstract perspective plays out in Mitchell's treatment of the many diverse first-person perspectives his varied narratives inhabit. Unlike the limiting "reduction to the body" that Jameson observes, Mitchell's novels, by contrast, are interested in the concept of embodiment, but markedly not in the *experience* of being embodied. Rather than concretely planting a charismatic authorial consciousness within a sexualized, unpleasantly human body of the postmodern novelist-god like Fowles does, Mitchell lightly hopscotches from body to

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<sup>5</sup> Nor does it exactly replicate the theoretical life or death of the Author-God that Roland Barthes so famously invokes in "The Death of the Author."

<sup>6</sup> Again, it is useful to consider Mitchell in relation to the tradition of speculative (science) fiction that he clearly draws from. While science fiction authors have long proposed various models of humanity as part of a larger scheme (either evolutionary or mystical), they frequently sketch out the dynamics of the latter, often in unsatisfactory and unlikely ways. Mitchell's total reticence on this matter, however, makes his work stand out as something new and innovative.

body, both in the multiple first-person narrative form of *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*, and in the recurring trope of the transmigration of souls. On the rare occasions when Mitchell's prose lingers on physical description, readers are surprised and perhaps even taken aback, so much so that these moments stick out uncomfortably long after a first reading – examples that spring to this particular reader's mind are the brief but gut-wrenching description of a dismembered cat in *Ghostwritten*, the human abattoir scene of *Cloud Atlas*, or the gruesome scene of breech birth that occurs in the opening chapter of *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*.

Even in these rare moments, though, the narration still refuses to fully inhabit the physical, feeling bodies it describes; rather, the first-person narrators of these scenes are onlookers, whose experiences are those of horrified witnesses, not victims.<sup>7</sup> The physical experience produced is thus a second-order one; rather than channeling the immediacy of bodily pain, Mitchell's characters telegraph affective, *readerly* responses such as shock, horror, pity, disgust. Notably, these rare moments of physical description are primarily ones of exceptional violence, in which the grotesquely absurd insufficiency of the human body as a vessel for the soul is made painstakingly clear. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the birth scene that opens *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*. As Orito, a midwife, decides whether or not she can deliver the breech birth and save both mother and child, she recalls a medical engraving from “that enlightened and barbaric realm, Europe.” The engraving, reproduced for us in the novel, depicts a horrifyingly contorted fetus, and the instructions that accompany it (the doctor may “saw off the arm, rotate the fetus, insert crotchets into the eye sockets, and extract the whole body, headfirst”) emphasize the paradoxically inhumane and sadistic demands of the human body (*Thousand Autumns* 5). The result of this episode is that both child and mother miraculously survive the birth, despite the best efforts of the body itself to thwart life. The reversed nature of the breech birth – the physical backwards orientation of the child, as well as its miraculously reversed trajectory of death (stillbirth) preceding birth, a notion also highlighted in Mitchell's continuing interest in reincarnation – further emphasizes the unnatural and absurd qualities of embodiment.

Tellingly, one of the most directly physical moments of Mitchell's novels is the eerie first sentence of *Ghostwritten*, in which the narrator asks, “Who was blowing on the nape of my neck?” (Mitchell, *Ghostwritten* 3). It's a question that remains unanswered throughout the book, even when it recurs at the end of the novel; prolific readers of Mitchell's work might have the uncomfortable suspicion that whoever is blowing on the back of the narrator's neck may well be the same mysterious, unseen not-God, not-author (but God-like, author-like) figure orchestrating the multivalent profusion of narratives that connect with each other not only within this novel, but across all of his works. For the most part, however, Mitchell's novels are oddly, sometimes surprisingly *disembodied*, and even the many seductions of a hyper-sexual character like *Cloud Atlas*'s musical Lothario, Robert Frobisher, are described through his epistolary narration from a frank but sardonic distance.<sup>8</sup> If anything,

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<sup>7</sup> A.S. Byatt notes this tendency in her review of *Cloud Atlas* for *The Guardian*, reading Mitchell's use of the word “partition” “in both its musical and fencing sense, to make a distance between us and the tense dramas and horrors he describes, to make us see everything” (Byatt, “Overlapping Lives”).

<sup>8</sup> Frobisher's many romantic misadventures are never described in graphic terms; instead, they are written as comic interludes in his letters to his distanced, and thus physically unreachable lover, Rufus Sixsmith. Characteristic of this tone is his casual announcement to Sixsmith that, “Summer has taken

embodiment in Mitchell's world is oppressive, and the overabundance of bodies is reflected morbidly in Frobisher's observation that the post-World War I Belgian landscape is marked by the grotesque "density of men in the ground"—searching for his brother's unmarked grave in a soldier's cemetery, he has the claustrophobic feeling that "the air was stuffy as if the sky were sealing us in" (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 440,441). Rather than focusing on enunciating the physical and the sensory, as Jameson suggests the postmodern novel does, Mitchell fixates instead on the absurd impossibility of human essence being tied to human flesh.

The uniqueness of Mitchell's admittedly odd and sometimes inconsistent approach to embodiment is rendered clearer with comparison to an earlier claim of Jameson's, from his 1984 essay, "Third World Literature in The Era of Multinational Capitalism." In a recent talk on "The Aesthetics of Singularity," Jameson commented that the "imprisonment in the present" characteristic of postmodernism that he describes in the latter essay, among other places, is commensurate to the "reduction to the body" referred to in *Postmodernism* (Jameson, "Third World Literature" 66). Both of these highly evocative phrases create a specific image of the postmodern subjectivity, which is, they suggest, bound up restrictively in both the dangerously de-historicized "now" of the present moment, and in the limited, individualized physical "here" of the body. Mitchell's emphasis on the ephemeral, arbitrary nature of embodiment pushes against both of these prioritized but unsatisfactory states.<sup>9</sup> "Now," in *Cloud Atlas*, is an ever-shifting point of reference, as is "here"; readers shift from body to body as Mitchell's multiple narratives in the novel unexpectedly give way to one another.<sup>10</sup> The resultant sense of movement between bodies creates a certain lightness and a thrilling vertigo in Mitchell's readers, as we are asked to follow our unquenchable desire for narrative itself (in the sense of movement through stories), rather than relying upon consistent identification with particular characters or settings, through the novel.<sup>11</sup>

Mitchell's emphasis on the limitations of the body is reflected not only in his individual plotlines, but also in the allegorical scope of his novels. A reader of Jameson's "Third World Literature" will recall that the essay highlights the imperative for

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a sensuous turn: Ayr's wife and I are lovers. Don't alarm yourself! Only in the carnal sense" (*Cloud Atlas* 68).

<sup>9</sup> In this sense, Mitchell's treatment of the body reflects the influence of an earlier, questionably "postmodern" novel, Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983); there, as we recall from Chapter 2, Swift reminds us of the inanity of trusting in the here and now of human bodies and human time, for, "...the Here and Now, which brings both joy and terror, comes but rarely—does not come even when we call it... We are one-tenth living tissue, nine-tenths water; life is one-tenth Here and Now, nine-tenths a history lesson. For most of the time the Here and Now is neither now nor here" (Swift 61).

<sup>10</sup> A brief note on *Cloud Atlas*' structure: the novel is comprised of six separate narratives, which interrupt each other in historical sequence. In which fragments of each narrative move forward in time before completing themselves in reverse order: a nineteenth century diary is followed by a series of post-World War I letters, a 1970s crime novel, a contemporary (early 2000s) literary adventure, a near-future dystopia, and finally, the unbroken central narrative of a distant, post-apocalyptic future. The sections are respectively titled as follows: "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing," "Letters from Zedelghem," "Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery," "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish," "An Orison of Sonmi-451," and "Sloosha's Crossin' and Everythin' After."

<sup>11</sup> Given the fact that Mitchell's inspiration for *Cloud Atlas* was Italo Calvino's vertigo-obsessed *If on a winter's night a traveler*, this feeling of constant movement and exciting disorientation is unsurprising.

underrepresented countries and literatures to offer “national allegory,” in which “*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society*” (Jameson 69). The example that Jameson invokes is Lu Xun’s *Diary of a Madman* (1918), in which an individual tale of cannibalism clearly stands in for the particular circumstances of the economic and cultural desperation of post-imperial China. Coincidentally, cannibalism is also Mitchell’s favorite allegorical trope, which he has referred to as one of the “indestructible whack-a-moles” of his thematic landscape, but unlike Jameson’s national allegorical example, he chooses to enact this theme in diverse, multiplicitous ways across both *Cloud Atlas* and the body of his work as a whole (Mitchell, “The Art of Fiction”). Rather than solidly inhabiting a specific set of national political conditions, Mitchell’s recurring obsession with the moral and philosophical offense of cannibalism, which seems metaphorically to reflect the error of the postmodern bodily fixation, acts as a kind of fluid, *global* allegory: the wrongness of the anthropophagite’s belief that he can absorb the power or essence of the victim through eating his flesh is a recurrent trope in Mitchell’s work, through which he attempts to depict a repeating flaw in human nature, unlimited by particular circumstances of time or place. This expansive use of allegory recalls Petrolle’s theory of postmodern allegory, which, she asserts, reconnects it as a mode of both writing and reading with the “religious, theological, or metaphysical speculation intrinsic to the form”; she goes on to assert that contemporary allegorical literature explores “the loss of ontological certainty – experienced as a diminishing faith in the realness and relevance of the body, everyday private experience, community, and the earth, as well as a diminishing faith in the trustworthiness of language and story to convey meaning” (Petrolle 9). Mitchell’s implied use of allegory aligns felicitously with Petrolle’s definition up until its final clause. As discussed above, his shifting narratives express a discontent – or more strongly, a marked repugnance – for the conditions of human embodiment. However, his continuing obsession with detangling the narrative-producing soul from the meaningless body implies something very different about the potential of narrative to “convey meaning.” Cannibalism and reading, in fact, are directly framed as opposing forms of human interaction, and his novels present the struggle between eaters of bodies and readers of books over and over again.

### *Consuming Bodies, Consuming Narratives*

The cannibal is immediately foregrounded as the central allegorical figure of *Cloud Atlas*. There, the villainous Dr. Henry Goose’s motto, “The weak are meat the strong do eat” is proven to be true not only on the metaphorical political and economic level that Goose ostensibly intends, but also in very literal terms. Goose himself is framed from the first page of the novel as an imperial inheritor of the cannibal tradition—his initial appearance artfully perverts an earlier iconic image of the “civilized” Englishman on foreign shores:

Beyond the Indian hamlet, upon a forlorn strand, I happened on a trail of recent footprints. Through rotting kelp, sea cocoa-huts & bamboo, the tracks led me to their maker, a White man, his trowsers & Pea-jacket rolled up, sporting a kempt beard & an outsized Beaver, shoveling & sifting the cindery sand with a teaspoon so

intently that he noticed me only after I had hailed him from ten yards away. (*Cloud Atlas* 3)

This image of footprints on a beach, of course, summons up the most iconic footprint of literary history. Rather than identifying the stray Englishman with the morally-concerned Robinson Crusoe, however, Mitchell's invocation of Defoe's hero aligns Goose, the incongruous "White Man" found here, with the cannibal aggressors that Crusoe so fears. Mitchell goes further in his association of Goose with the threat of cannibalism; in this scene of discovery, the malevolent doctor is caught in the act of digging up "human gnashers" left over from earlier days, when "this Arcadian strand was a cannibals' banqueting hall, yes, where the strong engorged themselves on the weak. The teeth, they spat out, as you or I would expel cherry stones" (*Cloud Atlas* 3). This scene again mirrors Defoe, who depicts Crusoe's horror at discovering a beach "spread with skulls, hands, feet and other bones of human bodies... where it is suppos'd the savage wretches had sat down to their inhuman feastings upon the bodies of their fellow-creatures" (Defoe 122). Tellingly, however, it is the supposedly civilized Englishman who is framed as a reincarnation of the "savage wretches" in Mitchell's account; Goose's intent to sell these scavenged teeth for both economic gain and petty personal retribution makes him the heir to the tradition of vicious human consumption that he so gleefully describes. Goose's rapacity makes clear the link between the real acts of cannibalism, the remains of which he sifts through on the beach, and the continuing cannibalistic consumption of humans through the violent, market-driven ethics of imperial expansion.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, Goose's dyadic opposite, Adam Ewing, is both an avid reader and a writer (the narrative Mitchell provides is Ewing's "Pacific Diary"), whose narrative curiosity is matched and motivated by his human compassion.

Cannibalism and its innate opposition to reading continues as a recurring theme throughout *Cloud Atlas*, and returns as the central figure in the two alternating narratives at the novel's heart: "An Orison of Sonmi-451" and "Sloosha's Crossin' and Everythin' After." The section that directly precedes Sonmi's, "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish," playfully reminds readers of the continuing theme of cannibalism as the eponymous narrator, protesting his rage against the system in a sadistic nursing home, yells out, "Soylent Green is people!" (*CA* 177). Cavendish's ironic allusion to the denouement of the campy cannibal-centric dystopian future film *Soylent Green* (1973) quickly loses its humor when it is revealed to reflect the unironic truth of Sonmi's future world. The link between economic greed and human consumption is most clearly articulated in Sonmi's world, a corpocracy (a term that reminds us of the connection between the capitalist "corporation" and "*corpus*," the human body) in which human clones are first mass-produced as both slaves, then, in another nod to *Soylent Green*, recycled as the food source for the alienated, market-dominated human population. The resistance offered in this narrative, as it always does in the novel, comes in the form of narrative; the *Declarations* of the aptly-numbered Sonmi-451 are publicized and denounced as blasphemies against the corpocratic order, but actually succeed in spreading the seeds of enlightened rebellion.

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<sup>12</sup> It is also notable, of course, that Mitchell's position as a "first world," English writer deeply concerned with what Jameson's dated essay refers to as "third world" conditions – those brought on by imperialism and its continuing after-effects – is attempting a project that extends beyond the national, to a global (or cosmic?) scope.

Finally, following the implicit implosion of this totally unnatural, cannibalistic society, Mitchell cycles back to the primitive images that clearly echo those of the Ewing narrative, in the vicious, man-eat-man pre-modern society of the post-apocalyptic distant future described by Zachry, the narrator of “Sloosha’s Crossin’.” In this farthest-distant future world, Hawaii is one of the only remaining livable spaces on an otherwise blasted planet, and its suggestively rewritten name, “Ha-Why” implicitly demands that readers ask how and why humanity arrived back at this limited primitive state.<sup>13</sup> There, the clash between Zachry’s peaceful society, the Valleymen, and the rapacious, cannibalistic Kona clearly reproduces the conflict between the cannibal Maori and the peaceful Moriori that prefigures the novel’s opening narrative, “Adam Ewing’s Pacific Journal,” where we initially encounter Goose and his quest for commodified cannibal “gnashers.” Again, the only suggestion of hope resides in narrative forms: in the pictographic ancestral icons that the Valleymen worship (which recall the Moriori dendroglyphs that Ewing accidentally discovers), in a holographic recording of Sonmi, rendered incomprehensible by the passage of time, and Zachry’s first-person survivor’s tale. However, as I will discuss later, none of these narrative forms offer the clear possibility of salvation from the historical cycle that Mitchell enacts. This thematic loop mirrors *Cloud Atlas*’ circular narrative structure, in which the novel moves forward in time, then reverses, returning to each of the past moments before ending back where it started, with the idealistic, scholarly Adam Ewing and the savage Dr. Goose. The novel might be seen to thus enact both processes of reading (the forward movement of the first half of the novel) and eating (the backwards, self-consuming second half), leaving its readers in an uncomfortable tension between the two.

Another depiction of cannibalism is rather idiosyncratically found at the core of Mitchell’s most recent work, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010). The novel’s villain, the powerful Abbot Enomoto, is revealed not only to be a personal and political manipulator par excellence, but also the leader of an obscure cult that believes in imbibing the “essence of souls” derived from acts of child sacrifice. Though the details of this horrific practice are shrouded in arcane mystery in *Thousand Autumns*, unlike the brief but graphic depictions of human slaughter and mutilation found in *Cloud Atlas*, it plays an equally central role. While the novel appears to conform to the generic concerns of the conventional historical romance, *Thousand Autumns* ultimately continues to work through Mitchell’s central obsession, the tension between violent human self-consumption and historical or philosophical – or in the more abstract sense, *narrative* – progress. More than any of Mitchell’s earlier novels, *Thousand Autumns* clearly articulates the polar opposite of cannibalistic hunger: the spiritual hunger for narrative. Over and over again, writing, reading, and storytelling appear as substitutes for acts of physical satiation. Early on, the young clerk Jacob de Zoet, the novel’s protagonist, refers to ink as the “most fecund of liquids,” leading readers into a metaphor that extends throughout the novel, the idea that people are better nourished by books and stories than by physical consumption (Mitchell, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* 13).

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<sup>13</sup> An alternate reading of this name, “Ha! Why?” might mock the reader’s impulse to seek out an answer to the unanswerable central question of the novel: what makes humans so predatory?



Along those lines, Dr. Marinus, de Zoet's preternaturally wise mentor,<sup>14</sup> dryly comments that "the printed word is food" and Jacob "look[s] hungry," a sign that they, as like-minded connoisseurs of text, can break metaphorical bread together (*Thousand Autumns* 145).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Jacob's other meaningful relationships in Japan (with his love interest, the scholarly midwife, Orito, and the young interpreter, Ogawa) are built around textual communication; for Jacob and Orito, unspoken and physically unconsummated feelings are expressed most eloquently through the gift of a rare Dutch-Japanese dictionary. While Abbot Enomoto is also a scholar, all of his learning is in the service of a selfish goal: the acquisition of both physical and spiritual power, through his dual quests for political influence and magical invincibility. Furthermore, under his direction, the corrupt monks of his monastery commit a textual transgression that complements their most egregious crimes of child sacrifice and cannibalism; they forge letters to the unaware mothers of their victims, covering up their sect's grotesque rituals of infanticide with a kind of elaborate literary hoax. Through the opposition of the heroic readers of books (Jacob, Marinus, Orito, and Ogawa) to the greedy and deranged eaters of human flesh (Abbot Enomoto and his monks) Mitchell repeatedly emphasizes a fundamental opposition between storytelling as idealized spiritual sharing and cannibalism as ultimate physical theft; the relation of the ideal reader to the text is an amatory one, while that of the eater to the eaten can be nothing but predatory. Looking back, we can also see this suggestion sketched out in less overt ways in Mitchell's earlier work, particularly in *Cloud Atlas*, as the readers in that novel express our own powerful desire for the story to continue; as the sexually insatiable Robert Frobisher impatiently claims upon discovering that his copy of Ewing's journal is incomplete, "a half-finished novel is an half-finished love affair" (*Cloud Atlas* 64). It is that very feeling of unconsummated readerly desire that we feel increasingly as the book skips from one "half-finished" narrative to the next. When the book makes its turn at "Sloosha's Crossin'" and begins to complete the half-stories one by one, its yearning readers eagerly rush to meet the endings as they accumulate, forming what A.S. Byatt calls "a complete narrative pleasure that is rare" in her review of the novel (Byatt, "Overlapping Lives").

Intriguingly, bodies themselves, when considered beyond the limited trappings of desire and consumption, also become blank pages that can be inscribed with a kind of mystical shorthand. In *Cloud Atlas*, for example, characters in five out of six of the sections share a physical imprint that crosses time and space, a comet-shaped birthmark between shoulder and collarbone, marking each of them as manifestations of the same transmigrating soul. Notably, the narrator of the only section lacking this textual marker, Timothy Cavendish, cantankerously comments that he also has a birthmark – but it ungracefully blemishes his armpit and resembles a "turd" more than a comet (CA 357).<sup>16</sup> The comet

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<sup>14</sup> Regarding Marinus' wisdom, Mitchell comments in *The Paris Review* (perhaps seriously, perhaps not) that Marinus is "wiser than his creator. Readers... don't know it, but in *Thousand Autumns*, he's on his twenty-eighth lifetime" (Mitchell, "The Art of Fiction")

<sup>15</sup> In her introduction to the recent collection, *David Mitchell: Critical Essays*, Sarah Dillon also briefly notes this "hunger" in relation to our own appetites as contemporary readers, which makes us, she claims, eminently receptive to the "feast" of literary devices that Mitchell lays before us (Dillon 18-19)

<sup>16</sup> Tangentially, though, careful readers of *Ghostwritten* may recall that the comet-shaped birthmark appears on Katy Forbes, a character distantly connected to Cavendish through his brother Denholme, her ex-husband's employer. This is just one typically Mitchellian string of intertextual

birthmark implies that physical traits, in Mitchell's world, are more indicative of some kind of unknown mystical heredity, rather than biological processes; whatever force inhabits the God-shaped hole of Mitchell's narratives seems to trump the physical and scientific realities of life on earth. In a more abstract fashion, the two protagonists of *Thousand Autumns* are also marked by the "textual" qualities of their bodies, which different onlookers "read" in different ways. Jacob himself is a keen critic of his own text; looking in a mirror, he notes that "when shaving... a man reads his truest memoir" (*Thousand Autumns* 59). Orito's face is marred by severe scarring, which reads as a damning mark of undesirability and exclusion by some, but conversely, as a sign of intriguing difference by Jacob, who sees her as "a book whose cover fascinates, and in whose pages I desire to look a little" (*Thousand Autumns* 62).

Jacob's own flaming red hair is also a kind of textual marker, signaling first his unnatural and foreign nature to the Japanese people he meets, but alternately interpreted as a symbol of a far-away home for Captain Penhaligon, a British naval officer in charge of evicting the Dutch characters (employees of the bankrupted Dutch East India Company) from their station at the Japanese port of Nagasaki. Penhaligon's "reading" of Jacob's red hair—reminiscent of his dead son's—is powerful enough that the Englishman disobeys his orders and leaves the Dutch holdouts unharmed, another testament to the narrative-making power of the body when viewed as an unconventional *text* open to individual interpretation, rather than flesh to be consumed. While the voyeuristic implications of the act of "reading" another person (particularly in the case of Jacob's interpretation of Orito) might seem to suggest a somewhat uncomfortable relationship between these two opposed modes of consumption, the marked contrast between non-violent, contemplative nature of Jacob's reading (both of people and of texts) and Abbot Enomoto's rapacious, consuming gaze, "ferocious with intelligence," under which Jacob cringes, "as little able to evade the man's gaze as a book can, of its own volition, evade the scrutiny of the reader" actually makes their difference apparent (*TA* 45). Here, we might further refine the opposition between the gentle reader and the cannibalistic eater; the former reads for the pleasure of learning and the excitement of following a narrative arc, while the latter, represented by the Abbot, reads only in order to gain further power—that is to say, in order to "eat" all the more and thus prolong the self-consuming cycle of human greed.

Considering these opposing perspectives on the human body, one has to wonder: is it preferable, in Mitchell's world, to be sublimated into a textual body? The inverse the idea that people are texts can be found in the suggestion that human essence can also linger in actual text, rather than bodies—for example, the mystical power of Jacob's family psalter in *Thousand Autumns*, or the repeating image of the carved ancestral icons in the "Adam Ewing" and "Sloosha's Crossin'" sections of *Cloud Atlas*. We see this impulse exemplified perhaps most clearly in the transformation of character Timothy Cavendish – notably, the only narrative that takes place in our own recognizable present day. Cavendish, a vanity publisher, begins his life in *Cloud Atlas* as a somewhat guilty, but contentedly complicit accessory to the kind of cannibalistic reading that the novel advocates against: his brief, meteoric rise and fall as a publisher is based on the commercial success of an aptly named, highly sensational memoir of a life of crime, *Knuckle Sandwich*. This work, which is promptly gobbled up by readers and Mitchell's sharply lampooned version of the exploitative London literary scene (the fatuous "Lemon Prize" ceremony where a vital scene takes place is an obvious send-up

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associations that could be spun out even further through said ex-husband's appearance as a child in Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* (2007).

of the Orange Prize), generates a financial windfall for the unscrupulous Cavendish, but also necessitates his desperate escape from the wrath of *Knuckle Sandwich*'s author and his criminal family. It is his escape from the world of London publishing that allows him to reacquire himself with the joy of reading for reading's sake, in his pleasurable consumption of a manuscript of the "Luisa Rey" story (the same one that we, Mitchell's readers, just read). Through the course of his "ghastly ordeal" away from the capital, Cavendish himself also transforms into a textual body, for, as he announces with the greatest degree of sincerity we ever see from him, his final intention is to write:

Like Solzhenitsyn laboring in Vermont, I shall beaver away in exile, far from the city that knitted my bones.

Like Solzhenitsyn, I shall return, one bright dusk. (*Cloud Atlas* 387)

Indeed, Cavendish does "return" from exile, not in his London-knit body, but rather, in the "bright dusk" of the cinema; his story becomes the government-banned film that Sonmi-451 watches in her future story, which bears the same title, "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish," as the narrative that appears in the *Cloud Atlas*. We might wonder, observing this change in Cavendish, if perhaps he also "returns" through Mitchellian reincarnation: can it be that he (and we) initially misread his birthmark, and if we looked again, might we see the distinctive comet in place of the undignified "turd"? Cavendish's transformation, from the greedy producer of text-as-commodity, to a reinvigorated reader, to a writer of stories – and lastly, through Sonmi's whimsical association of Cavendish with a statue of the Buddha, as an enlightened being freed from "a meaningless association of birth and rebirth"<sup>17</sup> – poses an intriguing question: does Mitchell suggest that we, as humans, simply need to read, and be read? And by careful, critical reading, might we be able to understand and undermine those things that prevent us from making narrative progress?

*"A Game Beyond the Endgame" – Mitchell's Unknowable Grand Design*

The circular *homo hominem lupus* logic of cannibalism, whether metaphorical or literal, draws a kind of brutal evolutionary loop in Mitchell's narratives of human self-consumption that initially feels like a perpetual motion mechanism. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Cloud Atlas*, where, as we have seen, Nietzschean image of an "eternal recurrence of war and peace" is twinned with grotesque images of cannibalistic production and consumption (Nietzsche 162). These loops within loops depict not a reassuring cyclical unity, but a disturbing circular sense of entrapment – a stultifying negation of freedom, rather than the puzzling "affirmation of life" that Nietzsche sought to describe in the thought experiment of eternal recurrence. Though they create a temporary sense of satiation with regards to the driving "narrative pleasure" that Byatt comments on, the novel's unfolding resolutions are all

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<sup>17</sup> As described in "An Orison of Sonmi-451": "... from the mountainside emerged the carved features of a cross-legged giant. One slender hand was raised in a gesture of grace. Weaponry and elements had strafed, ravaged, and cracked his features, but his outline was discernable if you knew where to look. I said the giant reminded me of Timothy Cavendish, making Hae-Joo Im smile for the first time in a long time. He said the giant was a deity that offered salvation from a meaningless cycle of birth and rebirth, and perhaps the cracked stonework still possessed a lingering divinity" (*Cloud Atlas* 329).

unsettling and incomplete in their individual fashions. The final and ostensibly most uplifting of them, the nineteenth-century Adam Ewing's, is ultimately disconcerting because of our foreknowledge of the failure, within the worlds of the novel, of his resolution to become an abolitionist and work towards a better future—after all, we must remember that this illusory “end” of the book (marked as such only by its physical location) is actually only the end of the beginning, the completion not of the novel's historical arc from past to future, but of its very first narrative.

The novel's fluctuating conceptualizations of the dissemination of narrative also reflect an illusory sense of resolution. What begins to look like a productive outward spread of each progressive narrative to a greater and greater audience—from Ewing's writing to himself in his journal, to Frobisher's personal letters to Rufus Sixsmith, to Luisa Rey's journalistic whistleblowing, to Cavendish's role as a publisher and then a writer, and finally to Sonmi's much-publicized *Declarations*—drastically reverses upon itself in Zachry's central narrative. Here, we return to oral transmission, a narrative form that is simultaneously intimate yet shareable with a wide audience of listeners. Zachry relates his story to his son, who in turn passes it on to us and, we assume, other members of his tribe; yet, without Zachry himself, the knowledge and experience it relates is rendered abstract and mythological. Similarly, Zachry's son and grandchildren still possess a holographic “orison” of Sonmi's testimony, but while the device's enduring physical object-ness makes it concrete and immutable on one hand, the valuable narrative it relates (the “Catechism” that could potentially teach humans how to finally make some kind of linear progress) has become a complete abstraction. It is, in this post-apocalyptic, pre-modern moment, a heartbreaking moment of simultaneous connection and disconnection: Zachry's son describes how,

Like Pa yarned, if you warm the egg in your hands, a beaustome ghost-girl appears in the air an' speaks in an Old-Un tongue what no un alive und'stands nor neer will, nay...She's beaustome, and she 'mazes the litt'uns an' her murmin's babbybie our babbits.

Sit down a beat or two.

Hold out your hands.

Look. (*Cloud Atlas* 309)

This imploring exhortation to “Hold out your hands./ Look.” eloquently calls upon our own melancholic understanding that Sonmi's story, so hard-won and so potentially meaningful, is now lost; at the same time, though, we see that, even in its most abstracted “ghostly” form, the narrative itself still has the power to compel and comfort. We, Mitchell's readers, also cannot help but be reminded of what we hold in our hands: not only a book, but a *novel*, a fiction (or collection of fictions, in this case) that can be taken as either an entertainment or a serious call to critical thought. This mid-novel “ending” of sorts offers simultaneous hope and despair, for until humanity learns and changes through careful reading of the developing narratives of its repeating history, time will continue on this evolutionary loop, offering chances for another Ewing, another Sonmi, another Zachry.

However, this distracting and potentially disheartening figure of loops of history within loops of story is not the only model of narrative to emerge from Mitchell's work.

Ultimately, the threads that weave among these cycles—and that stitch all of Mitchell’s novels to date together—lead readers to seek out what Sonmi calls “a game beyond the endgame,” and pursue the possible meanings behind the seemingly limitless web of intertexts that Mitchell’s accumulated work spins (*Cloud Atlas* 349). While his works appear at first to depict only the simultaneously horrifying and reassuring model of “Nietzsche’s gramophone record” replayed “for an eternity of eternities,” they furtively suggest that an alternative linear narrative of progress—as yet undetermined, and ultimately illegible to the limited perspective of this human writer and his human readers—might at least be possible (*Cloud Atlas* 471). Mitchell’s ongoing argument with Nietzsche is most clearly articulated in the “Letters from Zedelghem” section, from which the above quotes are taken. This narrative, a collection of letters from a dandyish but talented young composer, is closely modeled on *Delius As I Knew Him*, a critical but surprisingly tender memoir of author Eric Fenby’s real life friendship and apprenticeship with English composer Frederick Delius. Robert Frobisher, the Fenby character, is the ambitious amenuensis to the syphilitic, cantankerous Delius avatar, Vyvyan Ayr. Though Mitchell’s fictionalized version of this relationship introduces farcical (then tragic) elements of torrid romance gone awry, and transforms Fenby-as-Frobisher from a mild-mannered, polite narrator into a sharp-penned, charismatic young rake, “Letters from Zedelghem” retains and reanimates the central philosophical drama that animates Fenby’s *Delius*. While the book’s rather conventional first section treats everyday life and musical practice with the great man, it takes a dramatic turn once Fenby turns his attention to Delius’ driving devotion to Nietzsche; Delius’ best-known work, the “Mass of Life,” is actually a musical setting of selections from *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, echoed in the fictional Ayr’s unfinished “Eternal Recurrence” suite.

Fenby, a Catholic, takes up arms against his atheist mentor’s beliefs, and throughout the book, pauses to discourse at length about the effects of what he believes to be Delius’ spiritual insufficiencies. While Delius himself claims that “English music will never be any good till they get rid of Jesus” and asks peevisly “What Catholic ever wrote a piece of music worth hearing?”, Fenby laments the fact that Delius never became a believer, claiming that

...with belief there would have come that joy which is not found in his music, and which constitutes its chief defect. What joy there is, is as an echo through the ages of the joys of pagan antiquity – the joy of the gods, and the delight in all natural things before the world was born again. It is tinged with the sadness with which all joy must be tinged that is not born of that virtue which Christianity brought into the world – hope. And there is no hope in Delius’ music. (Fenby)

Though it is beyond our purview here to determine whether or not Fenby’s own music possesses the spiritual “joy” and “hope” that he found lacking in Delius’ work, Mitchell grants his young composer the ability to create a great work: Frobisher’s *Cloud Atlas Sextet*. The composition reflects the structure of the novel itself; it is composed, as Frobisher says, for “‘overlapping soloists’: piano, clarinet, ‘cello, flute, oboe, and violin, each in its own language of key, scale, and color. In the first set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the second, each interruption is recontinued, in order.” Via Frobisher, Mitchell adds a self-deprecating note to both the musical project and the novelistic one, wondering if the

experimental form is, “Revolutionary or gimmicky? Shan’t know until it’s finished, and by then it’ll be too late...” (*Cloud Atlas* 445).

Frobisher’s music, however, unlike his real-life equivalent, is not inspired by any clear religious conviction. Instead, we find him inspired to write the sextet by a state of questioning, brought on by his older brother’s premature death in World War I, and his own artistic development, by turns grueling and ephiphanic. We are led to believe that what emerges from Frobisher’s travails is a masterpiece – it is not only music, but the essence of the composer’s life (“*Cloud Atlas Sextet* holds my life, is my life, now I’m a spent firework, but at least I’ve been a firework,” *Cloud Atlas* 470). Again, this transformation enacts Mitchell’s evacuation of the body into text. Frobisher’s eventual sublimation into his aesthetic production “overlaps” with the novel’s other “soloists” transformations from human bodies into the ethereal bodies of their narratives; in fact, Frobisher describes this recurrent theme most clearly near the end of the novel (immediately prior to his suicide), saying, “People are obscenities. Would rather be music than be a mass of tubes squeezing semisolids around itself for a few decades before becoming so dribblesome it’ll no longer function” (*Cloud Atlas* 470).

Used up in the service of his art, and lacking the original religious conviction that seems to ground Fenby, Frobisher eventually gives in to Ayrs’ nihilistic readings (which are, at times, over-literal misreadings) of Nietzsche, even as their professional and personal relationship disintegrates. He is also first repelled, then swayed by the super-capitalist, nihilistic Morty Dhondt, a friend of Ayres’, who advocates volubly that the Nietzschean will to power is “the backbone of human nature”; Dhondt, a corrupt Belgian businessman with implied colonial ties, modifies Nietzsche’s original claim in *The Gay Science* that “war and peace” fluctuate in eternal recurrence, claiming instead that “humanity’s two eternal companions” are war and diamonds (*Cloud Atlas* 444). Dhondt – referred to as M.D., a nickname that recalls the other M(edical) D(ocTOR) we met earlier in Mitchell’s pages, Henry Goose – also observes with “mordant glee” (Morty-Dhont glee) that

Our will to power, our science, and those v. faculties that elevated us from apes, to savages, to modern man, are the same faculties that’ll snuff out *Homo sapiens* before this century is out! You’ll probably live to see it happen, you fortunate son. What a symphonic crescendo *that’ll* be, eh? (*Cloud Atlas* 445)

Driven mad by unrequited love – fulfilling Delius’ prophecy to Fenby that only a composer’s art can offer “lasting happiness... Love is a madness” – and by these insistent voices of nihilism, Frobisher eventually surrenders to his flawed understanding of an infinite, Nietzschean ebb and flow of time and commits suicide (Fenby). His mistake, however, is in his failure to recognize the theoretical nature of the eternal recurrence in Nietzsche’s writing. As Bernard Reginster, among others, has noted, the eternal recurrence, famously presented in the bizarre context of a “demon” appearing in the reader’s room one night to ask a hypothetical question, is a thought experiment, which “invoke[s] the concept of eternal recurrence to describe a particular attitude [Nietzsche] wants us to achieve toward our life – ‘affirmation’” (Reginster 203). Frobisher’s reading of Nietzsche himself and the various Nietzschean characters he encounters leads him to embrace the most profound negation of life, suicide, rather than this admittedly perplexing attitude of “affirmation.” He bases his choice upon a cosmological, literalized understanding of eternal recurrence, in which history

actually does cycle back and repeat itself; these are the “elegant certainties” that he writes of in his suicide letter to Sixsmith, claiming with a calm madness that

Time cannot permeate this sabbatical. We do not stay dead long. Once my Luger lets me go, my birth, next time around, will be upon me in a heartbeat. Thirteen years from now we'll meet again at Gresham, ten years later I'll be back in this same room, holding this same gun, composing this same letter, my resolution as perfect as my many-headed sextet. (*Cloud Atlas* 471).

Of course, in the universe of *Cloud Atlas*, this *isn't* madness at all, and Frobisher *does*, in fact, return as Luisa Rey, a reincarnation marked *isn't* only by the telltale comet birthmark, but also by her recognition of Frobisher's musical masterpiece, the *Cloud Atlas Sextet*: hearing it for the first time, “The sound is pristine, river-like, spectral, hypnotic... *intimately familiar*. Luisa stands, entranced, as if living in a stream of time” (*Cloud Atlas* 408).

However, though Frobisher is, in a sense, proven right in his own particular narrative, Mitchell strongly resists this Nietzschean theoretical model of a human-centered world in which eternity is made up of an infinitely looping cycle of finite human lives. Mitchell's implicit argument rejects both Frobisher's negative misreading of the concept, as well as more careful readings of the “affirmation of life,” which, regardless of its claims to optimism, is emphatic in its focus on the human being as the be all and end all of the world: unlike Mitchell, who seems to see hope only in the relinquishing of the human-centric attitude and giving into the unknown, Nietzsche exalts in the notion of “human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves” (Nietzsche 189). From the beginning, Frobisher is framed as a skeptic towards both of these possibilities, a troubled character who finds himself in unresolved tension between greater meaning and a feeling of dire meaninglessness. His failure to trust in the former is evidenced by his suspicion towards Adam Ewing, whose “Pacific Diary” he reads voraciously, but, resisting his attraction to it, suspects may be a forgery (*Cloud Atlas* 64). He is thus a kind of half-evolved Mitchellian character; he is neither as naïve as his immediate predecessor, the idealistic Adam Ewing, or as critical and canny as the intrepid, whistle-blowing who follows him, Luisa Rey. Frobisher is capable of perceiving hints of the greater cosmic plot of which he is part, but not willing to have faith in the latter. As a result, his story feels cut prematurely short by the novel's only suicide.

However, following Frobisher, *Cloud Atlas's* later, “ascended” or enlightened bearers of the comet birthmark, like Luisa Rey, Sonmi-451, and the scientist Meronym (who, as her name denotes, recognizes that she is only one part of a whole system), begin to perceive the evolutionary loop of human predacity with increasing clarity. In the central narrative, “Sloosha's Crossin’,” Meronym, one of a dwindling number of super-evolved “Prescients” who retain some knowledge of the pre-apocalyptic world, finally expresses her people's belief that these cycles must eventually come to an end: “*We Prescients... b'lief when you die you die an' there ain't no comin' back*” (*Cloud Atlas* 302). While this negation of eternally-recurring reincarnation seems “terrifying cold” to Zachry (and to Meronym herself), it seems to be the only possible hope for release from the regressive, cyclical flow of human history. While the eternal recurrence of souls that “cross the skies o' time” is comforting to Zachry (and, admittedly, to us as readers who seek out the return of familiar characters across the novel), Mitchell seems to view this as a paradoxically consoling nightmare. While we, as readers, take

pleasure in what appears to be the sustaining of life through reincarnation, we cannot forget that his narratives also *require death*; rebirth (the reappearance of narratives) is pleasurable, but it only makes the novel as a whole cycle backwards.

Indeed, to Mitchell, death seems to an opportunity for two possible kinds of narrative development: on one hand, deaths such as Frobisher's, which don't break the cycle of narrative recurrence, lead backwards to another chance at greater understanding through repetition. On the other, viewing death as a door that might open out to something beyond the cyclical, we are offered a glimpse of an alternate form of forward-moving time and narrative progress, perhaps more akin to a Kierkegaardian model of religious faith in unknowing.<sup>18</sup> This abstract possibility is reflected in Mitchell's description of the Buddha offered in the "Sonmi" section (referenced above), as "a deity that offered salvation from a meaningless cycle of birth and rebirth" (*Cloud Atlas* 329). This welcoming of the unknown (and unknowable) in Mitchell pushes strongly against Nietzsche, whose

... thought of the eternal recurrence as a rejection of the Christian doctrine of the eternal life. Thus, he presents *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which the doctrine of eternal recurrence plays a central role, as a "fifth gospel" that must presumably replace Christian doctrine. And the book's central exhortation is to remain "faithful to the earth": "I beseech you, my brothers, *remain faithful to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes!... To sin against the earth is now the most dreadful thing, and to esteem the entrails of the unknowable higher than the meaning of the earth." (Reginster 222)

While Mitchell's novel also rejects "the Christian doctrine of eternal life," *its* central exhortation seems to be quite different from Nietzsche's. While Mitchell's reincarnated narrators do remain, in a sense, "faithful" to the earth and their fellow inhabitants on it, their stories also point increasingly towards the necessity of changing humanity's relationship with this earth, and thus moving forward into some abstracted, post-Christian version of that "unknowable" that Nietzsche derides. To try and transcend the "meaningless," eternally recurring historical cycle that the novel depicts and longs to escape, perhaps all we can do is follow A.S. Byatt's suggestion for how to read Mitchell in her review of *Cloud Atlas*, is continue to "Trust the tale" even beyond its apparent ending, and believe, as we want to believe, that it will lead us out of the nightmarish cycles it depicts (Byatt, "Overlapping Lives").

This notion of surrendering to the release of death into the unknown recalls the most curious and compelling element of Fenby's memoir: its emphatic embrace not only of the conventional Christianity described loosely in his description of Delius' shortcomings, but more specifically of apophatic medieval mysticism and contemplative practice,<sup>19</sup> which

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<sup>18</sup> Regarding Kierkegaard, "Letters from Zedelghem" (Robert Frobisher's epistolary section of *Cloud Atlas*) strongly recalls elements of "The Immediate Stages of the Erotic" and "The Seducer's Diary" sections of *Either/Or*. If we follow this thread of allusion, it is irresistible to read Frobisher as a twentieth-century version of Kierkegaard's aesthete and "seducer," A., whose eventual despair reflects his failure to move through the ethical and religious stages that Kierkegaard describes in the "Or" section of *Either/Or*, and later in *Fear and Trembling*.

<sup>19</sup> More specifically, the *via negativa* charted out in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite, in whose philosophical footsteps van Ruysbroeck follows.



he frames as an alternative to the aggressively positive, atheistic Nietzschean model. In this opposition, we might see another inspiration for Mitchell's interest in evacuating the human body and the physical world. Unexpectedly, Fenby quotes extensively from medieval Flemish mystic Jan van Ruysbroeck in the midst of his memoir of Delius. His abstract description of God is as negatively defined as the God-shaped, author-shaped hole of Mitchell's prose: to Ruysbroeck (and to his reader, Fenby), God is "Simplicity and One-foldedness, inaccessible Height and bottomless Depth, incomprehensible Breadth and eternal Length, a dark Silence, a wild Desert..." Fenby, via Ruysbroeck, advocates for a contemplative practice that translates, in *Cloud Atlas*, into the act of allowing oneself to drift into the unknown (the openness to death described above): if we "go out in love beyond and above all things, and die to all observation in ignorance and darkness, then we are wrought and transformed through the Eternal Word." Furthermore, Mitchell's novel seems to obliquely align contemplative practice with the practice central to his project: the mapping out and critical reading of interwoven narratives, which, recalling Lyotard's and Mitchell's "dispersed clouds," is close in spirit to Ruysbroeck's call for "a fathomless staring and seeing. What we are, that we behold; and what we behold, that we are: for our thought, our life, and our being are uplifted in simplicity, and made one with the Truth which is God" (Ruysbroeck, "The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage," quoted in Fenby).<sup>20</sup>

However, this suggestion that close reading might help us find "God" is by no means a demand to submit to whatever this negatively-defined higher narrative authority might be. In the interview quoted above, Mitchell comments on *Ghostwritten*'s first narrator, the deranged cult member and terrorist Quasar, (the asker of the unanswered question, "Who was blowing on the back of my neck?"), claiming that this self-abnegating narrative summons up "...the desire to *be* brainwashed – and abdicate personal responsibility to a guru, a higher authority, a god" (Mitchell, "The Art of Fiction"). This desire to "abdicate personal responsibility" is the dangerous opposite of the ethic that Mitchell's renovated God-novel advocates for. Rather than relinquishing a sense of responsibility and submitting to an illusory "higher authority" that ultimately turns out to be a power-hungry human sham—the hypocritical guru here, referred to only as "His Serendipity," is revealed to be all too human, and seems to be a close relation to Abbot Enomoto—Mitchell's characters (and

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<sup>20</sup> One of the novel's most intriguing and elusive propositions is this barely-there gesture towards the *via negativa* of apophatic theology. Mitchell is not alone in expressing interest in medieval mysticism and contemplation as a model for the unthinkable/unknowable situations of today's moment of planetary crisis. Theorist Eugene Thacker has written extensively on medieval apophaticism, applying the negative logic of contemplative thinking to the precise problems that he describes, in *In the Dust of This Planet* (2011) as, "the world is increasingly unthinkable – a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction" (Thacker 1). Fittingly, Thacker's inquiry begins with the figure of "Clouds of Unknowing," and an opening epigraph from *The Cloud of Unknowing* itself. I might similarly invoke the latter text to describe the ultimate unknowability of Mitchell's world, which paradoxically generates unknowing through narrative structure, resonating with the idea that, "we pray to be raised up in this transcendently shining darkness, and by seeing nothing and by not knowing, to see and know in this very absence of sight and knowledge him who is above all seeing and all knowing" (*Cloud of Unknowing* 4). Of course, what we "pray" so fervently for as readers of Mitchell's macronovel, is not God, but some ungraspable cosmic narrative sense of what Thacker eloquently expresses when he says that "*thought is not human*" – and that we might then be able to, as he demands, "think about the world-without us philosophically" (Thacker 7, 9).

implicitly his readers) are urged to pursue their individual ethical urges. In Mitchell's universe, any human figure that claims a direct and prophetic relationship to God is revealed to be motivated by greed, and/or deranged – overall, not to be trusted (thinking back, perhaps these characters who aspire to godhead are versions of the too-human novelist-god figure of Fowles' narrator). Though resistance to these charismatic charlatans sometimes seems futile, it is this very dedication to resist the simplicity of “brainwashing” that allows for the sketchy possibility of forward narrative progress in all of his novels and, Mitchell implicitly suggests, in the world. As the simultaneously inspirational and disheartening ending of “Adam Ewing's Pacific Journal” (and the ending of *Cloud Atlas*, the novel) suggests, all the individual can do is struggle against human greed, red in tooth and claw, for, “in the individual, selfishness uglifies the soul; for the human species, selfishness is extinction.” Ewing unwittingly (and Mitchell knowingly) foreshadows and backshadows the diegetic historical future of the novel here, claiming that “one fine day, a purely predatory world *shall* consume itself” (*Cloud Atlas* 508). For this reason, regardless of whether or not history will recycle it, the individual soul must commit to fighting a lonely fight even amidst a sea of cannibalistic others in the hopes of eventually converting the whole ocean, for, as Ewing finally asks, “what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?” (*Cloud Atlas* 508-509).

Given this dramatic declaration, it is surely no coincidence that *Thousand Autumns*' Dr. Marinus (“ocean”) is perhaps the character in all of Mitchell's oeuvre so far with the greatest understanding of his own participation in the cyclical narrative of human history. Marinus, it is implied, has at least some comprehension of the fact that he moves through time, and that his body is only a temporary shell. While he is markedly not a believer in the Christian faith, the old doctor shares with Mitchell's reader an interest in whatever undefined force facilitates the soul's movement through time; markedly, though, the doctor “refers to the Supreme Creator in the same tone he uses to discuss Voltaire, Diderot, Herschel, and certain Scottish physicians: admiring, but less than worshipful” (*Thousand Autumns* 113). Marinus' version of the “Supreme Creator” is undefined, unknowable, and marked by a scientific curiosity. Similarly, as investigators of Mitchell's unsolved mysteries, we can only wonder about the unexplained wonders of his novels' world. The non-human voices that Mitchell presents in *Ghostwritten*, for example—including among them a Borgesian traveling *non corpa* (a kind of parasitical transmigratory consciousness) and an over-evolved artificial intelligence that views itself as a “Zookeeper” for Earth's human menagerie—remain unexplained and mysterious, only hinting at the possibility that there might be some other organizing consciousness beyond the scope of the novel, beyond the scope of human comprehension. The idea that someone or something else could be responsible for the existence of the *non corpa* of *Ghostwritten*, or the recycling of the soul in *Cloud Atlas*, or Dr. Marinus' implied reincarnations in *Thousand Autumns* is both uncanny and comforting, reintroducing to the “literary” (that is to say, non-genre fiction) novel a sense of mystification and perhaps-mystical unknowing that is in itself an odd kind of narrative satisfaction through an endlessly sustained withholding of knowledge, resulting in a perversely satisfying *dissatisfaction* or state of speculation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This tendency relates closely to Philip Tew's recurring references to myth and the mythopoeic in both contemporary writing and modernism in his 2007 study, *The Contemporary British Novel*. However, while Tew makes a very compelling case for the reinvention of these terms in relation to contemporary fiction, I am somewhat suspicious of his constant invocation of Ernst Cassirer's

In Mitchell's remystifying narratives, we thus see a state of attenuated suspension (of belief and disbelief, knowing and unknowing, or perhaps the in-between state of knowing that there is something we *cannot* know) emerge as a productive site. His implied readers are avid students of the postmodern, who recognize the futility of believing in a conventional, parentally judgmental God. At the same time, though, his novels carve out a space for the sincere belief in the possibility of some other, unknowable metanarrative and distant historical destiny that we, as a species, might someday fulfill, if only we can escape the solipsistic loop of cannibalistic self-destruction. This simultaneity resembles, but markedly does not replicate the cultural "oscillation" between irony and sincerity that Dutch theorists Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen have recently labeled "metamodernism." Rather than the constant movement of "oscillating to and fro or back and forth" by which "the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern... it is a pendulum swinging between 2,3,4,10, innumerable poles" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism"), Mitchell's readers are caught between states of knowing and a pleasurable understanding that we may not ever be *able* to know, suggesting a kind of productively static suspension of disbelief, rather than metamodernism's potentially disingenuous and non-committal back-and-forth movement.

The most obvious ancestor of this productive state of static suspension is Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), a clear precursor to Mitchell's newer formulation of the God-questioning God-novel. This reference is blatantly foregrounded in this particular section of *Cloud Atlas*, entitled "Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery." Mitchell's character Luisa Rey, who appears in both *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*, is the most obvious nod to Wilder's work; in *Cloud Atlas*, Luisa's narrative even reaches a moment of possible closure in a fall from a bridge, echoing the central event of Wilder's narrative. Aside from a varied stockpile of other replications and allusions, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* primarily informs the notion of simultaneous narrative possibilities that emerges from Mitchell's work. In Wilder's novel, the fall of the eponymous bridge and the resulting deaths of five people is narratively framed in two ways by the novel's first and last chapters: "Perhaps an Accident," and "Perhaps an Intention." Both possibilities—on one hand that, in an indifferent universe, "to the gods we are like the flies that the boys kill on a summer day" and on the other, "the very sparrows do not lose a feather that has not been brushed away by the finger of God"—are equally likely and unlikely (Wilder 9). The unproductive insanity of concretely choosing one or the other is apparent in the figure of Brother Juniper, a monk who witnesses the event and believes it is a pure act of God. Juniper's need to determine God "scientifically" and definitively is what leads to his eventual madness and execution.

Learning from Juniper's bad example, however, we contemporary readers find, as A.S. Byatt does, that "Both books can be read both ways – there is a hidden order, mimicked by, or revealed by, art, which makes sense of our brief lives. Or perhaps there is not any order, except at the molecular level" (Byatt, "Overlapping Lives"). For while Mitchell, obliquely quoting Don DeLillo, self-deprecatingly writes in *Thousand Autumns* that, "Storytellers are not priests who commune with an ethereal realm, but artisans, like dumpling makers, if somewhat slower," he markedly does not eliminate the possible

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writings on myth; this adherence to Cassirer verges at times on dogmatic, and distracts from the arguments Tew makes about the novels themselves.

existence of some unknowable “ethereal realm” (*Thousand Autumns* 266).<sup>22</sup> This unknowable but much-desired negative space of more-than-human possibility, at which his novels constantly gesture, is what allows Mitchell’s novels to sustain—if not *demand*—rereading after rereading, until the reader feels glutted on the wealth of proliferating connections. The humble human storyteller, Mitchell’s work suggests, does what he can within his limited scope; he attempts to feed the reader’s insatiable desire for narrative (and in doing so, only increases it), and can only suggest through tantalizing omission the idea that a greater, ultimately satisfying narrative might exist beyond our narrow world of dumplings and books. Eventually, in the dispersed clouds of narrative that move with seeming randomness over our hungry human world, perhaps some all-encompassing plotline might be mapped, if only by an unknown writer for unseen readers.

This proposed end to the cyclical model of denarrative desire also obliquely gestures towards the problem of periodization that has lurked in the background of all of the texts this dissertation has engaged so far; the narrative processes discussed in relation to these recent enactments of denarrative desire have not quite fit within the various rubrics of postmodern literature, though they often appear to conform to the latter. In the attempt to arrange this development in the contemporary novel in the long and rather topsy-turvy history of the novel in English, one might see that Mitchell’s attempt to reinstate the concept of guiding metanarrative aligns oddly with a surprising point of comparison, a parallel literary historical moment that similarly posits an end to the loop of denarrative desire. Though it seems like an odd and distant conclusion for what this chapter’s concern with a set of very twenty-first century novels, I suggest that we look back to an example of late Romantic fiction that deal directly with the speculative impulse of denarrative desire, while escaping the endlessly sustained cycle of frustrated readings and rereadings that it most often creates. In Walter Scott’s *Redgauntlet* (1824), readers are presented with a familiar model of historical rewriting and speculation. Scott asks readers to imagine a moment of alternate history brimming over with possibility, in which an imagined Jacobite plot, led by the mysterious Redgauntlet, unfolds within the otherwise established lines of Scottish history.

However, the novel ultimately posits that the backwards-yearning cycle of denarrative desire must be stopped—mercifully, one might say—by the plot’s failure; the imagined Jacobite uprising is prevented just in the nick of time, and the would-be alternate history of the plot returns obediently to the “truth” of historical record. When the end comes, it is shocking in its suddenness, yet also something of a relief; the entire weight of nearly four hundred pages of historical disruption collapses upon itself instantaneously with the revelation that the Jacobite movement is finally over: “Then, gentlemen,” said Redgauntlet, clasping his hands together as the words burst from him, “the cause is lost for ever!” (Scott 373). Though Redgauntlet’s impassioned exclamation is ostensibly one of despair, one might glimpse an undercurrent of release in the “burst” of these words from his lips. The realignment of Scott’s imagined plot with the prerecorded historical plot finally relaxes the tension of the reader’s suspension between fact and fiction, as the ultimate submission of alternate history to pre-established historical fact shuts down the original

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<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, Mitchell’s frank comments on his own writing make clear the separation between his own beliefs and the definitions of the greater cosmic processes hinted at in his novels—most notably, he comes out as a disbeliever in reincarnation, despite its recurrence in his work, in his *Paris Review* interview. However, he does not clarify what he *does* believe in, prolonging even in the non-diegetic world the much-noted sense of mystery that surrounds him as an author figure.

“What if?...” of the novel’s premise. Yet political and historical failure is not enough; after his coup is averted, Redgauntlet sails off with Bonny Prince Charlie in an abruptly picturesque, folkloric way, to some unnamed Lost Land of historical oblivion; he leaves his young niece and nephew with the dramatic declaration that, “I leave England forever... The curtain here falls between us. I go to the house of another – If I leave it before I quit the earth, it shall only be for the House of God. Once more, farewell both!” (Scott 376).

It is also intriguing to note another link between Mitchell’s project and Scott’s. Just as Jacob sees Orito’s face as a book to be read, or the De Zoet family psalter as a living trace of long-dead ancestors, so too does Scott emphasize the importance of the body as text. As Mitchell does with the destiny-making stamp of the comet birthmark, Scott also imprints this concept of physiognomic text on the bodies of his characters in *Redgauntlet*, for the curse of the Redgauntlet family is literally inscribed in the infamous, horseshoe-shaped frown they all share. Though Darsie, Scott’s young protagonist, believes firmly in “the privilege of acting for [him]self,” he is forced to acknowledge the fact that his destiny, whatever it may be, is at least somewhat predetermined – if by nothing else than the brand of his Redgauntlet ancestors upon his forehead (Scott 193). This “fatal mark,” the inherited scar of an ancient ancestral crime, is stamped there “by the mysterious law of nature,” implying that nature itself writes a kind of original text upon its creations – a text that cannot be erased or denied (Scott 189, 191). The transcendent quality of a cosmic destiny written in physiognomic hieroglyphs also might remind readers of the yearning for historical transcendence expressed in Susan Stewart’s concept of the “distressed genres,” which invokes in the term “distressed” the doubled meaning of intentionally antiqued and troubled. This image of the revived form as an expression of both forced historical connection and historical break suits Scott’s rather convoluted project, for, as Stewart comments, the aim of the distressed genre is to “enter time, to re-create,” and is thus “the first step in a move to *transcend* or *escape* time that will be the paradigm for literary idealism from romanticism through modernism” (Stewart, “Distressed Genres” 8). Notably, though, Scott’s novel concludes that this aim of the distressed genre—whose pessimistic, self-aware cousin is denarrative desire itself—is impossible. Mitchell’s distressed works propose something fundamentally different: that readers should attempt to transcend time *without* escaping it, and in so doing, attempt to productively reimagine it. The patchwork, “distressed” physiognomies of both Scott’s and Mitchell’s heavily pastiched novels also express the mystical possibility of stepping outside of time that these characters stand in for.<sup>23</sup> Reading this odd couple of texts together, we, like Mitchell’s comet-marked protagonists, or Scott’s frowning Redgauntlets, might feel in ourselves an uncanny stirring of questions asked before, long overshadowed by twentieth-century developments in capital-M Modern and postmodern culture and theory.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> This particular practice of the distressed genre is markedly different from postmodern pastiche, as exemplified Fowles; in the latter, the pastiche is always at least half-cynical; while Fowles attempts deadpan seriousness, he always casts one eye upon the limiting social and political conditions that create the formal conventions that he engages. Pastiche in Mitchell (and Scott), however, is uncynical and exuberant.

<sup>24</sup> Another commonality to be explored between Romantic and contemporary (Fantastic?) fiction is the continuing debate between the popular and the “literary”; in our current age of seemingly arbitrary literary prize culture and celebrity book clubs, we might trace an uncertainty in academic appraisal regarding what constitutes a “serious” novel, not unlike the varying treatment that Gothic and other Romantic novels have encountered in their long and embattled reception histories.

This issue is further complicated by Ian Duncan's astute claim that *Redgauntlet*, along with Scott's other historical novels, already "perform[s] a complex act of closure, of looking back, at an era of modernization – national and world-historical – that has reached its period," and thus might be seen as "postmodern"; its self-conscious positioning at "the far threshold of an identifiable historical stage of modernity" enables it to enact a kind of "dialectical closure." The implicit final demand of the novel springs from this problematic closure – instead of locking the door of historical possibility, it instead asks challengingly, "What will the end or aftermath of the historical novel look like?" (Duncan 98). One might see Mitchell's macronovelistic enterprises as kind of response to this provocative question: they take up Scott's "postmodern" position at the threshold of historical perspective, and, rather than closing it, tear it off its hinges. Rather than a kind of narrative closure, dialectical or not, Mitchell creates a space of infinite outward opening, infinite expansion of historical scope, that opens endless doors backwards into the past, but also forwards, into the future. The Romantic ethos that Scott expresses, with its characteristic, elegiac anti-modernizing impulses (posing itself, in Duncan's words, "on the far threshold of an identifiable historical stage of modernity"), resonates uniquely with our current feeling of end times.

But if the denarrative impulses that animate Scott's text are already dabbling in the postmodern, what, then, should we call Mitchell? To this date, the only consistent term for the very contemporary novel is what James Wood has called the unfortunate "infinite stutter" of "post-postmodernism."<sup>25</sup> In Mitchell's work specifically, I identify the "post-postmodern" as the impetus to critically reexamine the possibility of something beyond the processes of human production and consumption, by simultaneously looking back to models resembling religious belief and more-than-human grand narratives, and forward to a future premised upon a fundamental shift in the view of humanity as a mere component of the world, rather than its center.<sup>26</sup> While the "stuttering" illogic of "post-post" is undoubtedly both irritating and problematic, it is "modern" that strikes me as the more troubling element of the term, with regards to the questions of scale and perspective that Mitchell poses.

Further problems radiate from a close—admittedly, perhaps too close—reading of "post-postmodern." In the introduction to his popular history of the modern British novel, Malcolm Bradbury claims that "modern" has both a "weak" meaning – as in the thought that we live in "modern times" – and a "strong" one, referring specifically to the Modernist avant-garde. While Bradbury does not linger long on the commonplace, "weak" meaning, it is actually the one that strikes me as more immediately troubling to us today, the "modern" that indicates only a quality of contemporaneity or "nowness," whose seemingly innocuous surface masks an odd sense of temporal confusion. To illustrate this confusion, I will call upon a favorite strategy of my composition students, and quote the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of modern as "characteristic of the present time, or the time of writing; not old-fashioned, antiquated, or obsolete; employing the most up-to-date ideas,

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<sup>25</sup> Wood himself refers to Mitchell as an example of "late postmodernism," a term I find as unsatisfactory and "stuttering" in its reluctance to break from the modern/postmodern as "post-postmodernism" itself.

<sup>26</sup> Again, it is useful to consider Mitchell in relation to the tradition of speculative (science) fiction that he clearly draws from. While science fiction authors have long proposed various models of humanity as part of a larger scheme (either evolutionary or cosmic), they more often than not sketch out the dynamics of the latter. Mitchell's total reticence on this matter, however, makes his work stand out as something new and innovative.

techniques, or equipment.” Modern, in this sense, simply indicates the present. My rather persnickety question then, is this: if we *were* postmodern, and are now post-postmodern, where does that place us in relation to the present moment? While this stubbornly literal reading of the original term, “postmodern” thus implies a simple sense of projection into the future, the “post-postmodern” poses an abstract temporal puzzle – for what comes after the vague concept of “the future”? The doubled distance of “post-post” suggests that we are so far removed from a sense of nowness that we live in a kind of temporal no-place; we appear to exist neither in the mournfully disappeared present or the equally hazy future. How can we define a moment if it is only defined by its lack of moment-ness?

Perhaps the way to best consider our undeniably present present moment, then, is to relinquish “modern” entirely as the central element in our vocabulary of periodization. Unfortunately, the terms that have already been suggested as alternatives to the stuttering and time-bending awkwardness of our “post-postmodern” moment all continue to rely upon this slippery and often unsatisfactory word, investing it with such overdetermined periodizing and theoretical meaning that it ceases to mean anything at all: these new terms include “transmodernism,” “altermodernism,” “metamodernism” (described briefly above), and “remodernism.” We might see this reluctance to move beyond the concept of modernity as a nostalgic desire for the proliferation of comprehensibly human narratives associated with it. Considering these new coinages, while also taking stock of the terms we use to periodize Western history, from pre-modern to early modern, to modern, to postmodern, to post-postmodern, it is evident that our current critical language still persists in depicting a bell curve in which we seem to stagger further and further (or post- and poster-) from a perceived historical center. These terms also suggest that we can somehow return to this central modernist moment, whether to reexamine it or, in the most extreme case of remodernism, somehow redo it; this impulse also enforces my concerns with temporality, for it suggests a desire not to find a new “now,” but to return to an old one, the “now” of the modern or modernist moment. With this in mind, when attempting to theorize contemporary literature and looking at what it will become, rather than what can no longer be, one wonders if we are actually most hindered by this reluctance to define ourselves apart from “modern.”

A second reading of “modern” that makes its continued use unproductive is the associated implication of “modernity” and the problematic progress narrative of “modernization.” To offer a horrendously but necessarily concise analysis of the process of “modernization,” I suggest that we might view it – through its expressions in political and economic processes such as imperialism, industrialization, and the emergence of our contemporary global marketplace – as the impulse to shape the world in increasingly human (though, notably, not *humane*) terms, and to create, in place of the natural world, a new system constructed on a human scale, to serve the needs of human nature and human desire – a world of Benjaminian rather than Darwinian “natural history” in which nature itself is emptied, and eventually refilled, by human beings and their trappings. To this general and abstract definition of modernity as human expansion, let us add Jean-François Lyotard’s helpful use of the term *modern* “to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth” (Lyotard xxiii). To add another helpful

interlocutor, we might also consider Bruno Latour's provocative claim that, in the titular phrase of his 1991 work, "we have never been modern." As Latour suggests evocatively,

"Modern" is... doubly asymmetrical: it designates a break in the regular passage of time, and it designates a combat in which there are victors and vanquished... we have to rethink the definition of modernity, interpret the symptom of postmodernity, and understand why we are no longer committed heart and soul to the double task of domination and emancipation. To make a place for the networks of sciences and technologies, do we really have to move heaven and earth? Yes, exactly, the Heavens and the Earth. (Latour 10)

Latour's essay, which productively and sometimes cryptically generates questions that are still being answered, proposes that modernity demands an unsustainable division between the human and nonhuman, and, given the impossibility of this separation, we are not (or will never be, or have never been) truly "modern." Ultimately, he concludes that the present moment demands a new representation, a "Nonmodern Constitution," that recognizes that "Nature and Society are not two distinct poles, but one and the same production of successive states of societies-natures, of collectives... the work of mediation becomes the very centre of the double power, natural and social" (Latour 138).

Seeing these various definitions together, we might creatively define "modernity" as that which fundamentally and reductively relates itself to any given grand narrative of human progress, that renders secondary and separate the other lives of things (both animate and inanimate, up to the planet itself); all of these single metanarratives wind together into the most meta narrative of them all, the violent, ultimate imposition of human values and desires onto the natural world. To return to Lyotard's own claim that postmodernity is simply "an incredulity towards metanarratives" suggests that this process of modernization is complete, and, due to the loss of the metanarrative of human progress as a valid category, cannot possibly be extended; post-postmodernity, then, places us at an extra remove from this historical process, without suggesting that a different one might already be taking place. Furthermore, while Lyotard's definition is often used rather glibly to create a clear break between the metanarrative-obsessed modern period and a disenchanted, incredulous postmodern period, he actually defines his notions of the modern and the postmodern as a pair of cyclical and inextricable concepts; in his short essay, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" he claims that "Postmodernism... is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (Lyotard 79). To Lyotard, modernism thus becomes postmodernism, which becomes a new modernism, which in turn becomes postmodernism again; this evolutionary loop is self-generating and always in process.

However, the oft-cited claim of our present moment is that we are "After Postmodernism," and thus, drifting somewhere beyond the limits of this cyclical relation of modernism and postmodernism, in what Lyotard enthusiastically but vaguely referred to only as "the unknown." What, then, has dizzily emerged from this temporal and theoretical centrifuge in relation to this question of narrative and metanarrative? The claim that I have sketched out through David Mitchell's example is that our present moment, our "now," is one whose literature is deeply invested in reinstating some belief in the concept of metanarrative. However, the difference between the present moment and the departed "modern" is that the grand narratives being created now are not necessarily ones in which



we, the human race, are granted control, or even primacy. Mitchell's novels, which I read as exemplary of this impulse, suggest that in order to have a future—that is to say, a narrative that moves forward, rather than circularly, as we saw in Lyotard's cyclical model of modernity and postmodernity—we must look beyond the modern and postmodern fixation on the human construction and destruction of the world, to a distant future that is, in an oddly reassuring manner, entirely outside the repetitive cycles of human desire that he depicts.

Thus, if we read Mitchell's novels as symptomatic of a shifting cultural sensibility, we are truly in a moment after postmodernism, for we have escaped from Jameson's postmodern "imprisonment in the present." By cutting ourselves free from the limiting and fundamentally human-centric notion of a removed present moment called the "modern," and from the essentially human, self-consuming drive of "modernity," can we truly reinstate the possibility of some other abstract and unknowable further narrative development? I believe that this "post-postmodern" moment is one most strongly characterized by an investment in the Fantastic, not only as a mode of literary production, as Torodov describes it in his structuralist work on the topic, but more broadly, as a mode of cultural perception. For Mitchell, it seems, the necessary state of contemporary human existence (and the necessary state of the human reader) is an unending suspension between "hidden order" and chaos, between an unknowable "ethereal realm" and the prosaic earthly one, knowing and not knowing, and between individual autonomy and an unknowable collective destiny; one might also say it is, in some ways, a suspension between the warring desires of the writer to be either Vermeule's God-novelist or Fowles' novelist-god, but a commitment to neither. This simultaneity of beliefs—best summarized, perhaps, in what Mitchell has called Dr. Marinus' "belief in belief"<sup>27</sup>—might be constructively compared to Todorov's concept of the fantastic as a state of "hesitation" between believing and not believing<sup>28</sup>; as Todorov states, "*I nearly reached the point of believing*"... is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic. Either total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life" (Todorov 31). Mitchell, in his seemingly paradoxical role as a self-consciously post-God God-novelist, indefinitely extends this state of Todorovean hesitation, and makes it the primary mode of reading his novels. It is this induced state of hesitation and the profound desire to believe—or perhaps the reluctance to *dis*believe—in an overarching grand narrative that sustains the reader's continuing interest in the mystifying qualities of his work.

Mitchell's novels – along with a wealth of other contemporary works that demand that we look to the mystical, divine, or supernatural (though markedly not the conventionally religious) for visions of the future that deviate from the unending apocalypses that we might extrapolate from our present circumstances<sup>29</sup> – force readers to relinquish earlier notions of

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<sup>27</sup> "Marinus isn't a Christian, but he believes in belief" (Mitchell, "The Art of Fiction").

<sup>28</sup> For a thorough investigation of Mitchell and the Todorovean literary fantastic specifically in relation to questions of genre (speculative fiction and fantasy), please see Nicholas Dunlop's 2010 essay, "Speculative Fiction as Postcolonial Critique in *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*," collected in *David Mitchell: Critical Essays*, ed. Sarah Dillon.

<sup>29</sup> Again, I refer readers to *Battlestar Galactica*'s suspended and unresolved notion of an unconventional "God" (who, as a similarly inexplicable angelic character states in the final episode, "hates that name"); a wildly diverse, merely suggestive list of other exemplary texts might include Philip Pullman's radical rewriting of *Paradise Lost* in *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000), J.K. Rowling's

human control.<sup>30</sup> More specifically, they require that we surrender ourselves to the pleasurable, thrilling drift of the Fantastic's state of hesitation; in this moment, we are neither totally incredulous, as Lyotard imagined the postmodern subject, nor totally invested in a concrete concept of faith, as the credulous readers of the God-novel were. We are instead in a unique position of productive unknowing, ready to emerge from the mode of cynical postmodern perception, and translate our denarrative desire into the belief in the possibility of unforeseeable alternate futures. But there is no one or nothing to occupy the God-shaped hole in this reinvigorated belief in cosmic plans, then from what can we draw this belief? Clearly, the non-theistic formulation of this theory precludes the idea of any divine metanarrator, but not of metanarrative itself. Perhaps it might be useful, then, to think of this new configuration of "God" as an action, rather than an actor—as the act of narration. Mitchell's novels seem to ask us to peer into the unfathomable unknown in this way, optimistically, with hope, and with the discerning eyes of willing, critical readers:

*Sit down a beat or two.  
Hold out your hands.  
Look.*

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surprisingly philosophical conclusion to the *Harry Potter* series (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 2007), Cormac McCarthy's thorny engagement with the notion of God in *The Road* (2006), Michael Chabon's engagement with the tension between secular and orthodox Judaism in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007), or the notion of a God-like force that refuses to be named as such in popular films such as *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011; itself a very loose adaptation of a little-read 1954 Philip K. Dick story, "Adjustment Team") or *Source Code* (2011), or the much-debated ending of J.J. Abrams' massively successful television show, *Lost* (2004-2010).

<sup>30</sup> The increasing interest in the speculative mode in philosophy, articulated variously by theorists sometimes categorized under the rubric of "Speculative Realism," such as Quentin Meillassoux, Iain Hamilton Grant, Ray Brassier, and Graham Harman, might offer generative interdisciplinary ways of thinking through some of the questions I have described here, in more literary terms, as the Fantastic.

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