UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, MERCED

SHIFTING EPISTEMOLOGIES IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL: VLADIMIR NABOKOV, THOMAS PYNCHON, AND TONI MORRISON

by

TREVOR ZANE JACKSON

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE INTERDISCIPLINARY HUMANITIES GRADUATE GROUP

IN PARTIAL FUFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN INTERDISCIPLINARY HUMANITIES

PROFESSOR GREGG CAMFIELD,
CHAIR

PROFESSOR JAN GOGGANS

PROFESSOR NIGEL HATTON

PROFESSOR KEN YOSHIDA

2018

©

Trevor Zane Jackson, 2018

All rights reserved

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, MERCED

SHIFTING EPISTEMOLOGIES IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL: VLADIMIR NABOKOV, THOMAS PYNCHON, AND TONI MORRISON

by

TREVOR ZANE JACKSON

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE INTERDISCIPLINARY HUMANITIES GRADUATE GROUP

IN PARTIAL FUFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN INTERDISCIPLINARY HUMANITIES

PROFESSOR JAN GOGGANS	DATE
PROFESSOR NIGEL HATTON	DATE
PROFESSOR KEN YOSHIDA	DATE
PROFESSOR GREGG CAMFIELD CHAIR	DATE

2018

I dedicate this project to Rebecca Jackson, who provided me with an anthology of insights, boundless practical assistance, and a variety of constructive and necessary distractions in addition to invariable encouragement and generous love; and to my parents, Phillip and Terri Jackson, whose support, love, and sacrifice are without limit.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS………………VI

CURRICULUM VITA………………VII

ABSTRACT………………VIII

PART I: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM………………1

PART II: NABOKOV AND THE PROBLEM OF SELF………………15

§1: NABOKOV'S EKPHRASIS………………16

§2: RIDDING THE SELF: *MARY* ………………32

§3: THE ULTIMATE ENCOUNTER WITH OTHERNESS: *LOLITA* AND *THE ENCHANTER*………………51

§4: A DEMOCRACY OF GHOSTS AND THE PAIN OF STRANGERS: *PNIN*………………64

PART III: PYNCHON AND THE CARTOGRAPHICATION OF THE WORLD………………76

§1: INTERPRETIVE CONFUSION AND THE ENCYCLOPEDIA ENTRY: *THE CRYING OF LOT 49* AS PREFATORY GUIDE………………77

§2: PYNCHON'S CARTOGRAPHICATION………………89

§3: TECHNOLOGY AND THE MUSEUM OF HUMANISM………………100

§4: TOWARD BECOMING OTHER: NAVIGATION AND ESCAPE………………116

PART IV: MORRISON AND THE ETHICAL IMPERATIVE FOR UNDERSTANDING………………129

§1: TOUCHED BUT NOT MOVED: MORRISON'S ETHICAL AESTHETIC………………130

§2: WHOLE LIVES AND VIRILE MATURITY………………138

§3: FAILURES OF IMAGINATION………………148

§4: SPACE TO UNDERSTAND: *LOVE*, *PARADISE*, AND THE AFTERWORLD………………158

PART V: CONCLUSION………………175

BIBLIOGRAPHY………………179

Acknowledgements

I owe a great gesture of gratitude to a number of people. Foremost, I wish to acknowledge the professors supporting this project with their immense assistance in advising and directing my research: Professor Gregg Camfield, Professor Jan Goggans, Professor Nigel Hatton, and Professor Ken Yoshida.

The University of California President's Dissertation Year Fellowship provided me ample time to write and revise this dissertation project. The School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts Dean's Career-Building Award and the inaugural Will Shadish Graduate Fellowship allowed me to travel and interact with other scholars, and, because of this, to think more openly and more precisely about the scope and significance of this research.

Curriculum Vitae

Trevor Jackson
School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts
University of California, Merced
5200 North Lake Road
Merced, CA 95348
Email: tjackson4@ucmerced.edu
209.914.7084

EDUCATION

Master of Arts, English, California State University, Stanislaus, 2012

Thesis: *Nabokov's Authorial Agon: Aesthetic Solipsism, Metafiction, and the Expansion of Textual Supremacy*

Bachelor of Arts, English/History, California State University, Stanislaus, 2009

FIELDS OF STUDY

20th and 21st Century American Literature (Professor Gregg Camfield, Professor Jan Goggans)

Literature and Philosophy (Professor Nigel Hatton)

Critical Theory and Philosophy (Professor Ken Yoshida, Professor Nigel Hatton)

ABSTRACT

Shifting Epistemologies in the American Novel: Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, and Toni Morrison

by

Trevor Zane Jackson

Dissertation Chair: Professor Gregg Camfield

In Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Interdisciplinary Humanities

University of California, Merced

2018

This project describes strategies presented in the fiction of three American novelists which alter our relationship to the epistemological codes of modernity, standards in which we are implicated by a vast network of cultural assumptions and institutional apparatuses. Such confinement within an ethical hegemony—a system permitting only a limited range of acceptable conduct, contemplation, and resistance in both public and private spheres—restricts the bounds not only of what can be practiced but also of what can be safely thought. This system I identify as the epistemology of modernity and, ushered in by the advent of modernization, capitalist relations, and the contemporary continuation of enlightenment reason against which any form of expression must situate itself either in opposition or corroboration. Because divergence is permitted to a certain degree, the possibility of epistemological shifting cannot be achieved by outward participation in such a system and thus must be perceptual: achieved through mentality and self-awareness. The strategies involve a shift in epistemological and thus ethical relations to modernity. Briefly, for Nabokov, it is the ridding of focus on the self; for Pynchon, comprehending the influences of totality; and for Morrison, the depiction of the always-othered non-self rather than one reduced to normative social assumptions and interpretive practices.

More specifically, each author offers a particular set of insights on which to build. The project at which most of Nabokov's (1899-1977) written work is aimed involves the generation, almost separate from the fabric of reality, of a purely aesthetic world. While much of his project is (at worst) doomed to fail or (at best) susceptible to the inevitably invasive material of the real, it remains useful in seeing what potential arises when an imaginative mind consciously attempts to work outside of and resist established systems. Pynchon (b. 1937), on the other hand, is far more rooted in the project of describing the systemic effects of a totalizing modernity. His daunting narratives (often labeled encyclopedic) depict the overwhelming saturation of apparatuses under which individuals find themselves situated and interpolated. What Pynchon's work portrays is the oppressive and interconnected systems conducting the flow of control in modern life and, most important for this project, the realization of this as a social technology along with the means by which, once understood as such, to subversively navigate it. Finally, Morrison (b. 1931) represents the most directly and aggressively destabilizing personality of this trio. Her

novels adopt as a constituted whole an aesthetic form that seeks to confront and expose the hegemonic systems responsible for the perpetuation of ideologies that come to seem natural but which need not be. Rather than constructing an alternative world or showing the means by which one can navigate the current one, Morrison assails and deconstructions the assumptions that constitute modern reality. Together, these three novelists offer distinct possibilities for epistemological change that can be wrought, and my future work—proceeding this dissertation project—will turn to transforming the literary strategies uncovered here into an actionable praxis that reaches beyond the readership of the novel.

Part I: Introduction to the Problem

"I firmly disbelieve, myself, that our human experience is the highest form of experience extant in the universe. I believe rather that we stand in much the same relation to the whole of the universe as our canine and feline pets do to the whole of human life. They inhabit our drawing-rooms and libraries. They take part in scenes of whose significance they have no inkling. They are merely tangent to curves of history the beginnings and ends and forms of which pass wholly beyond their ken. So we are tangents to the wider life of things."

-William James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (143-4)

I

It is with a mood of mournful lamentation that Toni Morrison closes her second novel, *Sula*, with the endless and serialized sets of "circles and circles of sorrow" (*S* 174). With a similar and rebellious frustration at circularity, Vladimir Nabokov opens his autobiography *Speak, Memory* by stating that aside from suicide he has made every imaginable and creative effort to escape the binds of his spatio-temporal ego "only to discover that the prison of time is spherical and without exists" (*SM* 20). An overwhelming sense of futility and inescapability—a complex mood many might also associate with paranoia and the writing of Thomas Pynchon—that leads to desperation and even despair accompanies contemplations of circularity. Indeed, these novelists share in their dissatisfaction with this diagnosis and each resists the pervasive sense of confinement that seems to blanket the modern world about which they write. If we have a right to expect novelty under the rubric of beings capable of thinking and acting, and if we have also the right to expect progress as the guarantees of modernity have promised, this so frequently invoked circularity indicates that something has gone wrong. As Mark Grief reveals, the language of crisis has recurred repeatedly to address what constitutes the core of humanity, and the effort—particularly from the revelations of the Enlightenment onward where self-determining subjectivity emerged along with the promise of progress—to locate specifically where the origin of this "crisis of man" had arisen (to correct it, one presumes); at the same time, we recognize that the "delineation of a human core emerge[s] in some way to regulate whom to accept and whom to ignore" (Grief 18). Here already the central contradictions of modernity are readily legible where proclamations (free, agency-endowed, dignified subjects) and practices (exploitation and violence, resulting in the denial of human agency) foment this recurrent and unresolved crisis. Maintaining these central contradictions as the condition of its possibility, modernity tirelessly delineates drafts of the free, self-determining subject while it has always sought increasingly sophisticated means to manage bodies and beings. The matter, of course, is more complex than this single contradiction. However, a view to the implications of this opposition—the affirmation of dignified subjects in tandem with their abuse and utilization—brings into relief a great number of complicated concerns. Especially in light of the rapid pace of globalization, individuals are increasingly (and selectively) made to become subjects, capable of being acted on by forces interpolative, invasive, and inevitable. Concordantly, each of the novelists discussed below recognizes the human beings about whom they write as confined inside of something: what for Morrison is a repressive social structure, for Pynchon a system, and for Nabokov a limited but extremely preceptive species. All are concerned with accessing and activating something beyond crisis through literary strategies that identify and subvert it (a crisis issuing from a dominate epistemological configuration which I develop in what follows).

While Morrison, Pynchon, and Nabokov all recognize the human impoverishment wrought by the conditions I have just described—Nabokov reviles philistinism and cliché, Pynchon's novels express concern with the coordinated infantilization of American citizens, and Morrison laments the comatose public that appears pervasive today—none of them resign themselves, or their audiences, to the position these conditions are inevitable. While they seem focused in their novels on describing the various trappings and prisons human beings confront in the contemporary world—prisons of time, mind, race, religion, culture, violence, obsession, technology, addiction, space, place, and so forth—they all disavow the idea that these factors cannot be perceived and avoided. As Nabokov says later in his autobiography, the "spiral is a spiritualized circle" and in the "spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be

vicious; it has been set free" (*SM* 275). Beginning with Nabokov in the early nineteen-twenties, these writers have interrogated humanity's relationship to the modern world in a steady effort that continues through the work of Pynchon and Morrison, both of whom continue to write today. Spanning the early twentieth century and extending now into the twenty-first, the three novelists studied here have borne long witness and made deliberate response to an even more extensive crisis we might call the long modernity.

Though much has been done by scholars to diagnose and understand the evolution of modernity and the constraints it places on contemporary culture and society, the turn to literature and the prospect of imaginative possibilities are key for making sense of lived experience and responding to it authentically. Because fiction corresponds to but is not necessarily bound up with the world, it is the central site upon which this shift can be made legible. Needing by their very origin to adhere to a specific standard, a social purpose, or a legal or moral function, other such sites or disciplinary fields—and frequently literature is as complicit as these—are by their very nature already inhabiting framework of knowledge and assumptions of a specified and historically premeditated kind. The enduring aspiration for newness that is continuously emphasized in our contemporary culture (consider popular discourses supporting ideas of innovation, reform, and revolution) becomes the problem when it inhabits an epistemological framework that prevents it. With its immense gravity and its range of permitted divergences, the epistemology of modernity—generated socially, historically, and technologically—is waiting to interpret and incorporate texts, ideas, and actions: it is the condition under which they are all comprehensively co-opted. To engage in different practices of reading in order to release another meaning with the specific purpose of finding strategies by which an epistemological shift can be rendered or revealed is the central act of this project. It is with the optics framing the problem I have presented that I claim we can and ought to read the three authors on whose novels I focus.

Indeed, writers of fiction uniquely position and reconfigure relationships to the world held to be given, natural, or assumed. As Grief says, because the

> fiction writers' answers had to take stock of truths of American life that the abstract discourse did not—life as a Jew or an African American, life with an orthodox religious faith or hemmed in by pervasive technology—their accounts frequently undid the hopes of the original questions of man precisely on matters of "difference." Undermining the universal pretensions of the discourse, the writers' work anticipated an opposite turn. This was true even when, in their own views, the writers didn't approve of difference. Life in America provoked it. (Grief xii)

Speaking here of the literary culture between the nineteen-thirties and the nineteen-seventies, the three writers I focus on below overlap and extend on both sides the period Grief identifies, and his assessment holds true for the United States today. What also remains true is the gravity of difference as a viable response or solution to the crisis of modernity: the focus each of these writers place on pathways and possibilities *other* than those sanctioned and dominating ones. As I ultimately argue in what follows, Nabokov, Pynchon, and Morrison open spaces for recognizing and utilizing difference. Each novelist presents a literature of what I refer to throughout as a process of *becoming other*—a literature of becoming other. Bound up with this are the strategies I unfold in three parts, each dedicated to one of the authors, to show how and to what end their novels participate in this process. These literary strategies, as I elaborate below,

take place on the level of style and story: that is, as complex and worthy novels, they are strategically indicative and revelatory both in terms of how they are structured, and in the illustrative plights and problems through which many important characters pass and many perish.

My assertion throughout this project, then, is that literature provides a number of strategies for recognizing the ubiquity of this problematic epistemological arrangement. The three novelists upon whom the project focuses, specifically because of their shared critical stance toward modernity and its destructive epistemological formula, provide strategies for both epistemological recognition and, based on that recognition, epistemological alteration. Each identifies a particular compartment (Nabokov: self, Pynchon: institution, Morrison: other) where the weight of this epistemology of modernity is problematically concentrated and each places an enduring emphasis on the power and necessity of imagination to be critical of inherited, prefabricated ideas which oversaturate the social world and are reinforced at every turn in daily life. Such confinement within an ethical hegemony—a system permitting only a limited range of acceptable conduct, contemplation, and resistance in both public and private spheres—restricts the bounds not only of what can be practiced but also what can be safely thought. This system I identify as the epistemology of modernity and, ushered in by the advent of modernization, capitalist relations, and the contemporary continuation of enlightenment reason against which any form of expression must situate itself either in opposition or corroboration. Because divergence is permitted to a certain degree, the possibility of epistemological shifting cannot be achieved by outward participation in such a system and thus must be perceptual: achieved through mentality and self-awareness. The strategies involve a shift in epistemological and thus ethical relations to modernity. Briefly, for Nabokov, it is the ridding of focus on the self; for Pynchon, comprehending the influences of totality; and for Morrison, the depiction of the always-othered non-self rather than one reduced to normative social assumptions and interpretive practices. For this reason, it is necessary now to contextualize both the notion of modernity and the function of epistemology.

II

Modernity is the spatial and temporal ground into which this project inquires. The definitions of modernity are undeniably myriad and I will present only an essential groundwork here. Modernity might be characterized broadly as an interplay of difference and development between human cultures. Charles Taylor presents two theories by which modernity is usually understood: according to one perspective (a cultural perspective), we might view modernity primarily as transformations in the West that have given rise to a new culture; on the other hand (from an acultural perspective), modernity is a transformation wrought by some “culture-neutral operation” that “any traditional culture could undergo” (Taylor 172-3). The latter—associated with empire and enlightenment from a cultural perspective—understands modernity as the growing dominance of reason (scientific, secular, instrumental) as the characteristic transcultural force of transformation which “any and every culture can go through—and which all will probably be forced to undergo” (Taylor 172).[1] Globalization seems to have fulfilled this

---

[1] I’ve provided here only Taylor’s contextualization of modernity. He goes on to argue that two fundamental errors in critical judgment have problematized the concept of modernity further. The first error, according to Taylor, is how readily we presume that all people have always viewed themselves as the West does, through inward/outward dichotomies, resulting in the false conviction that modernity will end up making all cultures look like the West (180-1). The second error is the stubborn conviction that in this global West, the fundamental characteristic of the

prophecy or at least assured its eventual unfolding, and whether we might account for this with a cultural theory (the West's imperial ideology has globalized modernity) or through an acultural one (rationality seems to have arisen initially in the West and now, by that very same imperial ideology it contains, has ensured modernity's globalization), it seems clear that modernity is a malady of the West and a contagious one. In my estimation, modernity is a powerful movement of (Western) culture that projects itself as acultural and in doing so expands its temporal reach in two directions, revising and erasing cultural histories and incorporating what remains. Industrialization, capitalism, globalization, technology, and the advancing phrases that intertwine them and influence culture are among the major conditioners of modernity.[2] This is the general outline under which our contemporary reality is shaped.

Along with a few other conceptual fields that I will present in a moment, these conditions form what I refer to in this study as the epistemology of modernity. I mean by this term the dominant field of interpolations and imposed spatial limitations, the ubiquitous networking and management of beings, and the involuntary conscription of participating subjects that make up the daily machinery of the modern world. I am not seeking to account for the origin or development of this space, but rather am situating my work within it. To clarify the extent to which this epistemological field constitutes modernity, I will briefly turn to a number of thinkers to demonstrate its far-reaching coordinates.

In *The Official World*, Mark Seltzer aligns the titular concept with modernity as constituting a "social-systemic organization that metastasized across the five-hundred-year range of what has alternatively been called the age of discovery, the age of globalization, and the bourgeois half-millennium: an age coming to realization, or to term, in the epoch of social systems and its anthropotechnics—or art with humans" (4). Seltzer argues that a modern world comes to itself by staging its own conditions and has done so to such a degree with the proliferation of advanced technology that lived experience and reported experience increasingly resemble one another and are therefore reducing the available repertoires for approaching experience. We recognize here the recursive dynamics by which reproduction, self-proliferation, and expansion are embedded, so to speak, into its programming. The official world, Seltzer says, is of "necessity always patrolling the dikes of made culture, and in doing so, managing the catastrophes their construction sets in motion" (28). The official world is incorporative. It reports and (thereby) includes what it reports, and so gradually closes off that which is outside of it. The act of recordkeeping—graduated to the massive scale of modernity—becomes an act of generating reality (or at least, an individual subject's concept of the psychic and social space she is capable of occupying). As a preliminary sketch of what Seltzer has offered on a more fundamental scale, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* offers an "official" view of the construction of national identity via circulating print documents. And expanded into today's technological scale, the postmodern "possibility that at an outer limit, the sense people have of

---

contemporary West will somehow manage to persist unchanged (182-3). The major premise of Taylor's proposal about modernity is that our explicit beliefs about the world are formulated against what he calls a "background understanding"—and what I similarly characterize as the inherited ideas wrought by epistemological configurations—and that, if we wish the process of modernity to steer us away from catastrophe, we should shift one "dense constellation of background understanding" for another which places us "in relation to other and the good" (195-6). This makes, for Taylor, a viable cultural theory of modernity.

[2] For a discussion of the variety of other subspecies of conceptual terms (amodern, nonmodern, *ad infinitum*) and a debate concerning the viability of the postmodern as conceptual alternative or response to modernity, see both Fredric Jameson's *A Singular Modernity* (Verso, 2012) and Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard, 1993).

themselves and their own moment of history may ultimately have nothing whatsoever to do with its reality" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 281) becomes a viable avenue of inquiry when we recognize the official world's function of enclosing subjects into its space. Acts of record serve to generate and subordinate subjects, and, significantly for Seltzer, become themselves our collective models for reality.

Bruno Latour presents another modern site of this dilemma in contrasting natural philosophy and political philosophy (by way of the foundational work of Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes). The modern pursuit of knowledge becomes self-enclosing when we recognize that we "know the nature of facts because we have developed them under our complete control" (Latour 18). With these two discourses—let us say, politics and science—Hobbes and Boyle are "inventing our modern world, a world in which the representation of things through the intermediary of the laboratory is forever dissociated from the representation of citizens through the intermediary of the social contract" (Latour 27). Using the rather "official"-sounding term, Latour defines the Modern Constitution (the field of concepts making up modernity) as one which separates humans from nonhumans and pursues both hybridization and purification: because it insists on this "total separation" and "simultaneously cancels out this separation, the Constitution has made the moderns invincible" (Latour 37)—which brings the political and scientific to light as self-producing and self-enclosing.

The social and cultural spheres likewise lean for their production more or less upon themselves and responses to what they have produced. Bourdieu calls such spheres fields—positions established by distinctive properties relative to other positions—and details their practice of subsumption and incorporation as dynamics fueled by the principles of legitimation. These principles include the recognition given of producers by producers, bourgeois taste (which establishes itself in its own positional relation against that society in which it is itself a smaller part) and the positions internal to them, and finally, mass audiences where the choices of ordinary consumers sanction the flower of acceptability (Bourdieu 50-1). In all cases there are consecrating positions against which all subsequent ones are incorporated or stand in distinction, and thus the (re)production of limited variation is closed inward, self-producing, and encouraged to continue by consistent reinforcement. In a familiar dialectical fashion, as the newcomers of cultural production come into existence and "accede to legitimate difference" with respect to their standard-setting legitimators, they "push back into the past the consecrated producers with whom they are compared, 'dating' their producers and the taste of those who remain attached to them" (Bourdieu 107). The most effective and stealthy—that is, subsumed into our regular social codes in such ways that they appear as quotidian a matter of course as anything—are dictated from our institutions of legitimation.[3]

While the foregoing conceptual fields largely disclose their effects in spatial terms between subject positions engaged in repetitive interaction, I would like finally to include the subordination of time—and of perception of its terms—to the epistemology of modernity also as a central factor accounting for its dominance. To put it briefly, we can confidently mark the historical advent of modernity as coinciding with the social transition from concrete to abstract time which continues to dominate our perception of daily life. Moishe Postone calls concrete time that form of temporality understood to be the function of events (that is, time independent

---

[3] For example, Bourdieu writes: "This logic of defending the profession pertains to all the other professions (lawyers, doctors, university professors, etc.), whose permanence in a situation of privilege depends on the capacity to maintain control over the mechanism designed to assure their reproduction, that is, their capacity to recognize, in the double sense of identifying and consecrating, the legitimate members of the profession" (251).

of events) understood through natural cycles or human tasks or processes prevalent to the arrival of capitalist society in Western Europe; while on the other hand, abstract time is that which sees time as an independent variable, one divisible into "commensurable, interchangeable segments" or "equal, constant, nonqualitative units" (200-3). With abstract time—or clock time—our daily lives are more or less divided into segments which are more or less determined (general division between personal time and social time, labor time and leisure time, etc.) so that modernity's conception of time "stands above and determines… individual action" (Postone 214). Time in some sense becomes itself a thing subordinated to place and space in modernity: time as the abstract determiner of traffic between institutions that variously legitimate subjectivity, citizenship, personhood, and humanity. A better way to put this—rather than time being subject to subordination—is to say that the epistemological configuration of modernity encloses its subjects into a perspective of time as Postone has specified. The various institutional and individual relationalities thereby mediated reinforce this perspective as well and come to dominate the flow of social and psychic life. This is what is at stake in matters of epistemology when brought to bear upon the world itself. Quite obviously, capitalism undergirds much of this, as modes of economic exchange and production arise from and give birth to additional modes of social exchange and production. In this, too, time begins to resemble a self-perpetuating enclosure.

If modernity is the temporal and spatial framework for this project, epistemology is the theoretical one. I turn now to delineating how I am using the term epistemology through elaboration of an example.

III

Once the Earth was a flat disk and now it is a sphere. And once, the celestial bodies circled our stationary home before the machinery of the heavens was upended and the Earth jolted out of its inertial motionlessness to orbit around the sun. That the establishment of knowledge—the assertion of a truth—seems to undergo drastic changes that have drastic consequences not only for the human beings who develop (or discover) it but also the very stuff of reality is a testament to the instability of our ways of knowing. It also speaks to the mutability and continuous contingency of how we currently understand knowledge. As one example among many, the heliocentrification of the solar system presents an instance in which contentions of the changing physical world are pitted against those of the as-yet-unknown-but-absolute organization of the universe. That this change is anything other than the correction of a bygone technical and methodological limitation I imagine is difficult for contemporary readers to arrive at or take seriously, which is just the same attitude, I also imagine, of the pre-Copernican world. Indeed, to move a planet or arrest a cosmic vortex is no uncomplicated task, be it with the tools of mind or those of matter. As Thomas Kuhn points out, many of Copernicus's contemporaries thought him mad because at that time Earth's position was fixed. Thus, Copernicus's "innovation was not simply to move the Earth" but rather comprised a "whole new way of regarding the problems of physics and astronomy" that altered the nature and definition of both Earth and motion, conceptual changes necessary to make a moving Earth plausible rather than impossible (Kuhn 149-50). Although Flat Earth Societies still exist within the Western world, I feel it is safe to ascribe certain dispositions—the heliocentric universe for one—that our culture holds in common, but which does not require the complete investment of all of its members to function.

Of course, all of this involves Kuhn's notion of paradigms without which, he claims, there could be no normal science (100). In what sounds like something that might inspire trepidation in thinkers like Adorno and Horkheimer who view the rationalizing pageant of the Enlightenment and its legacy as the general antagonist of humankind, normal science can be defined as a "strenuous and devoted attempt to force nature into the conceptual boxes supplied by professional education" (Kuhn 5). A paradigm—the conforming network of assumption, concepts, and models that fuel a practice of inquiry and function to draw out novelty (anomalies) by its contrasting rigidity (Kuhn 64-5)—serves as a foundation for research rather than a truth: what we might call a kind of working truth which, as we will see shortly, resembles some of the characteristics of pragmatism as championed by William James.

Kuhn's discussion of paradigms is restricted to the professional scientific community and a discussion of their conceptual implications and consequences—the contexts out of which this domineering method arose and that into which it is routinely employed—are beyond the scope of his study (which is descriptive rather than critical). Extended beyond the scientific community, though, his structural description of paradigmatic functioning represents itself a model for understanding the progression—not necessarily into "positive" directions—of many things, including the concept of epistemology at the center of this study. As the description of a purely professional disciplinary process, the paradigm moves science forward in a dialectical process, and, even though scientific revolutions upset and alter the paradigmatic assumptions of communities of scientists, paradigms require strict adherence to generate novelty. Put in these instrumentalized terms, the consequences of such a structure are elided and neutrally packed into a disciplinary process. Dislocated from this neat context and placed in the framework of culture, we can extrapolate a wide variety of problematic results emanating from paradigmatic adherence as a standard practice. Even within the theoscientific framework, we think rapidly of heretical charges and executions. We readily imagine what this has wrought when one considers the modern judicial systems and the political support that extends their legitimacy (racist judges holding fast to states' rights and reluctant to increase the scope of what kinds of beings constitute citizens and what subjects and what neither).[4] At this vantage we recognize that what makes the paradigmatic model so powerful as a disciplinary description is its successful reproduction of the larger context out of which it arises and separates itself by elevating notions of objectivity. The salient point here is that the paradigmatic structure (as a scientific discipline) grows from older and more fundamental principles that are, I will argue, matters of our epistemological condition in modernity.

While a paradigm presumes the revisionary and dialectical movement toward Absolute fact or truth, epistemology tries to close—and enclose—conceptual parameters. Gregory Bateson argues that epistemology involves communal agreements about the nature of the universe we mutually inhabit and the nature of knowledge, and further that "many of these propositions happen to be false, even though we all share them" which means in consequence that in the case of such "epistemological propositions, error is not easily detected and is not very quickly punished" (486). More specifically for Bateson, these kinds of "misnomer[s] arise naturally from the Anglo-Saxon epistemological tendency to reify or attribute to the body all mental phenomena which are peripheral to consciousness" (320), which seems to be another way of declaring the

---

[4] Kuhn acknowledges these underlying connections that render our cultural institutions inseparable in his own language of science where a "paradigm is rarely an object for replication. Instead, like an accepted judicial decision in the common law, it is an object for further articulation and specification under new or more stringent conditions" (23).

Cartesian binary fields serving as the foundation of Western epistemology to be deeply erroneous. Critiquing the Hegelian school whose investment in notions of the Absolute is heavy, William James's assertion is as succinctly applicable to the fields of religion and science as well: namely that the consequence of an Absolute permits us to "treat the temporal as if it were potentially the eternal, [and to] be sure that we can trust its outcome, and, without sin, dismiss our fear and drop the worry of our finite reasonability," which amounts for James as having the right "ever and anon to take a moral holiday" (*Pragmatism* 41). In other words, the Absolute erases ontology (for Christians: eschatology; for science: the material cosmos) from the world and replaces it with guarantees. To put it another way yet, investment in belief of the Absolute allows one to become a subject (in the modern sense particularly) since the ways of knowing and being are largely restricted within a complex sociocultural sphere—an epistemology. Identifying an epistemology—which as Bateson puts it "contains within it assumptions about how we get information, what sort of stuff information is" (486)—allows us to understand that we occupy a kind of virtual reality, an understanding of the world *brought about* by a combination of unalterable material elements (the facts of existence) and radically alterable conditions arising from what we might most broadly call culture. This study is concerned primarily with the latter, which has come up with innumerable agreements about how to understand and act upon the former.

Epistemology in this formulation is not necessarily a deterministic prison, but it does represent a limitation that is difficult to surmount. William James opens his lectures on pragmatism by pointing out that each person has their own philosophy that determines their perspective of the universe, but I would hasten to add that this philosophy is nested within an epistemological field. For James, true ideas do not contain some "stagnant property inherit" in them—they are not, in the vocabulary Kuhn would prefer, objective and external to human consciousness—but truth is what "*happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events" (97) when they "*help us get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience*" (34). It is that which makes a concrete difference in its being true or untrue. Unlike relativism,[5] which forecloses on the pluralism James advocates, truth in this pragmatic construction is both personal and negotiable to various degrees when it allows shared understanding of and increased access to the scope of our common time and space. It requires only a cursory survey of the most pressing issues enunciated in national and world news reports, and the various conflicts wrought by proposed solutions from any ideological position, to see that our connections at the social and epistemological levels between events and truths do not often lead us into satisfactory relations with the various parts of our experiences. As Amy Hungerford reveals, following Charles Taylor, it is impossible to maintain a religious belief today without understanding that others do not hold that same conviction and indeed hold contrasting and sometimes fundamentally hostile beliefs; and this conflict is by no means retained within private, religious discourse but extends into the secular and public spheres.[6] It is an epistemological charge that the dominant configurations of

[5] While truth for James are those ideas that can "*assimilate*, *validate*, *corroborate*, and *verify*" (97), an authentic assertion of relativism makes no such demands upon shared consensus in its articulation of truth and can easily find more company in solipsism than notions of truth. The world for James is pluralistic, but it is always one and the same world. James also confesses, in one of his many attempts to defend pragmatism from his critics, that his articulation of truth has been more misunderstood by his detractors than the general thrust of his arguments.
[6] See Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton, 2010). The publication of Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) falls within the period covered by Hungerford.

truth in the secularized West—in which under capitalism and advanced neoliberalism[7] one must participate without needing to endorse—are inseparable from systematic and convinced aspirations for the absolute. This is most readily legible in religious and scientific discourses which complement or condemn one another but which nonetheless presume a grasp on or a way to the absolute, both through belief systems. The inherent and demonstrable enclosing of plurality that such systems of thought and practice are what James laments because they throw into crisis the expectation of novelty to which he understands we are all entitled. James does, after all, level his account against those great systematizers—Hegel and Kant[8]—who have primed all subsequent philosophy to respond to their formulations in order that interpretation of the universe might become complete. But for James, echoing what I have already said about epistemologies, the "universe is a thing wide open, but rationalism makes systems, and systems must be closed" (20). Kuhn's description of the scientific paradigm is no exception to this, being both indebted to the Hegelian dialectic for its ability to claim eternal priority as it persists in an endless loop and to a Kantian coldness that separates humanity from the rest of nature and urges us to have faith in objectivity. Indeed, Kuhn's description appears on its conceptual surface to present a system prepared to incorporate, eventually, all claims that arise to supplant it: such a discursive apparatus is self-perpetuating and comes to appear ironclad and eternal (what better kind of system might there be, as a scientist or a scholar, for which to advocate?). As a historical marker, the Enlightenment can be demarcated as initiating this great intellectual lineage whose problematic dominance continues its reach into the future. Surely this itself arises from a much earlier and more fundamental division between humanity and nature, between mastery and servitude, but I am focused in this project not on accounting for the origin and rise to dominance of this epistemological arrangement but rather on its continuing and problematic effects and on its seemingly unshedable tenants. Despite what intellectual awareness we might acquire concerning such an epistemological arrangement, "we are most of us governed by epistemologies that we know to be wrong" whose "lunacy… leads inevitably to various sorts of disaster" (Bateson 193-5). Epistemological errors set dangerous precedents. In the realm of normal science—itself an articulation of a larger and more substantially consequential epistemology—the tradition is to hold fast to these errors until they are overwhelmed, to have faith in the paradigmatic structure and devotion to "that interpretive enterprise... [that] can only articulate a paradigm, not correct it" (Kuhn 122). James, too, is pleased to "plunge forward into the field of fresh experience with the beliefs our ancestors and we have made already" which "determine what we notice" (122), but recognizes that "in the end it is our faith and not our logic" that determines our reality (142). For James, the world is open and free to become; for Kuhn, and, I would say, the entire enterprise of modernity, it is predetermined and pressured to fit until it collapses beneath the weight of its own resistance. In its active awareness of its own limitations, James' construction of pragmatism already contains the benefits of paradigmatic thinking while avoiding the dogmatic loyalty to established procedure which for science—and its methodological extension into the modern world—elides both its drastic consequences and its missed potential.

---

[7] See Inderpal Grewal's *Saving the Security State: Exceptional Citizens in Twenty-First-Century America* (Duke UP, 2007).

[8] James also finds that the philosophical stage of criticism has yielded little in terms of practical power, and calls Locke, Hume, Berkeley, Kant, and Hegel "utterly sterile, so far as shedding any light on the details of nature goes" (91).

Locked as we are in what might be termed the totalizing clutches of capitalism, the hindering heritage of Enlightenment thinking and enduring imperial ideology, the tightening pall of globalization, or some perverse combination of these not-always-interchangeable dynamics, it seems obvious that a search for new ideas and relationships that reside outside these confines is imperative but also increasingly problematic and nearly impossible. Our protests too frequently become participants in what we oppose. I contend that this is a problem of epistemology that can be answered by a particular type of literary writing that reorients readers by destroying their expectations in favor of new relationships rather than confirming what is already present in the world. This project establishes itself around two major questions. The first, which serves to frame the foundation on which the project proceeds, is this: how do we come to understand that there is, in the first place, an epistemological confine in which our thoughts operate in a limited capacity, to say nothing of the actions that proceed from them? The second question constitutes the bulk of the project's concern: how might we recognize and avoid the pitfalls of these epistemological confines? How might we find ways not to adhere to their discursive and ideological gravity? How might we take revolving discourses concerning postwar technological society, issues of race and immigration, and transcultural movement in new directions? How might we imagine not a different world, but a different set of relationships to the world? In a general sense—historically and culturally—this project addresses the central issues undergirding the foundations upon which the modernity we collectively occupy is constructed.

What I hope to have demonstrated in a preliminary way, so that the epistemology of modernity may serve as a maxim for what follows, is that there is no sector of our contemporary world—neither in the realms of media or bureaucracy or journalism (Seltzer), nor in science or rationality or politics (Kuhn, Latour), nor in art or literature or entertainment (Bourdieu), nor in temporality or labor or identity (Postone)—that is not saturated by the problematic dynamic I have demonstrated above. That dynamic is self-reproducing and self-referential because it is powerfully fast but fundamentally uninnovative; it is self-isolating because its fundamental structure is dialectic; and it is self-destructive because it is necessarily uncompromising (despite its amorphous appearance) and expansive. This is why I suggest these dynamics of thought are embedded epistemologically in the core of modernity. With globalization's steady march this threatens to be the fate of all things, and so presents us at this moment ever so slightly closer to a general catastrophe scholars have long foreseen.

III

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) is the first creative artist covered (Part II) because his narrative project represents an aesthetic attempt to inaugurate a response to the problem outlined above by identifying the ideologically ironclad barriers that constitute an epistemological framework as rooted in the self. It is this notion of the modern self to which modern subjectivity so tightly clings that Nabokov works to erode by means of articulating the unspeakable, rendering otherness as familiar rather than foreign, and recognizing our own complicity in not only producing it but embodying it so that we might let go of one epistemological notion of the self and conceive another. Each of the four sections dedicated to Nabokov centers on the examination of the self as one of the central problems of modernity, and the central problem that Nabokov addressed throughout his work, which can serve as one network of strategies for

effecting the epistemological shift with which this project is concerned. In brief, they appear thus:

- §1 Nabokov's Ekphrasis—lays out Nabokov's artistic consistency and aesthetic commitment to placing imaginative power and agency in the hands of the individual, and establishes the guiding thesis of my reading of Nabokov: namely, that his aesthetic is of an epistemologically ekphrastic nature that offers a strategy for shifting epistemological perspectives.

- §2: Ridding the Self: *Mary*—discusses the self-transformative potency of the (auto)biographical form, which Nabokov very consistently employs, and proposes the need for self-imposed loss and an intentional relinquishing of the self. I use Nabokov's first novel *Mary* to show how imagination can be employed to unburden the self, as the main character willingly constructs a world from the memories, lives, and mourning of others to resign his own ego, all without the ego-centric requirement of an audience.

- §3: The Ultimate Encounter with Otherness: *Lolita* and *The Enchanter*—constitutes a theoretical discussion of reading practices and ethical claims often leveled onto characters, discussing ways in which *Lolita* and *The Enchanter* reveal the reader as the chief othering party, prepared to condemn characters and sentence them to harm for the very same shortcomings permitting them to make those very judgements.

- §4: A Democracy of Ghosts and the Pain of Strangers: *Pnin*—offers an enduring roadmap of self-resignation, empathy, and human understanding by way of one of Nabokov's least known (or least discussed) novels, *Pnin*, in which the title character serves as the most significant specimen of one who enacts—as a form of life—the solution to the problem of the self.

This is followed in Part III by an examination of Thomas Pynchon's (b. 1937) narrative project which largely portrays the oppressive and interconnected systems conducting the flow of control and information and creating subjectivity in modern life. More important for this project, Pynchon's efforts at the representation of what many scholars consider an open work or a totalized world—a kind of epistemological cartography—urge us to dissolve the easy binary oppositions that sustain the current epistemology. Rather than perpetuate the illusion of binary separation, Pynchon reveals these presumed differences to be indistinct and coextensive (for example nature/mankind, organic/technological, human/non-human, institution/individual). Thus we can come to recognize the composition of subjectivity beyond individual agency (and responsibility) and to understand, with the shift this strategy has wrought, a new way to navigate the world with different relationships. That we come to understand it as a social technology that has constructed impressions of individual subjectivity rather than an anteceding essence better prepares us for navigating the confines of one epistemology and moving toward another. The four sections on Pynchon build this argument as follows:

- §1: Interpretive Confusion and the Encyclopedia Entry: *The Crying of Lot 49* as Prefatory Guide—claims that Pynchon's novels are encyclopedic only in the sense

that they are able to set in motion an endless potential of links (a referential mania that is overwhelming) that can be followed without termination; that also, by way of an illustrative scene in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the scholar attempting to master these links comprehensively will only be contributing additional material to a doomed and repetitive endeavor.

- §2: Pynchon's Cartographication—a holistic discussion of Pynchon's narrative project, discussing: the means by which Pynchon's novels, as open systems that both reflect and are reality, reveal the epistemological fallacy in any attempt to map the total world with claims to confidence.

- §3: Technology and the Museum of Humanism—focuses on one thematic example to illustrate the holistic point advanced in §2 above throughout Pynchon's work: the oppressive/liberating potential of technology that helps us to recognize the non-steadfastness of our own epistemology.

- §4: Toward Becoming Other: Navigation and Escape—offers, in summary, Pynchon's solution to the identified problem of cartographication (this process by which we are all trying to know and map the world in pre-established frames) as that of mental transformation, navigational equipment for coping with modernity, and an epistemological escape. Central to Pynchon's narrative project is an attempt to increase understanding and awareness of one's position in a much larger field (a map—of which a human subject can be both subject of and object upon) and how the composition of one's lifeworld is constituted by that map: although, it need not be because the dominant means is not the only way to make maps.

Finally, Toni Morrison (b. 1931) represents the most directly and aggressively destabilizing personality of this trio. Her novels as a constituted whole, discussed in Part IV, adopt an aesthetic form that institutes an ethical imperative to dismantle the current epistemological framework. In confronting directly a solidified field of ideas whose oppressive tenants have come to seem dangerously routine and natural, though they need not be, Morrison offers understanding, however difficult or frightening, as a strategy in which different possibilities can be opened and different relationships established. Morrison's is the most radical, comprehensive, change-inducing strategy for confronting the problems laid out by this project. Together each of the strategies advanced by these three narrative projects—recognition and resignation of the self, the acquisition of navigational techniques and the disillusion of binary considerations, and the confrontation of foundational formations with the ethics of understanding—provide a solution for overcoming the historical confines of the dominant epistemological framework. Part IV proceeds as follows:

- §1: Touched but Not Moved: Morrison's Ethical Aesthetic—offers an exegetical reading of Morrison's statement that readers of her first novel remained "touched but not moved" (*BE* xii) in an attempt to articulate the foundations of her narrative project as being grounded in the transformative power of an aesthetic production that seeks to strip the ethical of dominant and problematic meaning.

- §2: Whole Lives and Virile Maturity—takes up the task of articulating Morrison's epistemologically altering aesthetic (and ethic) by arguing that the central strategy in her narrative project for achieving such a shift is the depiction of whole lives.

- §3: Failures of Imagination—considers, in light of the call for a new form of reading susceptible to being moved and becoming other discussed above, the bereaved imaginative capacity on the part of both characters in Morrison's novels and of her readers in relation to modernity's reading practices.

- §4: Space to Understand: *Love*, *Paradise*, and the Afterworld—culminates the progressive argument of the previous sections in claiming from the radically frightening Morrison gives us understanding as a new epistemological framework for inhabiting the world.

This project establishes a new set of interpretations of three important twenty-first century writers whose largely neglected relationship and contemporary relevance collectively offers a series of strategies for reflecting upon, criticizing, and challenging the dominant conceptual frameworks exerting themselves today.

This project is framed around each author's contemplation and confrontation of the problem presented above. To put it another way: one does not choose Morrison (or Pynchon or Nabokov) because one wants to know more about her or because she has been misread in the past and can now be revealed in a new light (though this can be true), but more than anything one chooses Morrison because an examination of her work is useful in articulating the problems and potential solutions to the more crucial difficulties outlined above.

A tight and tidy way to read this dissertation is to proceed with the expectation that the strategies presented proceed from and build upon one another so that: (a) first one grapples with the philosophical self in Nabokov, recognizing one's presence in a wider (ekphrastic) constellation; (b) then one turns one's attention, after the self, to Pynchon the social world that constitutes his central subject matter, to institutions as machines for producing structures of order and subjectivity; (c) then, combining the insights of Nabokov and Pynchon (self and society; institution and society) one witnesses through Morrison the infectious reinforcement wrought by the epistemology in question, multiplying prejudice and causing the self to internalize sordid messages about its place in the imposed pattern of the world. Where Nabokov gives permission to create the world, Pynchon describes this creation of this world in hands more myopic and less imaginative, and Morrison shows how impoverished imagination and minimized space for creativity destroys the quality of life for individual subjects residing in modernity's epistemological sphere. But the fact is that all of these steps are chaotically intertwined—so perhaps this dissertation can help to give a more precise vision of each strain, how it might be isolated and meditated upon, and how these complex interrelations might be recognized more readily for and diverted into a wider project—expanded beyond the realm of literary analysis—focused on effecting shifts in epistemology.

Part II: Nabokov and the Problem of Self

"Nabokov doesn't do firm ground."

-Galin Tihanov, The Harvard Institute of World Literature: "Exilic Writing and the Making of World Literature" Seminar, July 8, 2015, Lisbon, Portugal

"The foreigner, precisely—like a philosopher at work—does not give the same weight to 'origins' as common sense does. He has fled from that origin—family, blood, soil—and even through it keeps pestering, enriching, hindering, exciting him, or giving him pain, and often all of it at once, the foreigner is its courageous and melancholy betrayer."

-Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (29)

"But real life laughs at logic's veto."

-William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (257)

"The same here is none other than the other. It has at least the figure of the other. The necessary *consequence* of this strange configuration is an opportunity for thought."

-Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (7)

§1: NABOKOV'S EKPHRASIS

I

An author or writer or philosopher need not be or embody one, singular aspect in his life or work. Considering that Nabokov almost destroyed the draft of *Lolita*, we might think of him and all his previous and future work differently—or not think of him at all—had that novel never appeared before the eyes of readers, or had another novel made him famous. In the afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov describes how he had taken the unfinished draft "as far as the shadow of the leaning incinerator on the innocent lawn" when he was "stopped by the thought that the ghost of the destroyed book would haunt my files for the rest of my life" (*AL* 312). Nabokov thought, too, that he had destroyed what he calls a pre-*Lolita* novella that rehearsed some of the themes of the famous future novel and was to be translated into English as *The Enchanter*. How we might have read Nabokov had these texts been immolated on the pyre of artistic false starts can only be speculative, but the point remains that such works of the artist threaten to consolidate into a set of manageable themes or ideas a far more fragmented and rich set of artistic attributes. As a possible exception to the mutable examples listed above, Nabokov does exhibit an extraordinary consistency across the entire body of his writing. As he seems to assert on many occasions, his fully developed artistic perspective does not require an outside to contend or debate with. And this is why he—or, more properly, those artist-readers for whom he produces his work—can have his own Gogol, or his different Pushkins against those conventional, domineering interpretations in modernity's discourse. The critics, too, have their different Nabokovs. My hope here is to outline some of the ways in which Nabokov has been read, and to assert that some of these interpretations are rooted in particular kinds of understanding, be it humanist (Boyd) or transcendent (Alexandrov) or modernist (Maddox). Yet, to point them out as such—as though pulling on the metafictional characteristics of Nabokov's self-aware prose—stands, I think, as a first effort to move into seldom-visited interpretive territory. Briefly, the review that follows constitutes the majors strains—and the major scholars—of Nabokov scholarship under which most others situate themselves in one way or another: the point here is to articulate the several dominant strains by which Nabokov's aesthetic is usually defined before mutating a few perspectives and spinning off my own understanding of his narrative project which will become the central driving force for what follows.

Perhaps the most famous, prolific, and authoritative Nabokov scholar, Brian Boyd is the author—among many other works on the man and his art—of Nabokov's comprehensive two-volume biography, which is at once a description of his entire life and an interpretation of all his work. In the opening pages of the first volume—*Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*—Boyd emphasizes three primary traits that should stand out about Nabokov and his art and goes on over some 1,300 or so pages to unfold these in great depth. Identifying the author as a constant loner, Boyd posits the "unequaled self-assurance" that we have already seen in Nabokov as among the characteristics that allow his art to flourish onto new critical grounds and which also accounts for the charges of isolation so redolent in the scholarship (*RY* 4). Aside from showing the means by which a worldview permeates all aspects of life—from art, to politics, to sports—this brief example also helps to explain why Nabokov claimed never to belong to, and often expresses contempt for, literary schools of thought, groups and organizations, or any such homogenizing entities: they threaten to stifle the individual. Thus, Boyd's classifies Nabokov's

"intense, almost ruthlessly concentrated feelings toward others" as a second major characteristic of his personality.

Such disposition gives birth to the widespread assertion that Nabokov is or creates creatures of cruelty (*RY* 4). As Boyd writes, although Nabokov "allowed few people to become his friends, he loved his father and mother, his wife and son, with extraordinarily fierce devotion" (*RY* 4), providing yet more cause to understand Nabokov as an isolated, self-referential artist caring little or nothing for the outside world.

However, Boyd's third and most significant statement about Nabokov helps to account for a fracture in the scholarship where some continue to see Nabokov as an isolated, unmeaning, and purely aesthetically concerned writer who has nothing but style—the negative side of humanism, as one might argue—while others go the route celebrating unique, individual genius and divergent thinking. Boyd, emphasizing Nabokov's "unrelenting individualism," follows this latter pathway, lauding the positive side of the humanist project through Nabokov by writing that he "refused to allow his tastes or strong opinions to be tempered by his times, and he detested groups, generalizations, conventions, anything but the particular and independent" (*RY* 4). This provides Nabokov the individual with his artistic strength and insight. Nabokov himself makes claims to support this view of the supreme, unique power of individual consciousness, quick to qualify the traps those generalized thinkers and commonsense users are apt to fall into: "Besides dreams of velocity, or in connection with them, there is in every child the essentially human urge to reshape the earth, to act upon a friable environment (unless he is born Marxist or a corpse and meekly waits for the environment to fashion *him*)" (*SM* 302). This world-reshaping drive essential in the human allows Nabokov to develop and delve into the cruelty often bestowed upon his characters. Despite this, Boyd calls Nabokov the man "quite 'normal': lucidly sane, outraged by cruelty, committed to faithful love after a youth of sexual adventures" and goes on to see his own task as trying to explain why

> Nabokov could create characters as bizarre as Humbert, Kinbote, or Hermann and allow us to see out from within their minds...Because Nabokov valued the liberating force of consciousness he felt he had to understand how people could be imprisoned in madness…Here his interest in psychology shades into his philosophical interest in consciousness, the overriding concern of all his art. Although Nabokov insisted on the critical use of reason, he had no faith in expository argument and scorned discursive fiction, leading many readers to assume he is all style and no content. In fact he was deeply serious as a thinker—an epistemologist, metaphysician, moral philosopher, and aesthetician. (*RY* 4-5)

Rather than understanding him as an unfederated isolato, Boyd finds Nabokov's disposition, both in art and life, as deeply concerned with human issues, the power of consciousness, and the potential of the imagination to unlock perceptions that rise above and extend beyond common or ordinary understanding. This is why Boyd renders him as a mixture of epistemologist, metaphysician, moral philosopher, and so many other things at once. Rather than having his art reduced to escapism, Boyd maintains that Nabokov wants the "good reader to step through and enjoy the detailed reality of the outside world" and yet rewards even more the "good *re*reader who ventures far enough [and] finds another door concealed in what had seemed that solid landscape outside, a door into a new world beyond" (*RY* 5). What can be criticized as a humanist preoccupation with self-elevation and self-reverence can also be understood—and I will argue

for the primacy of this perspective below in considering Nabokov's aesthetic as ekphrastic—as a means by which the investigation of others can be used primarily to understand the self, be it in alignment with empathetic, warm concepts of wider human unity (though it need not bear the label of humanism).[9]

While not necessarily in conflict with Boyd, Alfred Appel Jr. adopts a more exclusive claim about Nabokov's body of work. In his very long and insightful introduction to *The Annotated Lolita*, Appel argues for a more solipsistic and aesthetically concerned Nabokov than Boyd, which is not to say that he dismisses the legitimacy of the latter's claims. In fact, in stark agreement with Boyd, Appel writes that the "ultimate detachment of an 'outside' view of the novel" when considered as its own, autonomous aesthetic world as Nabokov so often claimed that it was, "inspires our wonder and enlarges our potential for compassion" because "such compassion is extended to include the mind of an author whose deeply humanistic art affirms man's ability to confront and order chaos" (xxxiii). Implied with Appel's claims is an ontological empowerment by which man or artist is capable of generating or arranging from the disinterested and harsh world something solid, reliable, and fundamentally enabling the possibility of meaning—the ordering of chaos to create significance.

If this is the aim of art Appel retains the contention that Nabokov's art "must be seen as artifice" (xx), that the "transcendence of solipsism" is a guiding concern throughout his work (xxii). Citing how a butterfly or moth frequently appears at the conclusion of a Nabokov novel, signaling the completion of a great pattern or a sequence of designs, Appel asserts that Nabokov "records a constant process of becoming—the evolution of the artist's self through artistic creation—and the cycle of insect metamorphosis is Nabokov's controlling metaphor for the process" (xxiii).[10] However, the resistance to solipsism arrives when we realize that this process is not exclusively about the author or confined to the private project of the artist creating the evolving work. Were it merely this, were the only concern, as Appel points out, the evolution of the artist himself, for himself, by himself, then it would remain the solipsistic self-isolation Nabokov is, as I will claim, fighting against. A butterfly larva can emerge from its chrysalis and

---

[9] Along these lines, Morrison writes in her essay "The Site of Memory" that her artistic ideas about representing the usually-silenced interior of the/an other in her writing, memory, and imagination—citing Frederick Douglass, James Baldwin, and Simone de Beauvoir in this instance—begins not with herself, but elsewhere: "these people," she says, "are my access to me; they are my entrance into my own interior life" (74). Rather than allowing a "memory" to dictate how it will be represented, Morrison states that her "route is the reverse: The image comes first and tells me what the 'memory' is about" (73).

[10] For Lukács, too, the novel "appears as something in the process of becoming" whose rules do not reside within a finished form, making it the "most hazardous genre" (72-3) but also the most ontologically empowering for the possibilities it might potentially actualize. Situating the novel as a non-teleological form, Lukács can embrace the humanist potentiality without placing a ceiling on human capabilities. As he writes more apropos of Appel above, the novel—like the self-generating artist—effects a "firm balance between becoming and being" and by "transforming itself into a normative being of becoming, surmounts itself" (73). For Lukács the rise of the novel—with its focus on individuality, its status as fallen, its representations of the structural reality of the eminent, contemporary world which longs to be transformed, and its protagonists who are, above all else, seekers—is correlated with the emergence of modernity as a unique and dominating epistemic era with its own rules and relationships that separate it from the epoch(s) preceding it. Thus, he situates the proliferation of the fallen exclusively within what I am describing as the epistemology of modernity. While Lukács finds in the modern, fallen world the possibility of renewal or restoration through the novel, this very potential threatens to slip into the problematic and poisonous facades that Adorno and Horkheimer have identified as the culture industry and the enlightening, liberating powers technology provides us with, and so does the illusion that, as Raymond Williams has pointed out, we have somehow succeeded in separating ourselves from nature and exist in a domain that is separate from or oppositional to or sovereign over it.

blossom by itself, but a novel cannot. And one central point of the metaphor Appel employs (and Nabokov, too) is to illustrate the process by which an increase is elicited—in the case of the insect, not only an increased awareness in moving vantages from the horizontal to the vertical[11] but also a great flourishing of beauty and complexity beyond utility indicating the two-in-one possibility of what is always already there; in the case of the reader or character, a heightened awareness beyond the confines of the self-contained ego indicating an at least two-in-one capability of a perception that is always already there in potential.

In explaining these conceptions, Appel places an emphasis on Nabokov's *Nikolai Gogol* as a means of understanding his art, making some direct analogies between Nabokov's treatment of Gogol and Nabokov's own artistic practices. Just as all reality—in Gogol and in reality for Nabokov—is a mask, there are for Appel two "plots" taking place in Nabokov at least: that of the characters interacting within the fiction, and that of the creator presiding over those interactions (xxvi). Because of this, Appel claims that the "strategy of involution has determined the structure and meaning of Nabokov's novels" and that involution stands as the central characteristic of Nabokov's art (xxvii). By this term, Appel means the way in which fictional characters come to recognize and interrogate their own inauthenticity and the way in which readers are invited to participate with or be the victims of authorial intrusion into or out of fiction. Appel provides seven interrelated strategies by which Nabokov accomplishes this involution—parody, coincidence, patterning, allusion, the work-within-the-work, the staging (as in, with theatrical or dramatic elements) of the novel, and the intruding authorial voice—and argues that these serve to render discernable the "total design of his work, which reveals that in novel after novel his characters try to escape from Nabokov's prison of mirrors struggling toward a self-awareness that only their creator has achieved by creating them" (xxxii). As readers, I will claim, we too are offered this possibility of self-awareness that is extended to but seldom actualized by Nabokov's characters, and we often fail for the same reasons as the characters to take up this perception and put it to productive use, imprisoned as we are in the assumptions of conventional readership and the prison of the self. Such failures to understand or perceive attributed to the characters in Nabokov's novels can be extended as a criticism of the critics that Appel is attempting to combat in arguing that Nabokov's is not a body of work intent on isolating itself but rather on transcending the trap of solipsism by extending the faculties of self-awareness to characters and reader—or if not extending this ability, at least offering it. Indeed, many characters and critics fail to perceive it or remain unwilling to pick it up.

So neither Boyd nor Apple forwards the unqualified claim that Nabokov is wholeheartedly embracing solipsist principles as many readers of Page Stegner's *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov*—one of the first monographs on Nabokov, published in 1966—came away understanding, though Stegner, as De la Durantaye succinctly implies, finds Nabokov's art as a flight away from the "unethical worldviews of fascist political regimes" (16) rather than a general withdrawal from the world. Rather, Boyd and Appel among others find that Nabokov's employment of the solipsistic, the metafictional, and the involuted work functions for a purpose other than pure aesthetic separation.

In a similar vein oscillating in the other direction toward the claim of solipsism, Lucy Maddox understands Nabokov's work to be predominantly metafictional, finding that the "real conflict" takes place "between the narrator and his narrative, and if there is a winner, it is the

---

[11] See Justin St. Clair's essay "Borrowed Time: Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* and the Victorian Fourth Dimension" (*Science Fictions Studies* 38.1, 2011: 46-66) for another accurate means of spatially representing this claim about Nabokov for widening perspective.

narrative" (3). For her, the creative imagination—and the creative imagination of the characters—is the villain in Nabokov's work because it "succeeds in keeping his characters from ever confronting reality with the inverted commas removed" (6) and thus permits their continued artistic imprisonment. As she writes, providing a precise example of the iniquities of imagination in Nabokov's characters, the

> most tortured of Nabokov's characters are those who fail to distinguish between the ideal images of imaginative art and the actual people and processes of ordinary life. These characters—Humbert Humbert is perhaps the clearest example—are haunted by images which never have belonged to the world of actuality, and never can… The creative imagination can clarify and animate the given world, but it can also breed monsters who make that world a hell for themselves and others. (6-7)

It is here, in the darker, more dangerous side of imaginative potential, that she places Nabokov's focus, saying that his central concentration is on the question of what we—characters, readers, individuals—can make of diminished things (memories, relationships, aspirations, and so forth). Placing Nabokov squarely as a modernist with the likes of Joyce, Proust, and James because of the means by which subjective representations of perception generate the style of their novels, Maddox emphasizes what she calls the "fatal obsession" of Nabokov's characters to somehow fix or freeze some aspect of reality eternally for their own undiminished possession (5; 9). She adds to this the element of the erotic—an aspect of Nabokov's work so pronounced in *Lolita* and prodded over by critics—and claims that such sexual desire in Nabokov's narrators represents a "perfectly appropriate synecdoche for that compulsive need to possess the world beyond the self, to possess it sexually and intellectually, that is the real subject of the novels" (10). As a result of this fleeting need to fix the external world through a withdraw into the capacities of the imaginative interior, such characters become "predictably pathological" (12) for Maddox because they are divorced from the authenticity of the real that has already disappointed them in the very process of trying to impose and solidify their own version of it. In this view, the problematic accusations associated with solipsism—the ethical dimensions and dilemmas—are placed squarely on the characters as their frequently monstrous attributes are highlighted in order to be deplored and disparaged and they are elevated as negative examples of myopic personalities incapable of empathy or understanding beyond themselves. The problem Maddox locates at the heart of these negative characters and at the root of the poisoned imagination is a perspective that does not conform to the tenants of modernity, a set of characteristics—moral, ethical, philosophical, perceptual—that stand outside a standardized set of public, political, and civil modes of social behavior.

For Leland De la Durantaye, too, the issues of Nabokov's art are situated upon a moral or ethical base. Although De la Durantaye focuses almost exclusively on questions of *how* to read *Lolita* in particular in *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, his emphasis on the art of Nabokov as a moral endeavor can be extended beyond Nabokov's most famous novel. Rightly claiming that Nabokov's own emphasis on *Lolita* as a book without a special message or moral meaning results from his concern that the art itself might be misunderstood or reduced through this conception, De la Durantaye still maintains that "*Lolita* is a moral book in the simple sense that from its first pages to its last it explicitly treats moral questions" (190). This is true—or can be made to be true—about almost any book. Indeed, while the reader of *Pale Fire*,

for example, may delight and laugh at the personality pirating and increasingly apparent obsessive efforts of Charles Kinbote to insert himself into John Shade's life and art and close the book amused with the comic craziness of a seemingly insane and benign character (despite the resultant murder in the novel) or simply dismiss it as an entertaining instance of art for art's sake, the serious reader—the reader Nabokov always has in mind—should certainly engage with the dilemmas the novel produces: the tremendous harm perpetrated on the self and others through personal convictions, the effects upon and erasures of the lives and legacies of other people, the pathetic and depressing delusions of the self-certain, and so many other things.

Evoking Kant on the one hand and Hannah Arendt (along with her "teacher and first love" [5] Heidegger) on the other, De la Durantaye foregrounds empathy and judgement as among the strongest concepts in Nabokov's work. With Arendt, he understands that evil or cruelty arrives in acts of thoughtlessness, in the "inability or unwillingness" to see or think from another's standpoint, which is often pointed to as an arch-attribute of Nabokov's characters (5). With Kant, De la Durantaye discerns judgement and taste, these lines separating the "personal and partisan" to determine a subjective truth, as imperative for thinking from the standpoint of an other (11). Kant makes clear, in De la Durantaye's words, that what the "modern spectator is expected to be is before all else, *disinterested*" and that art by Kant's time—having distanced itself from Plato's fear of divine terror—required an eye "discerning because it remained cold, and with a heart wise because kept within the bounds of reasons" (9-10). *Lolita*, as De la Durantaye claims and as Nabokov's other works also attest to, makes this line difficult to discern. What stands out in De la Durantaye is the need to confront the complicated moral questions raised in the novels which are all the more imperative because of the means by which they manipulate and even entrap or implicate the reader in their deceit and deviance, but also the suggestion that there is a preeminent and preexisting standard or criteria—as Kant so systematically traced—by which to make and maintain these difficult judgements he argues we are entreated or required to make.

De la Durantaye finds convincing parallels between *Lolita* and *Madame Bovary*, the least of which are accusations of obscenity, because of the challenge that both Flaubert and Nabokov locate in "creating empathy for what might so easily have been repugnantly banal or immoral" and more so in both finding the content alluring because repugnant (12). To transform the latter into the former remains the formal challenge to which both authors found themselves called. But while De la Durantaye points this out, he does not initially or explicitly make a case for *why* this repugnance of content makes an alluring artistic challenge, nor why this content is best suited to these writers' projects.

Taking a different view on the ethical, Michael Wood argues for the artistic process to be itself a form of morality. Along these lines, he writes in what is for me a brilliant encapsulation of Nabokov's aesthetic outlook and dedication that the

> very lightness of [Nabokov's] novels conceals mountains of weighty preparation; the slightest glance of joke often depends on hours of pedantry, summoned, worked through, and abolished, as if Ariel needed Prospero's books, but also needed to let them go. Or as if art were itself a morality, a form of cathedral sculpture demanding all the most care because it may well be seen only by God. (2)

This statement finds a rich resonance in the title of Wood's book—*The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*—and the great risk and reward of art is that in the intimate process of reading certainty will be lost. While Wood explicitly claims that the ethical is difficult to discuss yet vital, he finds that this is the "realm of the unspeakable for Nabokov" that is pronounced everywhere in his work and, as Wood writes, such "moral questions, like epistemological ones, are put to work in [Nabokov's] fiction" but "Nabokov does not write about them; he writes them" (7).[12] Following Barthes—and also employing the agency-inscribing separateness of the author function and the text with Foucault and Derrida—into the advent of an entire family of lowercase authors and the multiple Nabokovs with which this provides us, Wood posits that Nabokov is attempting to construct "memory and understanding as a function of loss rather than as a redemption of it" in his writings, and that might refuse or rewrite history (5; 234) in order to prevent himself from becoming swallowed and erased by it. The great patterning and precision of his work points toward the potential to redeem loss (95) and if irony, silence, and the uses of fiction—three primary characteristics in Nabokov's writing for Wood—are the means by which this is accomplished (7), then Nabokov is working toward the construction of something that will endure beyond him, not for the immortal gratification of a monstrous ego but as a tool and testament for others concerning the possibility of accessing other shores, other worlds beyond the received one.[13]

If the marriage of the metafictional and the metaphysical[14] in Nabokov scholarship has become as commonplace as attention to the ethical, then Vladimir E. Alexandrov has been instrumental in shifting the primacy of the focus away from the perspective that Nabokov is principally a practitioner of stylistic self-reference, narrative involution, and playful prose bordering on narrative traps designed to ensnare readers in a complicated, exclusive game of literary trickery and allusion. Accordingly, his primary aim is to "dismantle the widespread critical view" that Nabokov is "first and foremost a metaliterary writer" and to suggest, in a direction that none of our scholars so far have explicitly moved, that Nabokov follows an "aesthetic rooted in his intuition of a transcendent realm that is the basis of his art" (3). Ten years prior to the publication of Alexandrov's *Nabokov's Otherworld*, William Rowe published a short, similarly-themed study entitled *Nabokov's Spectral Dimension* in which he sought to produce through a series of brief, novel-by-novel explications[15] the vast examples evidencing

---

[12] Such a statement is applicable to Morrison's work as well, as will be discussed at length in Part IV below. Morrison too, and Wood himself, will suggest that, like Nabokov, Morrison "re-enacts, by example, the questions raised by the emergence of competing knowledge" and also "refigures knowledge itself in the light of what fiction can and cannot do" in an essay entitled "Sensation and Loss" that focuses on *Paradise* and applies to Morrison more widely (144).

[13] While the English title of Nabokov's autobiography is *Speak, Memory*, its first title in America was *Conclusive Evidence* and it was called *Other Shores* in Russia and France. As Wood writes, Nabokov does not "doubt his own sense of his existence, but he clearly feels he needs to prove his past to others, since his earlier life, his spectacular loss of family, home and two refuges in exile, must seem unreal to them, a fancy, a legend" (28)—a claim that is flimsily upheld if we are to take Nabokov's own words seriously, but which directs us more importantly toward the merging of fiction and reality that will be addressed in the next section.

[14] See De la Durantaye, 16.

[15] Another similarly structured study of Rowe's is entitled *Nabokov's Deceptive World*, and seeks to showcase the variety of formal methods—negation, meaning, sound effects, symbols, and so forth—by which Nabokov manipulates readers with his intricate prose. In a brief review entitled "Rowe's Symbols," Nabokov admits no contention with the first two of Rowe's three sections, but writes that he "must protest vehemently against a number of indecent absurdities contained in the third part entitled 'Sexual Manipulations'" and proceeds to assail the Freudian school and the "symbolism racket" (*SO* 304-5).

Nabokov's use of ghostly presences which, far from disappearing after the person's death, continue to exert an influence upon the direction of the narrative from the shrouded, mysterious beyond, highlighting Nabokov's enduring interest in the hereafter.[16] While Rowe makes obvious the spectral presence haunting Nabokov's work, Alexandrov brands it the central preoccupation in Nabokov's art and philosophy, finding it as the "heart of his oeuvre" that has escaped the attention of readers and scholars for some sixty years (3-4). Both Rowe and Alexandrov—the former enabling the latter—employ the Russian word *potustoronnost* that Nabokov's wife Véra mentioned[17] permeated everything her husband wrote. Nabokov translates the word as "the hereafter," which situates his preoccupation with the otherworldly dimension. For Alexandrov, elevating this preoccupation as the pinnacle of Nabokov's art, the centrality of such a concept reveals Nabokov's persistent faith in and fixation with a transcendent realm. This claim, Alexandrov himself says, flies in the face of many Nabokov's critics because they take his attention to intricacy as an effort at self-enclosing which shuts out "real" world and thus miss the point that Nabokov is rendering in his art a set of profound connections that he perceives in the world at large. As Alexandrov explains, referring to the repeated themes running through lived life beyond art in *Speak, Memory*, the harmonies Nabokov sought to elucidate

> obviously means patterns in human life, which, together with mimicry in nature, constitute one of his major forms of evidence for the existence of a transcendent otherworld… This suggests that Nabokov's characteristic practice of filling his fictions with epiphanic *structures*—with networks of concealed details, the connections among which emerge suddenly—is an aesthetic embodiment of a metaphysical experience. (30)

Thus, the "single most important manifestation of the otherworld for Nabokov is patterning in life, nature, and art" (41) and the examples of such connections in all three of these areas are legion throughout Nabokov's writing. It is the process of becoming aware of this pattern—and of Nabokov structuring his fiction in such ways that his readers might become aware of the watermark of authorial presence that has analogies to the outside world not to be undermined or dismissed by diminishing the relevance of the creative imagination—that underlines the elevation of human consciousness.

With frequent reference to Nabokov's essay "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" collected at the end of *Lectures on Literature* and presumably delivered at the conclusion of a semester of Nabokov's lectures on his European masterpieces, Alexandrov emphasizes the centrality not just of the gleaming otherworld that shines through the work but also the means by which Nabokov's ethics are aligned with a ultimate morality of goodness. As Alexandrov writes, Nabokov's ethics "emerge as absolutist, not relativistic, and [are] as intimately connected to his conception of artistic inspiration" (53). Common sense is to be defied, rejected, and, ultimately for Nabokov, murdered, and a writer should destroy it, as Alexandrov puts it, by pursuing the "secret connections" among his "figures of speech, rather than accepted, conventional, and therefore stultifying literary prescriptions" (53). Indeed, this attitude extends far beyond the practice of artistic production for Nabokov, and his entire worldview can be said to revolve

[16] "Those readers [who] label Nabokov pessimistic, cruel and lacking in soul," Rowe writes, are "presumably unaware of the spectral dimension, of the persistent attempt to push beyond the boundaries of human consciousness, throughout his work" (108).

[17] See Alexandrov 3-4, 8, and 234, note 4; and Rowe, 108.

around it. The reason that the commonsensical is so appalling and unacceptable for Nabokov, I hope is by now clear: the generalization, the simplification, the cliché, the *poshlust*[18]—all of these are clusters of carelessness that occlude the vision we might glimpse of a higher reality, of another world. Alexandrov, then, understands Nabokov's ethics as rooted in a morality emphasizing the transcendence of a world beyond our own, and though Nabokov never invokes the name of God, or affiliation with it in any form, is it this otherworld (presumably a more perfect realm whose patterns descend in a Platonic fashion into life and which can be imitated in art) out of which he develops an ethic that is absolute.

All of these varying perspectives display the different aspects of Nabokov's project that have been made central by scholastic emphasis. As I said before, these strains weave together to produce a large view of the field of Nabokov studies—that is, the categories criticism typically places emphasis on when Nabokov is under discussion. As should be clear by now, attempts to distill from this heap of interpretative possibilities the real or true Nabokov is muddy and difficult and probably impossible and pointless. Nabokov himself would likely agree. Where Boyd seems to elevate the individuated genius of the author and espouse a staunchly humanist perspective, Alexandrov foregrounds an acquaintance with the world beyond that is both ethical and absolute; where Appel finds that the involution consistently spanning the style and texture of Nabokov's work posits the possibility of a transcendent experience or understanding, Maddox agrees with the metafictional emphasis without the metaphysical concerns and focuses on the problematically poisoned imaginations of his negative narrators and the harmful effects this wreaks on the world; and where De la Durantaye insists on the importance of the moral questions that Nabokov's readers are forced to confront by the mere content of his novels, Wood insists that Nabokov's work broaches the realm of the unspeakable and its own aesthetic morality, that Nabokov generates ethical concerns and does not merely address them.

Some divisions between these views are remarkably subtle and deserve further exploration, while others should be markedly obvious. While the content each focuses on is rather easily distinguishable, there remains a clear separation between those scholars remarking on *how* we should read Nabokov (Maddox, De la Durantaye, Appel) and those claiming precisely and essentially what Nabokov is at his core (Boyd, Alexandrov, Wood).

II

What I want to suggest is that we read through Nabokov's writings with attention to how his narratives provide strategies by which we become aware of and potentially escape confines of inherited assumptions—what I have labeled above the epistemology of modernity. I hope to do so by proposing that Nabokov provides a total view of the work of art. In doing so, he identifies the self as a central problem and aesthetically advocates the disillusion of the bounds of the ego, both as a possible means his work provides (in Wood's sense that Nabokov writes the ethical rather than writes about it) and as a lesson he attempts to teach through his characters (in Appel's sense of involution).

---

[18] In a 1966 interview with Herbert Gold, Nabokov identifies "corny trash, vulgar clichés, Philistinism in all its phases, imitation of imitations, bogus profundities, crude, moronic and dishonest pseudo-literature" as obvious examples of *poshlust* and goes on to elaborate this ornate list rather extensively (*SO* 100-101). He also discusses the term in his annotated translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, and Alfred Appel writes that to Nabokov Charlotte Haze is the "definitive artsy-craftsy suburban lady—the culture-vulture, that travesty of Women, Love, and Sexuality" who typified the "essence of American *poshlust"* (*AL* xlvii).

Despite the widely held understanding of Nabokov as an exclusively metafictional writer, most of the scholars I have mentioned make efforts to break away from this form of reading. Surprisingly, even those who highlight this aspect of Nabokov's work are unsatisfied with a hermetically enclosed literary world. Perhaps the reason for this revolves around its inability to extrapolate anything beyond itself, which is clearly not true, as a reading of any Nabokov novel will make clear. The problem of pure monadic fiction is that it may resonate, as Nabokov says about his novel *Invitation to a Beheading*, like a "violin in a void" (*IB* 7). Another reason for this flight from the purely metafictional concerns the need not to reduce or generalize or imprison such novels in safe, pre-interpreted frames of enclosed meaning: that is, to stop with the surface claim that it is an involuted work, a metanarrative, and thus sweep over the wider implications and shut the book as though its relevance were reduced to a fancy game with no significance. None of this, of course, is to claim that Nabokov is not a metafictional writer—indeed, he inevitably is—but as Alexandrov has claimed, this is not the *only* thing he is.

Nonetheless, there remains a great deal of evidence that bears out the claim that Nabokov's project is a solipsistic one, and plenty of room to accuse the man himself of harboring an elitist, superior disposition toward the world—the generalized masses he seems so willing to dismiss—and thus the kind of arrogant, self-obsessed, overly confident character that he creates in his own fiction: a man who can be, like those characters, cruel to others and outsiders. One can cite the aristocratic upbringing the author enjoyed, the educationally enabling wealth, the enormous, inherited estate Vyra outside Saint Petersburg where he wandered and developed, and the intellectual and cultural heritage that resulted in all of these combined as a way to account for what would continue to be an existence that remained quite separate from the general, vulgar world. In his autobiography, Nabokov remarks on the ancestral physiognomy of his grand and famous family members as "they recede through the picture gallery of time into the shadows" of a distant Russian and Germanic past, and, without reproducing here the many examples Nabokov provides, he states that the "number and diversity of contacts that my ancestors had with the world of letters are truly remarkable" (*SM* 53-4). Elsewhere, he tells of how when his Uncle Ruka—a man who had a "colorful neurosis that should have been accompanied by genius but in his case was not"—died, he left Nabokov "what would amount nowadays to a couple of million dollars and his country estate, with its white-pillared mansion on a green, escarped hill and its two thousand acres of wildwood and peatbog" (*SM* 71-2). This was in 1916, when Nabokov would have been around the age of sixteen or seventeen, and the disinterested tone he often adopts toward matters of wealth comes through strikingly with this casual mention of a massive inheritance. Furthermore, the nostalgia he harbors, that he "cherishes," for the pre-revolutionary era of his upbringing is a "hypertrophied sense of lost childhood, not sorrow for lost banknotes" (*SM* 73).

That such a privileged upbringing and family history enables Nabokov to persist in the worldview that he develops—but which seems to be almost fully formed from his childhood—can serve as an insightful explanation for his ethics and his personal, artistic disposition (and for his metaphysics as well, grounded as they are in a safe, confident, worry-less world). This can also be an invitation for criticism.

Despite his ironclad confidence and the consistency of his worldview—and all the charges of problematic isolation that often accompany it—it is through looking at the self-criticism of his own early poetry that we find Nabokov in the most nascent state. I say nascent state because Nabokov indicates that in his youth he was already aware and in the process of separating himself from the influence of other writers, and part of this consistency can

be accounted for with the retrospective nature of reflection and autobiography. Nonetheless, it is the search in art for the unencumbered self that Nabokov places at the forefront of his development. Later, as I will argue after this process is complete, the erasure or disillusion of that self arrives as the second portion of his project.

In the spring of 1916 Nabokov published a book of poems written for his then-lover Tamara—who is virtually reincarnated in his first novel *Mary* which is discussed below at length—poems he calls "juvenile stuff, quite devoid of merit" and which "ought never to have been put on sale" (*SM* 238). Despite this too-late realization they were, and Nabokov relates two brief anecdotes in which his naive art was harshly criticized, a way in which he himself would critique later "masters" of fiction in his own lectures and interviews. In the first instance, his Russian literature teacher—"a first-rate through somewhat esoteric poet" himself whom Nabokov expresses admiration for—brought a copy of the book to class in order to publicly "apply his fiery sarcasm" to it and provoke the "delirious hilarity of the majority" of the class; in the second, the teacher's famous cousin asks Nabokov's father to tell his son he would never become a writer (*SM* 238). Most importantly, though, Nabokov relates a third instance in which a "well-meaning, needy and talentless journalist" who owed his father a favor wrote an "impossibly enthusiastic" review of the book which his father was able to capture before it went to press. In good spirits, Nabokov is thankful for this, and recalls

> Him [his father] and me, while we read it in manuscript, grinding our teeth and groaning—the ritual adopted by our family when faced by something in awful taste or by somebody's *gaffe*. The whole business cured me permanently of all interest in literary fame and was probably the cause of that almost pathological and not always justified indifference to reviews which in later years deprived me of the emotions most authors are said to experience. (*SM* 238-9)

Thus, Nabokov's self-pronounced immunity to criticism—which consistently comes through in all of his writing—derives in part from this youthful error and results in the disintegration of his need to be read or praised by others. On one hand, it is a move of self-protection; on the other—and we can have them at the same time—it is an effort at artistic incubation and growth. Together these create a suitable environment for the blooming of an art unencumbered by the expectations of others.

If criticism has been done away with as an area of concern for Nabokov's developing art, then influence must be approached and slaughtered as well. Nabokov's discussions of his early poetry and his first novel are among the very few times that he is self-critical concerning the quality of his artistic ability. As he describes the trancelike intensity he experiences while composing his first poem, he admits that as an

> innocent beginner, I fell into all the traps laid by the singing epithet. Not that I did not struggle. In fact, I was working at my elegy very hard, taking endless trouble over every line, choosing and rejecting, rolling the words on my tongue with the glazed-eye solemnity of a tea-taster, and still it would come, that atrocious betrayal… It did not occur to me then that far from being a veil, those poor words were so opaque that, in fact, they formed a wall in which all one could distinguish were the well-worn bits of the major and minor poets I imitated. (*SM* 220-1)

He goes on to say that in his "foolish innocence" he believed the poem was a "beautiful and wonderful thing" but realizes that it was "indeed a miserable concoction, containing many borrowings besides its pseudo-Pushkinian modulations" (*SM* 224-5). While Nabokov would maintain the intense carefulness in composing his work for the rest of his life (the infinite care that Wood so accurately describes above) he would shed, or claim to shed, these other influences completely. Those early poems of his youth, he writes, were "hardly anything more than a sign I made of being alive, of passing or having passed, or hoping to pass, through certain intense human emotions" (*SM* 217) as though to say early volleys and aborted false starts were only preliminary until he could locate the unhindered space to make his own worlds rather than imitate or dwell within the worlds of others.

Decades after the composition of this first poem, as he penned the foreword to the English translation of *Invitation to a Beheading*, Nabokov would write that he could

> never understand why every book of mine invariably sends reviewers scurrying in search of more or less celebrated names for the purposes of passionate comparison. During the last three decades they have hurled at me (to list but a few of these harmless missiles) Gogol, Tolstoevski, Joyce, Voltaire, Sade, Stendhal, Balzac, Byron, Bierbohm, Proust, Kleist, Makar Marinski, Mary McCarthy, Meredith (!), Cervantes, Charlie Chaplin, Baroness Muraski, Pushkin, Ruskin, and even Sebastian Knight. (*IB* 6)

Indeed, this is not the only place Nabokov dismissed influence altogether, or claims himself as his own influence either directly or through the employment of anagrams and pseudonyms.

To return to the charge of solipsism or elitist self-isolation, it is more accurate perhaps to say that in observing the difference between the young poet Nabokov and the later, more fully formed novelist we notice the emergence of an authentic artist. That is to say, he is critical of his early poetry because it is not *his*—it is Pushkin's, or pseudo-Pushkin's, or whoever else that is *not* Nabokov: it is imitation rather than foundation; it is the hampering inheritance which produces myopia; it is the prefabricated, received conventionality that dilutes and distills and evaporates originality into the wading pool of the common; it is a falling into the acceptance of the already-composed, generalized world that precludes larger vision. What Nabokov dislikes and distances himself from is the anti-solipsistic disposition because to not do so would be to accept as inevitable the trajectories that precede one, epistemological and otherwise. And for the same reasons, he deems as destructive the ignorant absorption of what others have already said and done and identifies the need to break away from that ubiquitous and easy invitation in favor of pursuing and reaching beyond an unencumbered self.

III

The ninth chapter of *Speak, Memory* serves an exemplary instance of Nabokov's artistic control as he moves through the somewhat distanced, cold, cruel, and self-obsessed mode that some readers use to generalize him to the warm, empathetic, powerfully moving, particular specificity of an intimate experience whose range is representative of a miniature masterpiece of literary achievement in the span of twenty pages.

Originally entitled "My Russian Education" when it was published in 1948, this piece focuses on Nabokov's father, as Nabokov uses a large cloth-bound scrapbook his mother kept for

many years filled with papers and notes and such matter along with his own recollections to construct a brief biography. The interjections into the conventional biographical genre are fewer and less flourishing than those Nabokov permits himself in *Gogol*, but are nonetheless present, arising as parenthetical apparitions or briefly inserted judgements. Early on, Nabokov mentions that some thirty years after his father graduated with a law degree from the Saint Petersburg University a fellow student mailed his mother a copy of *Madame Bovary* that had belonged to his father and which the senior Nabokov had labeled the "unsurpassed pearl of French literature" on the novel's flyleaf (*SM* 174). Nabokov takes a moment to uphold this, calling it a "judgement that still holds" (*SM* 174). Nabokov also criticizes his father's artistic tastes, saying that in addition to the prolific writings his father produced on politics and criminology he knew the work of poets of several nations very well and elevated Stendhal, Balzac, and Zola—"three detestable mediocrities from *my* point of view," Nabokov puts in, though he concords with his father's veneration of Flaubert, Dickens, Pushkin, Tyutchev, and Fet (*SM* 177). The other details of the brief biography are mostly presented matter-of-factly: Nabokov's father was highly politically active, having his court title dissolved by imperial decree in 1905, serving as president of the Russian section of the International Criminology Association, elected to the First Russian Parliament, where he "made several splendid speeches with nationwide repercussions," imprisoned for some months after the dissolution of the Duma by the Tsar and forbidden to run for elected office while still permitted to participate in antidespotic politics ("one of the paradoxes so common under the Tsars," Nabokov adds), fined by the government, and so on (*SM* 173-9).

All of this information is useful in viewing the context out of which Nabokov comes, but it remains, while superior in terms of style, in large part withdrawn. Even the mention of his father's murder is delivered in this fashion—almost simply incidental—as Nabokov enumerates more of the man's activities, writing that after going into exile his father edited the "liberal émigré daily *Rul'* ('Rudder') until his assassination in 1922 by a sinister ruffian whom, during World War Two, Hitler made administrator of émigré Russian affairs" (*SM* 177).

In the second part of the chapter, Nabokov turns to his eleven-year-old self, his enrollment in school, and writes that although his father was very active, as "often happens with the children of famous fathers, I viewed his activities through a prism of my own, which split into many enchanting colors the rather austere light my teachers glimpsed" (*SM* 186).[19] The chapter comes to revolve around a duel that Nabokov's father is set to participate in resulting from the unpronounced "insinuations that my father could not let pass" published in a Rightist newspaper (*SM* 188).

The chapter builds up to this event of a Russian duel—"a much more serious affair than the conventional Parisian variety"—with Nabokov's recollections of his father, as though the man's life flashes before his son's eyes: Nabokov attempts to transfer the image of his father fencing in full padding to the rural dueling grounds, remembers the manner in which the poetry of Pushkin flowed from his father's lips and relives the famous Russian duels described by every Russian writer (Pushkin and d'Anthes, Lermontov and Martinov, Sobinov and Lenski), recalls the kindness of an "inherent humanity" in his father's attitudes toward family and servants alike, and highlights one particular instance of his father capturing a butterfly with childish urgency so he could show it to his young son (*SM* 188-93). All of this Nabokov depicts himself recalling as

[19] In a vein consistent with his later artistic sensibilities, he also writes that the "constant pressure upon me [at school] to belong to some group or other never broke my resistance but led to a state of tension that was hardly alleviated by everybody harping upon the examples set by my father" (*SM* 186).

he rides home on the day of the duel, contemplating his father's mortality and uncertain if the man will be alive or dead when he arrives, but dreading the possibility of the news. He is met with relief and a profound welling-up of emotion as he arrives to find his father and family at home surrounded by cheerful noises, knowing instantly that the duel has been called off, that the offending party has issued an apology, that his father is alive, and that

> ten years were to pass before a certain night in 1922, at a public lecture in Berlin, where my father shielded the lecturer (his old friend Milyukov) from the bullets of two Russian Fascists and, while vigorously knocking down one of the assassins, was fatally shot by the other. But no shadow was cast by that future event upon the bright stairs of our St. Petersburg house; the large, cool hand resting on my head did not quaver, and several lines of play in a difficult chess composition were not blended yet on the board (*SM* 193)

as though to sever the connection between two now-past events, or to erase the latter entirely, and remain in the healthy, happy, splendid emotions of his father's life. The residue of that brilliant glow—of his father's survival—outshines and overlaps the chapter's initial opening, and successfully moves from the somewhat cold, even cruelly withdrawn, to the madly affectionate and emotionally moving and luminous recollection of Nabokov's own heart, creating a more total picture not only of his father, but of Nabokov's artistic sensibility.

I would like now to come to my own assertion concerning Nabokov's narrative project, which I argue is ekphrastic in nature. Traditionally understood as a powerful narrative description (and here I refer primarily to the textual) that is visually evocative of some other artwork, art form, or art object (seaside vernal births, Romantic urns, classic shields), I propose Nabokov employs an ekphrasis on the levels of both story and style, which is to suggest an ekphrastic dimension on the narrative level. Although metafiction certainly qualifies as form of ekphrasis wherein artwork makes reference to itself or its own artificiality that concurs with Nabokov's work, I mean to emphasize the perceptual dimension any form of ekphrasis implies and to extend it in Nabokov's case to a different set of coordinates. I mean to emphasize the perceptual dimension—as will soon become clear below—implied by ekphrastic that grants access to a full picture at once: Nabokov's aesthetic is ekphrastic in that it represents a holistic and total landscape by which the reader might perceive the global aspects of the work—as a world itself—and the world without the noise and tribulation and limitations of immanent, locally situated position. In performing such a reading, a way in which a total (or more total) view becomes a means to escape—or shift away from—a modern epistemology that focuses on the self, elevates the individual and their unique subject position in a particular facet of space-time, and promotes the preeminence of the local (itself a form of solipsism).

Thus, a pervasive tendency to read reductively by focusing on one or a few aspects of a novel or story as they are presented to us and obscure a larger picture must be resisted. The briefest glance over *Lolita*'s reception history, or a summary of a novel from what Nabokov might call the non-expert reader or simply the non-reader, illustrates this point clearly. What for others is Nabokov's embrace of solipsistic art—the art for its own sake that Nabokov himself would dismiss—instead emerges as a means by which to avoid the self-centered, localistic traps that limit wider perception and confine the range of possible connections (and thus, the scope of human understanding) to the immediate. Rather than this, however, I claim that Nabokov's seemingly solipsistic approach serves to avoid the generalizing tendencies of modern readers and

provide, through what is usually perceived as a flight from reality, a fuller, totalizing view of reality that is instructive for the project of locating a new epistemological relationship to our surroundings.

How one ought to read and how one must be taught to perceive the world is consistently at the center of Nabokov's work. Where Alexandrov, for instance, accounts for this with reference to a transcendent otherworld, I find a means of viewing the world beyond the confines of the phenomenological self or ego. It is a pushing to the limits of thought or consciousness, which also explains how approaching such sensations might be accounted through descriptions of the transcendent or mystical. If ekphrasis traditionally makes reference to or reveals the connections between various forms of art generally divided into distinct categories (a synestias of mediums), Nabokov's employment as I am using it makes legible a similar indivisibility between art and life which the metafictional and involutionary tactics of the author, rather than formulating a world of aesthetic solipsism, bring into more prominent relief.

Looking to Nabokov's description of his own writing and to his claims about reading corroborates this ekphrastic viewpoint. When asked about his habits as a writer, Nabokov says he composed his earlier novels in chronological order but relied heavily on "mental composition, constructing whole paragraphs in my mind as I walked the streets or sat in my bath" until his novel *The Gift*, when he switched to his more famous method of writing his novels with pencil on index cards (*SO* 68-9). Nabokov says he finds "cards especially convenient when not following the logical sequence of chapters but preparing instead this or that passage at any point of the novel and filling in the gaps in no special order" (*SO* 69). In another interview, Nabokov describes the same compositional method more precisely:

> There comes a moment when I am informed from within that the entire structure is finished. All I have to do now is take it down in pencil or pen. Since this entire structure, dimly illuminated in one's mind, can be compared to a painting, and since you do not have to work gradually from left to right for its proper perception, I may direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing. I do not begin my novel at the beginning. I do not reach chapter three before I reach chapter four, I do not go dutifully from one page to the next in consecutive order; no, I pick out a bit here and a bit there, till I have filled the gaps on paper. This is why I like writing my stories and novels on index cards, numbering them later when the whole set is complete…and when I finally feel that the conceived picture has been copied by me as faithfully as physically possible—a few vacant lots always remain, alas—then I dictate the novel to my wife who types it out in triplicate. (*SO* 31-2)

In his composition Nabokov is trapped neither by the forward flow of linear creation nor by the chronological confines of linear time, and he will make a great effort—especially in his later novels, *Ada* and *Look at the Harlequins!*—to confront the problem of time and the limits within which human consciousness can conceive of it. But here, he releases the chronological, linear confines of composition from their confinement, and in his lectures on literature, recommends that reading itself be done in the same way. For he cautions us to understand the term *reader* loosely, writing that

> one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader… When we read a book for the first time, the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation. When we look at a painting we do not have to move our eyes in a special way even if, as in a book, the picture contains elements of depth and development. The element of time does not really enter in a first contact with a painting. In reading a book, we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it. We have no physical organ (as we have the eye in regard to a painting) that takes in the whole picture and that can enjoy its details. But a second, or third, or forth reading we do, in a sense, behave toward a book as we do towards a painting. (*LL* 3)

He is recommending that we read the book not in episodic chunks or temporarily connected units as conventional readers, but that readers reread until the work can be comprehend holistically. “Only myopia condones the blurry generalizations of ignorance,” Nabokov says, and in “high art and pure science detail is everything” (*SO* 168). In a private conversation with Alfred Appel, Nabokov relates that in his case, the “differentiation in artistic and scientific vision is particularly strong because I was really born a landscape painter, not a landless escape novelist as some think” (*AL* 414-5).

The ekphrastic in Nabokov is not the description of a single picture, but the projection of an entire prose project. That is to say, not a device on display but the culminating effect of extensive stylistic subtlety. This is why patterning, concealment, detail, and overall artistic control are the center of Nabokov’s craft: he weaves a total picture rather than an assemblage of parts. This is why Maddox claims that the true conflict in a Nabokov novel is between the narrative and the narrator, and why Appel asserts that the action of the characters and their consciousness of their creator constitute the two plots in Nabokov’s stories. It is why holistic patterning—total design—plays so important a role for Nabokov, and why it has unchangingly remained at the center of his practice since his very early work. Boyd claims that Nabokov’s third novel, *The Defense*, arises as his first masterpiece in which he “perfected the surface of his art and at the same time discovered how to plumb its depths” (RY 321) in the form of converging coincidences and intentionally textured patterns. Finally, it is what enables Alexandrov to claim that the “hermeneutic imperative” of Nabokov’s work “consists of numerous, intimately interwoven strands of motifs” which serve in their totality to “invariably transcend the ken of even the most percipient of the characters, who at best see only a fraction of them” (NO 14). That is to say, even the most aware of these characters have trouble envisioning the entire picture in which they are painted or placed and suffer as a result in the same way that—and this is the claim that will develop as this study progresses—readers often myopically misrecognize the possibilities of Nabokov’s novels interpretively and this ekphrastic view of the world they are capable of imparting. While we are accustomed to looking only locally from a horizontal vantage within the scope of modernity, Nabokov provides us with the vertical vision that sees entire landscapes rather than immediate topographies: to see beyond the self is the ekphrasis that constitutes Nabokov’s narrative project.

In this way—as we might gaze on the entirety of a painted landscape at once, moving our eyes from place to place at will, focusing on separate parts while maintaining an awareness of

the whole and the blending of those parts to create it—Nabokov provides across the entire structure of the novel holistically beyond the immediately available sensory and ideological input of the ego. This effort—in first dealing with the problematic, thorny tangles of the self—presents an alternative way of viewing the world, both physically and perceptually as we are trapped in space and time (an enclosure Nabokov will assail often), as well as ideologically or epistemologically because of the conventional ways in which we are interpolated to view the world (the endless assault of the *poshlust* and generality that evacuates the critical faculties Nabokov so painstakingly sought to cultivate in his art and his students). Really born a landscape painter, Nabokov provides rereaders not only with an entire world within the novel, but also the possibility of the overlooking spectator position rather than the participatory position within the painting itself. This will become of the highest importance as Nabokov works to dissolve the problematic bounds of the solipsistic self (which accounts for most every individual occupying the modern world), and the constant metatheatrics and metafictional ploys are designed not to ensnare the good reader—although they do indeed work to do this—but rather to direct him on *how* to read, on how to see beyond the immediacy of narrative, on how to disband that very self who reads for more potent purposes.

§2: Ridding the Self: *Mary*

I

Nabokov wrote the introduction to his first novel, *Mary*, forty-five years after the book's initial publication. As it arrives to English readers now, reviewed and refreshed and available in the author's own translation, Nabokov calmly admits "no embarrassment in confessing to the sentimental stab of my attachment of my first book" or the "artifacts of innocence and inexperience" that constitute what he identifies as the readily perceptible flaws it obviously contains (*M* xiv). Having already written at this point in 1970 when this introduction was published what many consider his three masterpieces of English prose—*Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Ada*—and asserted himself far beyond the mundane volleys of artistic ineptitude, Nabokov reflects on the influence his first novel exerted on his subsequent artistic development. Most importantly he accounts for those defects and sentiments as a beginner's step, however necessary, that should and must be overcome. In this reflective light of nearly half a century, Nabokov prefaces his novel with the first piece of insightful information:

> The beginner's well-known propensity for obtruding upon his own privacy, by introducing himself, or a vicar, into his first novel, owes less to the attraction of a ready theme than to the relief of getting rid of oneself, before going on to better things. It is one of the very few common rules I have accepted. (*M* xiii)

Even with the acceptance of this one common rule, the prefabricated themes of *Mary*—Russian émigré life in Berlin, the lost and romanticized amorous affections of bygone youth, and a betrayed country—subordinate themselves, even as a first novel, to the greater project to which Nabokov will consistently dedicate himself for the next five decades: that is to say, as the socio-historical coat of émigré life in Europe slips away with Nabokov's travels (France, the United States, Switzerland) and the novel's context dissolves with the equally merciless passage of time, the seeds of his existential and artistic obsessions are planted, and, despite what he and

critics say, bloom here in this initial novel. The more pertinent portion of this, however, is the need to relieve oneself of the personal weight that might impinge on the artistic efforts in process. Concerning this unloading—where the first novel seems an opportune ground, though the raw material of reality must flood over in the subsequent efforts—Nabokov writes in *Speak, Memory* that

> I have often noticed that after I had bestowed on the characters of my novels some treasured item of my past, it would pine away in the artificial world where I had so abruptly placed it. Although it lingered on in my mind, its personal warmth, its retrospective appeal had gone and, presently, it became more closely identified with my novel than with my former self, where it had seemed to be so safe from the intrusion of the artist. (*SM* 95)

One may presume from this that the evacuating of self into fiction as an initial step to more authentic artistic development serves a twofold purpose: first, it allows, in the instance of the initial novel, the errant wanderings of the aspiring artist to satiate themselves in the content of a fictionalized story resulting in the apprentice artifact that is to be set aside (*Mary,* above); and secondly, it permits the author himself—apart from the work that now represents and inaugurates his movement toward a literary career—to be liberated of the burdens of personal influence so that the fictionist, rather than the man, may flourish (as in *Speak, Memory* above).[20] In this way the artist may be permitted to write more organically, more authentically, more transcendently without, rather than with, the prison of the personal guiding his content.

From his first novel to his final one, Nabokov's characters are engaged in this process of self-evacuation, approaching it directly or tangentially, consciously or unknowingly: some fail while some approach success more than others, almost transgressing an epiphanic or transcendent threshold that permits them an epistemic hyper-awareness, and others yet are elevated as negative examples of the pitfalls of the misappropriating or misunderstanding or beings plainly disinterested in and oblivious to this need for comprehension beyond the confines of the self.

What follows will explore more fully Nabokov's conviction that the personal should not impinge on the artistic, or that the self is something to leave aside when approaching and crafting the work of art. Rather, it is that the self—as a limiting concept, a socially constituted subject, a psychic identity, a cosmic singularity—is something to be gotten rid of both from the confines of the fictional realm an artist produces and from the geography of "reality" that allegedly exists apart from it. Such self-intrusion is something to be worked against, to be worked through in order to be lost in a difficult and painstaking effort. Loss as a general, lamentable theme and as an interpretive tool rampages through Nabokov scholarship with good reason, reflected in his work—the loss of homeland, of childhood, of memory, of language and a means of expression, of life along with time's eternal guarantee of mortality and earthly oblivion: all of these forms of loss, and more, situated alongside sadness and pain and hardship that they may be redeemed or

---

[20]Having no sustained discussions of his fictional works, Nabokov anticipates in the foreword to this autobiography that readers will protest the limited and "scattered references to my novels," saying that "on the whole I felt that the trouble of writing them had been enough and that they should remain in the first stomach" (*SM* 14). Thus, in the section mentioned above—a chapter which details, sometimes with warmth and sometimes rather cruelly, the recollections of his French governess Mademoiselle O—Nabokov can write that the "man in me revolts against the fictionist, and here is my desperate attempt to save what is left of poor Mademoiselle" (*SM* 95).

reversed or recovered through the work of art. This conventional notion of loss necessitates the understanding of something separated (usually from the self we are seeking to abolish, and usually irrevocably) and accompanied by a desire for its return. This loss thus results in a sense of sadness, a diminished sense of the self that seeks reclamation or replacement through a variety of means of what has becomes an empty space whose vacancy yearns for occupation. The type of loss I wish to articulate here is one that is not only not the result of injury or lack or understood as a deficiency, but one that is worked for and worked through: a loss that is welcomed, a loss that is given.

It is a process to be *worked* through. It is useful here to consider loss alongside or as a form (or cause) of mourning. Freud understands mourning as the process by which attachment to a lost object is withdrawn and, by the conclusion of the process, leaves the ego free and uninhibited. Judith Butler insightfully speculates that perhaps "mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance" (*PL* 21). It is this movement or series of moments preceding the completion of mourning wherein one is required to willingly abandon oneself to the nascent transformative potential awaiting actualization, because whatever trauma or event has effected the loss and initiated the mourning process must be responded to, worked through, overcome, repressed or forgotten, rearticulated, re-interpreted and repackaged for a transformed redeployment that serves to alter the previous relationship for the purposes of self-preservation or continuation or return to conditions—however artificially reconstructed—extant prior to the initiating event.

Butler's remarks are pertinent here for at least two of the characteristics concerning loss and mourning that she highlights. First, mourning is an act of intention, a deliberate choice which one must give themselves, permit to overcome them, and carry them into unknown space. It is that which can be willfully sought. Second, the speculative dimension—the vein of which I will follow below—allows us to make inquiries into the nature of loss and mourning, of agency and submission, and to trace lines of thought that are precluded by the more cemented, prefabricated concepts and conventions of psychoanalysis: lines of thought that Nabokov would dislike for the very reason of their domineering solidity. Nonetheless, the common, psychoanalytic definition of mourning as a reaction to loss will be useful here in uncovering a separate concept that, unlike mourning, involves the conscious attempt to lose or give up and push away attachment rather than withdraw from an (already lost) attachment; a submitting to, but also more centrally an initiation of loss rather than a response proceeding it.

When Freud compares the expression of mourning to that of melancholia, careful to caution readers that while the former is far more definite the latter is a very uncertain affair, he situates them on a connected continuum. The briefest distinctive factor between the two is that mourning is a conscious matter, the lost object of the cause clearly articulated before the sufferer, and melancholia a subconscious one where the sensations associated with loss arise into and affect the conscious life of an ego accompanied by an anomia that leaves the cause undisclosed. Despite their obvious relationship, the former seems to be normal and healthy while the latter seems pathological, a gateway to narcissism and other more harmful manias.[21] Improperly

[21] Melancholia may serve as a diagnosis for modernity: if there is a pathological description for modernity, it may be considered through a number of cultural concepts including the unconscious loss of something (Luckás); Kierkegaard's notion of despair, an illness effecting everyone regardless of awareness (*The Sickness Unto Death*); and a variety of other literary examples fixating on illness: Silko (*Ceremony*), Pynchon (*The Crying of Lot 49* and Odeipa's strange pregnancy); Palahniuk (*Fight Club* and modernity as spiritual depression); Plath (*The Bell Jar* and

directed cathexis—the intensive investment of mental energy into an idea, object, or person on the part of an individual—accounts loosely for the advent of melancholy in the ego, a misallocation that can subsequently stir up all kinds of troublesome reactions and behaviors where the pathological is concerned. It is also a means or a tool with which one might account for what is often understood as Nabokov's self-centered, cruel, careless characters: stating that their self-indulgent narcissism, pathologically attached to themselves or some other (close) object of aspiration or art, explains their conduct and consequent endings (see Ganin, see Kinbote, see Humbert, see Hermann, see Vadim, see Sebastian Knight's full- or half- or non-brother, see even Luzhin). Such a reading—or Freudian application, as it were—is not intended here, but it is helpful to elaborate the pathway by which this interpretive movement might occur in order to steer it in another direction.

Thus, as Freud writes, the cathexis (directed at whatever erotic object) of the melancholic person partially "regresses to identification" and partially becomes "reduced to the stage of sadism" and thus

> It is this sadism, and only this, that solves the riddle of the tendency to suicide which makes melancholia so interesting—and so dangerous. As the primal condition from which instinct-life proceeds we have come to recognize a self-love of the ego which is so immense, in the fear that rises up at the menace of death we see liberated a volume of narcissistic libido which is so vast, that we cannot conceive how this ego can connive at its own destruction. It is true we have long known that no neurotic harbors thoughts of suicide which are not murderous impulses against others re-directed upon himself, but we have never been able to explain what interplay of forces could carry such a purpose through to execution. Now the analysis of melancholia shows that the ego can kill itself only when, the object-cathexis having been withdrawn upon it, it can treat itself as an object, when it is able to launch against itself the animosity relating to an object—that primordial reaction on the part of the ego to all objects in the outer world. (173)

This sadism—which can easily be attached to Nabokov's negative characters and which can also be accounted for as a form of solipsism—remains for Freud a transference contrived by the neurotic to permit himself to persist by focusing the menacing feelings of death and his inevitable self-extinction upon others or by aiming the melancholic misdirection of destructive energies which becomes, for the same reasons, turned upon the self.

Often Nabokov's characters exhibit a desire verging on or embracing self-destruction that remains at the same time a desire to live—in life, in art—after death, to persist in some manner after the advent of self-disillusion. It is as though their efforts are aimed at eliminating the possibility of mortality through art. Some exhibit this directly (often the artist or creative characters) while others are prodded along this path by Nabokov himself. Hermann in *Despair* plots his own death—or the disguised death of a selected shadow-self—and Sebastian Knight's half-brother dissolves his own identity into Sebastian himself (merging both, replacing one, killing both, or replicating neither). Philip Wilde in *The Original of Laura* seeks to erase himself through a purely mental concentration that overcomes the physical constraints of the world by

---

gendered socio-psychic spaces); Adorno and Horkheimer (along with others from the Frankfort School), and Freud's insistence on the impoverished ego, all of which are based on assumptions of concordance with an egocentric model of human life and its necessary relationship to the world.

the power of consciousness, what he records as a "process of self-obliteration conducted by an effort of the will" accompanied by pleasure "bordering on almost unendurable ecstasy" arising from this very "act of destruction which develops paradoxically an element of creativeness in the totally new application of a totally free will" (213). Charles Kinbote's efforts at self-insertion (and assertion) fatally skew an entire narrative and end a life (fictional or not), while Humbert Humbert's admirable artistic craft hopes to preserve eternally a love object while discarding that life on which it is modeled. Ganin, as we shall see, succeeds in invigorating himself by stealing the memories and desires of others. What I hope to ultimately consider is a kind of self-destruction which is not suicide, which is not self-murder, but something else. The question posed can be formulated as such: how does getting rid of the self and freeing the ego in a fashion that is similar to but not concordant with the means by which mourning—worked through, labored over, with difficulty achieved—liberate the ego from a lost object?

Although Nabokov might turn over in his grave or laugh across the threshold of that *potustoronnost* which he might currently occupy at my employment of Freud as a means to interpret his work, the standard conception of mourning is useful here nonetheless: it indicates a reaction to loss. However, I claim instead that it is *not* a Freudian understanding with which Nabokov is approaching the analytics of the self and the ego, the one of which he seeks to deprive and the other to depart from: what we require is a new concept that is neither mourning (because it results from an exterior and un-willed loss of that which is not self) nor melancholy (because the type of self-loss we are after here, certainly stripped of its pathological attributes and certainly incapable of being fully unconscious since it must be in large part voluntary, is made necessary by the conscious project of transcendence). So: what process might we propose to describe this working on or un-working of the self, this restoration of porous characteristics to the ego-walls, a kind of conscious, non-mourning melancholia for not regaining the self, but submitting to it, departing from it, leaving it behind? Rather than a reaction to loss, as of becoming less whole and thus developing a deficit, it involves the invitation of loss, which need be neither masochistic, self-victimizing, nor melancholic.

The ultimate problems that *Mary* addresses, aside from the need for ridding the self, are those not only of being stuck within the self, but the immense difficulty of recognizing this and overcoming it, a problem to which Nabokov's novels are instructive. The ekphrastic vision is a hard one to achieve. Nabokov shows us as much with his characters, and persistently attempts to proffer strategies to those very characters and, more importantly, to those readers who follow them through their struggles.

The distinction between the (auto)biographical and the fictional, or the fictional and the real, presents a particular set of problems for readers and is a distinction that can be productively dissolved. The veracity of a narrative affects how it is read, treated, and approached. At the same time as it is a distinction to be dissolved, it also remains a predominant preoccupation of the artistic process. Ganin, the central character of *Mary*, adopts memories that do not belong to him in the first place.

Leigh Gilmore finds the autobiography cemented largely as a "Western mode of self-production, a discourse that is both a corollary to the Enlightenment and its legacy, and which features a rational and representative 'I' at its center" (2) that derives its authoritative positionality—which it most certainly holds over the realm of fiction in the minds of conventional readers—from its "proximity to discourses of truth and identity" rather than its "resemblance to real life" and, finally, a genre whose "portals are too narrow and [whose] demands [are] too restrictive" to constitute any more than a particularized restraint of

self-representation flanked by legalistic definitions, the demand of verisimilitude, and apprehension concerning invention (1-3). Even without the stringent limitations Gilmore rightly identifies with the autobiographical genre Nabokov is already at work assailing its principle constitution in his fiction: while the representative at the narrative's center—be it author or character—may often seem and indeed is erudite and eloquent he is certainly not always rational, and thus the legacy of the Enlightenment and the sutures that hope to maintain its stability are underhandedly cut away under what is on the surface a convincing and conforming employment of the very discourses of truth and identity that sustain it: the academic annotations of *Pale Fire*, the confessional mode of *Lolita*, the autobiographical labyrinth of *Look at the Harlequins!*, the false biography that seems absent in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. All are acceptable modes, as Gilmore points out, of truth, authority, and representation.

As fictional autobiographies, some of Nabokov's novels are not subject to the same solemnity with which we might read a "true" narrative: they are not located within or conditioned by the same realm of readership expectations. They are, in short, subject to different practices of reading. Nabokov's employment of the verisimilitude-inspiring conventions of these various genres—academic, autobiographical—arrives in the robes of the comic and the packaging of the parodic that Appel has so properly pointed out, and of course they are these things. But they are at once more than that: they occur as powerful interrogations of the discursive fields around which truth claims and authority, as Gilmore says, assert their dominance. However multilayered Nabokov is in his artistic stratigraphy, it would be an error to reduce one or the other of his prominent features and present it in the foreground, to calm the epistemologically interrogative aspects of his work by focusing on its comedic effect or its parodic productions, minimizing its play (or play in general) as merely a benign category that proffers no productive, interrogative, or critical power.[22] As Gilmore suggests, one function of the autobiographical narrative is to petition for belief (37), whether for some cause or to elicit or invite judgement, and under this regime we are unable or not permitted to read non-fiction alongside fiction with the same attitude of veracity. The overabundance of value placed on belief—the material from which the (auto)biographical narrative draws its authority and subsequently its authenticity, both of which, as Gilmore says, are constituted by hegemonic discourses that render veracity irrelevant—often stands in the way of fiction exerting its expansive potential for global and local intervention and improvement. Instead of asking what is true and verifiable in a narrative, perhaps we should be asking to what use it can be put: psychically, philosophically, ethically, and so forth.

As Gilmore claims, following Foucault, the autobiographical mode "offers an opportunity for self-transformation," for becoming other than what one is, a narrative that exists "less [as] a report with a fixed content summarized at the end of a long life" in favor of one that "becomes a speculative project" concerning "how to become other" (11). Thus, one writes in these instances to become more than what one is—sometimes entering, sometimes exiting a particular discursive field—and any blind conformity to the conventions of the genre can never achieve this authentic, liberating form of self-transformation. This is why Gilmore investigates autobiographical limit cases and focuses on narratives of trauma. A first-person account of trauma, she writes, represents an "intervention in, even an interruption of, a whole meaning-making apparatus that threatens to shout it down at every turn" and thus limits not only the mode or type of self-representation that is permissible but also asserts the parameters of what constitutes legitimate thought and experience (23). One crucial point arising from this fact—that the

[22] For more on play see Boyd's *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*.

autobiographical limit case exists as a restricting feature of personal narrative and that it can be tested, pushed, and challenged by narratives of trauma that do not conform precisely to its structures—is that we, in light of this, must come to learn another way to understand these narratives that is not subordinate to the characteristics that confine them. In advancing the claim that new ways to understand narratives must be learned (thought of seriously, taught, experienced), I hope to extend Gilmore's assertion to its relevance where the separate of fiction and reality—the limits one imposes on the other—are tested, pushed, and abolished for productive purposes.

One vital example of the need for pushing these representative limitations Gilmore places at the center of her study are the first-person accounts of trauma experience by women. The risk in producing them and that doubt that assails them arrives "not only when they bring forward accounts of sexual trauma but also because their self-representation already is at odds with the account the representative man would produce" (23).[23] Again, learning—through education, cultivation, consideration, and concentration—to read such narratives beyond the normative confines and reading practices of dominant discourses on truth and identity and legitimacy is crucial: not to read them "properly" within these confines, but to approach them with an entirely different mode of understanding, one that must be learned.

Gilmore's goal to analyze the modes of self-representation within narratives of trauma in order to test the limits of the autobiographical genre constitutes a privileging of the trauma discourse that works against the imposed limits I, too, am fighting to dissolve, but it also restricts the self-evacuation I am pondering and proposing. This is because such a move—however needed, justified, and correct it is, and it is—privileges the same realm of legitimation, and the tools by which it functions, that it undermines in a different context in the first place.

Nabokov explicitly elevates the imaginative capabilities of human consciousness over the requisite of the real or lived experience in a number of places. For example, when asked about this precedence Nabokov wrote:

> I tend more and more to regard the objective existence of *all* events as a form of impure imagination—hence my inverted commas around "reality." Whatever the mind grasps, it does so with the assistance of creative fancy, that drop of water on a glass slide which gives distinctness and relief to the observed organism. (*SO* 154)

That veracity is less important than imagination, that the former prevents us from perceiving the wider gamut of possibilities and thus, subject to the dominance of a discourse on truth, limits *how* we can comprehend, understand, and, most importantly, articulate the world, remains the central point for undermining a discourse with strong claims (socially and thus psychically) in order to learn a different means of reading and relating to the world. As we turn to the novels, to the explicitly fictional, and attempt to read them without the burdens imposed by veracity, a number of questions arise to which Nabokov's first and last books hope to provide some

[23] In *Lolita* Humbert will typify this, asserting a dominant, persuasive male position in which the main focus of the narrative is not only not on the victim of the trauma but the perpetrator of it, but also whose express purpose, in one manner of reading, it to ignore the "real" and product a more permanent, aesthetically authentic representation than any notion of verisimilitude can stand up to. Further, the subtitle of Humbert's memoir contains the marks of hegemonic discourse at every turn: *The Confession* (meant for saints, the holiest and highest among this race of men) *of a White* (that most colonial of races) *Widowed* (that is, having been liberated from any association with a women) *Male* (that most dominant of sexes).

answers, if not some strategies. How does this learning—this movement to a different understanding of reading—happen and what consequences will it have? In what ways does the problematic concentration on the self interrupt and stymie this process? When we say that neatly pulling apart truth and fiction or when we say that it does not matter so much if the narrating character is representing a verifiable truth, misleading a reader, or fooling himself, in what ways does this abolition of specified expectations and conventional reading practices permit us to give in to otherness and step closer to an ekphrastic view of things?

II

One way, in this ridding of the self, that is expressed and often mistreated or overlooked in *Mary* involves the means by which the protagonist gives in to otherness by actively engaging in a kind of voluntary mourning for which, as stated above, we do not yet have a term. For Ganin, the novel's protagonist, his self-initiated non-melancholic mourning involves not his sense of nostalgic grief over fading memories or a pathological desire to regress through the bars of time to a previous life or an all-redeeming reunion in the impending present, but someone else's, which he aspires—at least temporarily—to adopt and foster as his own without the requisite concern for authenticity or accuracy. For Ganin, it is not only a love object not lost, but one that was probably never his in the first place: and he is certainly not in mourning for this woman Mary, but perhaps he is doing whatever work precedes mourning and which, subsequently, never culminates in it. Ganin's venture is not to maintain that lost memory, to bring it to the present and reinvigorate it with newness in an endless recollection sustained in the present, but to adopt, work through, and abandon it as though moving through stages of self-evacuation or -abolition. Caught in the static landscape of émigré Berlin, a thing of "perpetual waiting" according to Alfyorov (*M* 3), the man whose past he will imagine for his own, Ganin must rid himself of his own present and the mixtures of his un-occurring past together with the lifeworld of Alfyorov whose borders he crosses and invades in order to move on from that anchored life rooted in the self.

The static world of the émigré inhabiting Berlin is not the only stagnant geographic in *Mary*. Early in the novel, Nabokov diagnoses Ganin's ennui as arising from an interior, psychic stasis, writing that the "murky twilight which was gradually seeping into the room was also slowly penetrating his body, transforming his blood into fog," and putting it precisely thus:

> He was powerless because he had no precise desire, and this tortured him because he was vainly seeking something to desire. He could not even make himself stretch out his hand to switch on the light. The simple transition from intention to action seemed an unimaginable miracle. Nothing relieved his depression, his thoughts slithered aimlessly, his heartbeat was faint, his underclothes stuck unpleasantly to his body. (*M* 18)

Possessing a desire for desire, the absence of an object of desire (to desire), the lack of a particular drive for yearning (for something), Ganin falls squarely in the realm Luckács reserves for the modern novel and its seeker-protagonists, and somewhere in the uncertain badlands around mourning and melancholy. He is "appalled" by the arrival of another indistinct day (8) and bored with his girlfriend and her "unwanted flesh" (11)—in fact, having the magic of amorous enchantment abolished by their first sexual encounter on the "jolting floor of a dark

taxi" succeeds in rendering the whole thing "utterly banal" (19)—and has come to understand that she "[lies] at the root of the trouble" (8). For his depression to abate, Ganin must rid himself of this attachment, and it is only the introduction of another women in a photograph—Mary, the wife of Alfyorov, another tenant in the *pension* where Ganin resides, who is to arrive to reunite with her husband at the end of the week—that supplies the impetus for Ganin to move into action. It is the mere announcement of his wife's arrival that sparks Ganin's attention, as he views a picture (first of Alfyorov's sister who died of typhus and then of Mary) and hears a few sparse details for later reanimation—the turbulence of Russian history and pre-emigration life, typhus—before being reinvigorated or reinvested with an object of desire. As he wanders through the night or watches from the window, Ganin witnesses a world different from the suspended and suffocating banality that has previously possessed him. Nabokov dedicates a chapter to describing this newly recovered elation Ganin experiences. In this ecstatic trance of perception, Ganin witnesses as everything "grows fabulous, unfathomably profound" and at "this late hour down those wide streets passed worlds utterly alien to each other: no longer a reveler, a woman, or simply a passer-by, but each one a wholly isolated world, each a totality of marvels and evils" (27).

However temporarily, Ganin is in the thrall of an epistemological change,[24] and though it threatens to shift back through a cycle of vigor, pursuit, possession, disenchantment, and depression, it remains powerfully vitalizing in these initial stages, for after breaking off with his girlfriend Lyudmila he feels liberated and unbound and free to pursue new possibilities. The epistemological alteration remains vague, dismissible as a conventional instance of immature youth (recall how Romeo so resolutely abandons Rosaline) and undeveloped love.

If a ridding of the self remains a state to be strived for, then the dropping of a girlfriend, whose life would always be an anchor of the self through the intimate ties that relationships forge, would seem an initial step. How, though, does this function? Were it not for the replacement of one love object (used, drained Lyudmila) with another (fresh, vitality-emanating Mary) the self would be somewhat more free—and by that I mean emptier, freed-up, less full, less attached to itself, and less bound.

By adopting or falling in love with another, Ganin seems likely to fall into a trap of substitution whereby he identifies the solution as residing within another whom he situates in the position that is the cause of the problem in the first place: but the stroke of genius that Ganin makes here is that the love object selected is not only another (that is, an Other—positioned beyond the self), but an other with whom he is not acquainted, an imaginary manifestation of someone else's life, someone else's memories, someone else's wife—someone else's love object: it is, thus, no "real" or authentic object, but a projection of the other. The intervention Ganin makes in the problem is that, the vigor of reality having come to a close in the form of the exhausted love he no longer feels for Lyudmila, he finds that a fiction would do the trick better: he selects, in other words, a desire he cannot attain, and locates a way in which the scenario can be played out in the imagination.

All of this he elects knowingly. He strives for no "real" object. Going a step farther, the object he selects is someone else's object, doubly withdrawn in firstly being Alfyorov's and secondly—because Alfyorov's is already not *his*—in being Alfyorov's externalized manifestation of desire. The point I wish to belabor, though, is that it is not Ganin's own experiences—or even the "real" experiences he evokes from his own past imagination—that he

---

[24] Nabokov describes it thus: "The delightful private event which had occurred last night had caused the entire kaleidoscope of his life to shift and had brought back the past to overwhelm him" (*M* 30).

strives to animate and desire, but those of another, and thus he exercises a self-renunciation in bringing in to his consciousness the material of the Other. If I am using your desire to gain my own (or to establish or clarify a notion of what my own desire is or ought to be)—I want your experience, your love object(s), your desire—, where does the self who is undertaking this adopting, that is "I," come in? It must, we can presume, be being invaded, marginalized, pushed aside, and invalidated in the oncoming experiential onslaught of this invited other.

However much he summons up his imaginative powers, Ganin persistently wants to lose the trappings of the self. Already mentioned has been how Ganin, his vitality arrested by the residual attachments of his diminished affections, has had to jettison his relations with Lyudmila, and we will see also that his affections for Mary are conjured not to intercept her and steal her away from Alfyorov as he repeatedly states and apparently plans, but only so that he can abolish them and move on, as a tool to combat the stifling shackles that suspend the self.

Hana Píchová writes that the Russian émigré milieu surrounding Ganin consists of characters "unable to understand or adapt to the present situation" who as a result are "reduced to living like ghosts" (22-3). In *Mary*, Píchová identifies Ganin's struggle as one against the temptation of dwelling and becoming entombed in the past. She claims that the imaginative faculty exercised by Ganin is one that prevents him from becoming hostage to the past (109-111) and that because he cannot set out on a journey to return to his native Russia for political reasons—undergoing a kind of mourning—he instead "resorts to personal memory, to a mental revisitation to soar over political and geographical boundaries to safely return to his lost homeland" (17-9). She questions, too, why Ganin finds it necessary to approach his personal past with such creative zeal as he does, harboring no literary or artistic ambitions (20-1). Indeed, Ganin is no author like Vadim, no pseudo-biographer like Sebastian Knight's alleged brother, no confessional memoirist like Humbert Humbert, no philosopher like Krug, nor a writer of treatises on time like Van Veen. Píchová explains this by writing that after clearing away the obstacles from the present that are occupying his mental space and preventing him to move into the past, Ganin's mental recreation of Mary symbolically represents his "current journey, which is based on recreating a loved one and finding a way out of the entrapping pattern of exile" (20-1; 24-5). Thus, Píchová also ultimately locates the need for returning to the past as a means to move into the present and eventually the future, to return in order to work through, as in the case of mourning, those psychic preoccupations that cement one to a specific mental state.

Like mine, Píchová's wider concern is not about returning to and dwelling in the lost or afflicted past, but about needing to liberate oneself from its bonds. For her, the aesthetic energy with which Ganin—like an artist creating his own worlds—invests in this recollection is a tool for preventing the entrapping features of the past from taking hold of and ensnaring its travelers. For me, the entrapping aspect to be dealt with is that of the self—because even without the self being entrapped in the past it remains, however liberated from its former psychotic or mnemonic baggage, a self. Certainly, too, the aesthetic becomes a means for seeing beyond the self, without the self. In relieving himself of his present, and taking on memories of the past (mixed with and adopted from or inspired by Alfyorov's own) in order to abandon them at the end of the novel and move away from Germany, toward France, toward some unknown other shore or other world, Ganin's attempt to uproot himself—physically and geographically, psychically and mnemonically, all in terms of identity—is the subject of *Mary*. Like a practitioner of transcendental homelessness, to evoke Luckács yet again, Ganin uses the aesthetic to do more than see into and understand the other: he deploys it to take the other into himself, to become other to himself, and to release the bonds to that other that the self has developed at the end of

the novel as he vacates the world he has occupied (émigré Germany) and the world he had crafted in his imagination (the world of *his* Mary, gleaned from a photograph, assembled from scraps of memory).

It is also worth mentioning again the injunction on Ganin's aesthetic aspiration that Píchová brings up: Ganin is no artist as such, no writer or poet or actor—though he has "sold his shadow, as many of us have" (9) to the screens as a movie extra. Ganin pieces together and presents no aesthetic artifact for the fancy of others. He has no audience, and no need of one, and this enables him—in contrast to many other Nabokov characters who are bound by their artistic products and ambitions—to approach more successfully the self-abnegation which I claim is so central for viewing Nabokov's ekphrastic art and achieving a shift away from the epistemology of modernity.

Unlike many others in the Nabokov oeuvre, Ganin is completely willing to summon up an entire aesthetic world and promptly abandon it without passing it on to others, without forcing it into a preserving container, without rendering it transmittable, without externalizing it and consecrating it with the potential to be internalized by others.[25] The work of authors, however much we stage and repeat their murder, will reflect and refract upon them, permitting them, or some notion of them, to endure, even solidifying their identity to themselves. Humbert Humbert's intention is to preserve—for transmission, for suspension, for the cessation of crippling anxiety in the face of inevitable loss—a crucial concept; Charles Kinbote's is to assert once and for all not just an authoritative interpretation of the poem "Pale Fire," but also the centrality of his influence on its composition. Ganin's intention resonates with neither of these. He is not an artist attempting to create an artifact. He is, rather, an artist intent on the opposite of preservation. While evocations of oblivion seem too violent here, I will resort to saying that Ganin is an artist in the process of moving beyond the need for form, for expression, for self: one that engaged in the work of ridding the self. To imagine with the passion of an artist without the need for an audience is a great giving up of the self.

III

Píchová is right in quite a number of ways, except that Ganin's imaginative powers are employed not to build up a past, but to break down the tie that emanates from it, and that she takes Mary to be the real—in the sense of true, verifiable former acquaintance—actual love of Ganin's past: that nine years ago (see *Mary* 31) Ganin had met and had relations with Mary, though this is a recollection connected to his recovery from typhus imbued with imaginative possibilities. There is no reason to think that Mary and Ganin had been acquainted at all in the past, and one claim central to the point of the novel is that they are not and need not be, that the verisimilitude of Ganin's recollections—the fact/fiction division that diverts so much focus from our reading practice—is not the focal point of the novel, but rather the effect to which he fabricates them should be.

In Píchová's reading, the focus remains on mourning, on working through the exilic problems of a lost homeland and overcoming the oppressive problems of the past. Underlining it is a disposition toward mourning that is closer to Freud's understanding outlined above. My focus, however, remains on a concept—as yet unknown—closer to Butler's speculations about

[25] Indeed, herein may lie an answer to Jameson's query in *Archaeologies of the Future* concerning what readers will find to read in Utopia ("the unspoken thought being that a society without conflict is unlikely to produce exciting stories") (182), the implication being that everyday life might permanently rise to the intense level of art.

mourning, about the self-submission to a transformation, the willing pursuit and completion of the project or self-erasure. Ganin remains a character who persistently wants to lose, rather than regain anything, through the past.

Nabokov prefaces *Mary* with a passage pulled from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*—"Having recalled intrigues of former years, | having recalled a former love" (115, 1.xlvii.6-7)—highlighting the powers of the past and the potential of memory to (re)experience the charge still situated there. Indeed, Nabokov's autobiography makes much the same effort, and he writes in the preface to *Mary* that Ganin's Mary is a "twin sister of my Tamara" from the twelfth chapter of *Speak, Memory*, the latter written some twenty-five years after the novel, and remarks on the similarities between his own memory of his early love and Ganin's (*M* xiii-xiv). The parallels between the novel and the autobiography—bike, pagoda, name scrawling, scarlet fever rather than typhus (chapters 2, 11, and 12 specifically)—are telling. Nabokov, however, places the priority, much like Ganin, on the imaginative and creative rather than the mimetic, writing that a "headier extract of personal reality is contained in the romantization than in the autobiographer's scrupulously faithful account" (*M* xiv). Personal reality, too, must be somehow different from conventional reality, and the former may not require the involvement of the latter.

And therein Nabokov's own attitude concerning the relationship between fiction and reality provides a credible way in which to read *Mary* and interpret the creative predicament in which Ganin places himself. Going as far as to derive inspiration from Alfyorov's sister, herself dying from typhus (the first photograph he shows Ganin, initially mistaken for Alfyorov's wife), Ganin embarks, at this point grappling with shredded images of a past that does not belong to him, into a remembrance of his own typhus recovery some years before. It is here that we begin to gather evidence of his never having known Mary in the first place—the Mary of the novel's title, the Mary wedded to Alfyorov, the Mary he will summon up in order to abandon rather than reunite with. Rather, she arises as a figure meant to be lost, generated to induce some kind of mourning and work through an invigorating process of self-transformation. It is in the memory of his typhus recovery—itself suspect of veracity—that we are alerted to Ganin's affinity with the imaginary impulse, and the priority with which he permits it to hold over the real:

> In this room, where Ganin had recuperated at sixteen, was conceived that happiness, the image of that girl he was to meet in real life a month later. Everything contributed to the creation of that image—the soft-tinted prints on the walls, the twittering outside the window, the brown face of Christ in the icon case, and even the washstand's diminutive fountain. The burgeoning image gathered and absorbed all the sunny charm of that room, and without it, of course, it would never have grown. It was after all simply a boyish premonition, a delicious mist, but Ganin now felt that never had such a premonition been so completely fulfilled. (*M* 32-3)

Typhus standing as an apt metaphor, having already been invoked by the photograph of Alfyorov's sister to such a degree that we become uncertain of Ganin's subsequent memories, the state and stability of memory and reality become hazy, uncertain, and piecemeal. As Ganin's intentionally employed imaginations testify to, the creation of the "image of that girl he was to meet in real life a month later" (*M* 31)—who may be no one in specific—predates, as in anachronism, the girl herself, whomever she may turn out to be.

Thus, the formation of the image precedes the appearance of the person. Consequently it is the image, the imagined framework, that takes on a greater sense of priority and premonition and subsequently diminishes the authenticity of (or the need for authentic connection to) the latter-arriving person. Further, it permits—as I claim is the case with Ganin's pseudo-recollection of Alfyorov's wife Mary—the subsequent individual to become inconsequential, requiring her to neither exist or appear in order to have the invigorating effects upon Ganin. It is unimportant whether Mary was or was not—and I claim that she was not—formerly a lover of Ganin's; it is immaterial whether or not they were acquainted at all: further, it is only because they are not, because Mary is Alfyorov's wife, because she is the other of another, that Ganin is able to leave more of himself behind after the imaginative ordeal concludes at the end of the book with Ganin taking leave of the apartment, the town, and all of his acquaintances there, rather than intercepting Mary at the train station as he has been promising himself and his inattentive readers throughout the novel.

Compare this disposition to two brief passages from *Speak, Memory*, both from chapters that deal with Nabokov's youth's lover Tamara, of whom he says Mary is a twin sibling. First, he recounts observing the name of his beloved scrawled in various places: "I would find it written with a stick on the reddish sand of a park avenue, or penciled on a whitewashed wicket, or freshly carved (but not completely) in the wood of some ancient bench, as if Mother Nature were giving me mysterious advance notices of Tamara's existence" (*SM* 229).The picture for the person is already forming for the young Nabokov, just as for Ganin, prior to his encounter as though nature had mandated the meeting. In this passage, Nabokov implies as much, or at least highlights retrospectively the synchronous arrangements that would allow him to perceive the "faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life" (*SM* 20), which amounts to the same as envisioning, impersonally, an ekphrastic vision of the self and (in) the world. What separates Nabokov's experience here from Ganin's, however, is that while the former's are fulfilled and the connection between past clues that points toward future premonitions are fulfilled chronologically and perceived retrospectively, the latter develops the connections intentionally. What for Nabokov is a keen and uncanny perception of the world is for Ganin an effort of imaginative forgery. It is the difference between seeing the connections, as Nabokov does, and engineering both the connection and the conduit that generates it.

A second passage from *Speak, Memory*, however, also highlights the pre-preparedness to go through the process of mourning that Ganin so loftily embodies, and the willingness to bring it upon oneself. Of his early poetry—and what is also true about Ganin's imagined life—Nabokov writes that it seems "hardly worthwhile to add that, as themes go, my elegy dealt with the loss of a beloved mistress—Delia, Tamara or Lenore—whom I had never lost, never loved, never met but was all set to meet, love, lose" (*SM* 225).[26] If a more perfect thematic summary of *Mary* exists, it is not to be found elsewhere in all of Nabokov's own writings. Ganin himself recalls how he "used to ride past Mary last July before he even knew her" (*M* 72) in his earlier memories. Indeed, Ganin is the character who has never lost, loved, or met Mary but who is all set to do so, who sets himself up, if only in his own mind, to do so. With the acumen of an elderly autobiographer, the youthful Ganin recalls and builds upon the material of his memory:

> He was a god, re-creating a world that had perished. Gradually he resurrected that world, to please the girl whom he did not dare place in it until it was absolutely complete… Afraid of making a mistake, of losing his way in the bright labyrinth

[26] See *Mary* (56-7) for the similar female trio of Mary, Lida, and Nina.

> of memory, he re-created his past life watchfully, fondly, occasionally turning back for some forgotten piece of trivia, but never running ahead too fast. (*M* 33)

If the world of his past, that world that has perished and which he now takes the utmost imaginative patience to reassemble with precision, does indeed belong to him, then the girl he hopes to please by placing her in it does not belong to it. And this at the very least, becomes the other invading the borders of Ganin's memory, his life, his self—an invasion that Ganin has opened himself to.

Other instances indicating the uncertainty or unreliability of Ganin's recollections permeate the novel. "Strange to say," Nabokov writes at one point, that Ganin "could not remember exactly when he had first seen her," that he "could not picture their very first meeting" (*M* 44) with one another. The *her* here, too, is questionable: is it Mary, another female of former acquaintance, or a figment of Ganin's young stock imagination? The answer, as I am asserting, concerning the true identity of Mary or of Ganin's potential acquaintance with her matters less than the function for which and from which her image is summoned: to work through an emptying of the self in part by taking on the memories and dispositions of another. Nabokov goes on to undermine the relevance of verisimilitude in Ganin's situation, highlighting the value of the fabrication over the truth:

> The fact was that he had been waiting for her with such longing, had thought so much about her during those blissful days after the typhus, that he had fashioned her unique image long before he actually saw her. Now, many years later, he felt that their imaginary meeting and the meeting which took place in reality had blended and merged imperceptibly into one another, since as a living person she was only an uninterrupted continuation of the image which had foreshadowed her. (*M* 44)

This blissful union of two divergent images might as well be the same thing as saying that the imaginary one, the one weighing in with monumental creative precedence in Ganin's imagination, has taken priority, even violently overshadowed the "living" one as though superimposing itself into a dominant position. The imperceptible merging remains the domination of the fantasy, so that the entity existing in reality ceases to matter significantly. This is why certain lines of the novel—"In those photos Mary had been exactly as he remembered her, and now it was terrible to think that his past was lying in someone else's desk" (*M* 50)—can conflate or confuse the two (authentic image of the past, imagined image of the past) without much problem, and lend a sheen of purpose to Ganin's commandeering of the others' pasts (and how he can permit them to seamlessly occupy his own). This is why, too, the novel can also seem to bespeak a violent priority of the self on Ganin's part. Only in the light that these memories, this woman, and so forth, are the mnemonic and experiential substances of another person, is Ganin understood as opening himself to the entrance of otherness at the expense (or profit) of the self, of himself, of his self.

As the novel unfolds, an attentive reader suspects the authenticity with which Ganin articulates his memories. We hear, for instance, that in his mind the girl of his affections "must have some unusual, resounding name" but that when he finds out she is called Mary he is "not at all surprised, as though he had known it in advance—and that simple little name took on for him a new sound, an entrancing significance" (*M* 48), another instance divesting Ganin from the need

to rely in any manner on outside information and further evidence permitting the scope of his imagination to encircle and appropriate however it wishes: amending the enticement of an unusual name to fit the flat contours of the typical Mary.[27] It is from this imagined past that Ganin seems to draw himself out of stasis. We learn that he is so "absorbed with his memories that he was unaware of time," that his "past, in that perfect form it had reached, ran now like a regular pattern through his everyday life in Berlin," and that it is not just "more real, much more intense than the life lived by his shadow in Berlin" but a "marvelous romance that developed with genuine, tender care" (*M* 55-6). We learn too as he describes some three reunions with ladies of uncertain identities—all the same Mary for Ganin—and anticipates a fourth with his plan to steal her away from Alfyorov when she arrives by train, that he "never saw Mary again" (*M* 75), which is the heaviest clue alerting readers to the inauthenticity of his plans for a reunion. Instead, having repeated and relived a repertoire of memories in his mind, Ganin departs Berlin alone, propelled West by the invigoration of having exhausted his memories and the memories of others and having permitted himself a vision of the world—however temporary—that is not unencumbered by the burdensome limitation of a weighty and historically particular and individual personality.

It is in reaching the limits of his imagination and memory that he is allowed to leave, and in departing, in the motion of migration, that Ganin is able to envision the world anew:

> He looked round and saw at the end of the street the sunlit corner of the house where he had been reliving his past and to which he would never return again. There was something beautifully mysterious about the departure from his life of a whole house… And the fact that he kept noticing everything with a fresh, loving eye—the carts driving to market, the slender, half-unfolded leaves and the many-colored posters which a man in an apron was sticking around a kiosk—this fact meant a secret turning point for him, an awakening. (*M* 113)

Additionally, as the novel closes with Ganin's departure from Berlin, we are privy to a few clues confirming the non-existence of Mary—or rather, of Ganin's Mary as only the image *he* has conjured:

> As Ganin looked up at the skeletal roof in the ethereal sky he realized with merciless clarity that his affair with Mary was ended forever. It had lasted no more than four days—four days which were perhaps the happiest days of his life. But now he had exhausted his memories, was sated by them, and the image of Mary…now remained in the house of ghosts, which itself was already a memory…Other than that image no Mary existed, nor could exist. (*M* 114)

Four days in which Ganin's tryst of the imagination took place in isolation, in the confines of his apartment room, in the solitude of his own mind. It is through evoking and working out the memories of his past and the past of Alfyorov that Ganin can unburden the self, exhausting the memories and which weld and wed it to a specific understanding of the world that Ganin is now free to shuffle off as he embarks into a newly electrified world—one in which he is now able to

[27] In translating the name and novel's Russian title *Mashenka* into English, Nabokov considered *Mariette* and *May* and "settled for *Mary*, which seemed to match best the neutral simplicity of the Russian title name" (*Mary* xiii).

perceive "life in all the thrilling beauty of its despair and happiness" (*M* 110) on an unknown journey.

In this journey that will arrive after the conclusion of the novel, Ganin's fate becomes other to the reader—he becomes, like the movie extra he sometimes sells himself into in Berlin, a figure fleeing into another screen in a film we may never watch. But Nabokov aptly selects this filmic metaphor for a novel about becoming other as Ganin recalls the "flickering, shadowy doppelgängers" who are "still flitting, God knows where, across the wide gleam of a screen" (*M* 110), those "anonymous shadows sent out all over the world" after their capture by a "barrage of murderous brilliance, illuminating the painted wax of motionless faces, then expiring with a click… our human shame" (*M* 9). It is during the viewing of one of these films in which he appears as an extra that Ganin is at the height of his depression, and this is just before Ganin discovers the photograph of Mary that will animate his stasis: the solution, in one sense, to his existential ailment: the despair of having a self.

As the scene flashes by on the screen, he feels the aforementioned shame—having "sold his shadow" (*M* 9), that is, his self—on top of a "sense of the fleeting evanescence of human life" as his "haggard image, his sharp uplifted face and clapping hands merged into the gray kaleidoscope of other figures" (*M* 22). Repulsed at this, Ganin can no longer watch the film. He wanders home now, considering "how his shade would wander from city to city, from screen to screen, how he would never know what sort of people would see it or how long it would roam round the world" (*M* 22). The film has made him other to himself, and his own image on the screen—what he should recognize as a solid singularity—has become a mysterious personality, an identical but non-self melting into the kaleidoscopic whirlwind of other, unknown entities.

In this malaise, he understands those around him to be "lost shades" and has the sensation that the "whole of life seemed like a piece of film-making where heedless extras knew nothing of the picture in which they were taking part" (*M* 22). On one level, this is the metafictional flare for which Nabokov is well known, the involution that situates Nabokov's authorial signature visible like a watermark behind the text, enunciating those ignorant extras as the fictional puppet-creations of Nabokov's imagination. Such metafictional flares are also always the point on the other level in Nabokov: on the larger and more significant one, where his narrative project is concerned not as an instance striving for solipsistic seclusion, but where the self—the reader, the writer, the human being—is a thing to be reckoned with and resigned. On this level, Ganin's pronouncement is the ekphrastic vision—or at least, for him, the suggestion of its possibility—almost directly stated as I have articulated Nabokov's project above. Here in Nabokov's first novel, we have the suggestion of an ekphrastic project that will occupy each of his works until the last. Rather than the metaphor of the landscape painting, however, we encounter the filmic vision where the camera, like the gazer in the art gallery, provides a view of the world that permits us to perceive it beside or outside or without or beyond or above ourselves.[28] These "heedless extras" who know "nothing of the picture in which they [are] taking part" (*M* 22) are we readers (and also, surely, non-readers) and watchers and collective inhabitants of the modern world: what Ganin perceives along with this realization and the problem by which he is so terrified is the un-assailed investment in the self that so flawlessly and ubiquitously characterizes modernity.

[28] We are in these instances, like Butler says, permitted to become ec-static, beside oneself: which for her contains several meanings including "to be transported beyond oneself by a passion" or to be "*beside oneself* with rage or grief" or in the case of addressing a "we" that includes "myself within its terms, I am speaking to those of us who are living in certain ways *beside ourselves*, whether in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage" (24).

The solution upon which Ganin happens in the novel is to go to Alfyorov and obtain some material (viewing the photograph of Mary) with which to divest himself of himself through that other (with the memories and desires of that other), Alfyorov. Pushing the existential despair in which Ganin is arrested at the opening of the novel to its highest point—the point directly before which he begins to enact a solution—the filmic appearance of Ganin's shade-self succeeds in articulating the alienation he so ardently feels toward himself. It permits him an opportunity—for whatever reason—to locate a solution not in reconstituting the alienated self with a solid sense of renewed identity in the lost self, but in remaining estranged from himself long enough to get rid of and work through that thing that is being alienated (rather than the sensation of alienation itself). That is to say, Ganin is afforded the dual option we all are at the level of potential: either resolve the sensation of alienation by reaffirming and regaining security with the self as it is presently composed and thereby retain the self and liberate it from whatever feelings of loss presently assail it (a kind of mourning), or work through an abolition—a transformation of relationships hitherto unknown and inarticulate—of that which stands as the primary problem, that which is capable of being alienated: the self. When one diagnosis the self—or a certain conception of it—as the cause or source of the problem, alienation becomes only a sensation that arises out of the self, a symptom under which greater and more subtle, obfuscated turmoil festers. Rather than ridding oneself of the sensation that makes the self feel a certain way because it is a self, Ganin directs his efforts toward and elects to rid the thing that permits him to have the sensation of alienation in the first place: the self. Between these two proposed solutions—resolve alienation or renounce selfhood—too often the former is the selected course of action, and indeed the encouraged option (psychoanalytically, concerning the singularity and assumed value of an individual personality, conforming to renaissance humanism and the powerful heritage with which it inherits its progeny in line with enlightenment rationalism, and, where all of these constellations converge, ultimately: modernity). Following the path of the latter is a difficult move, and Nabokov rehearses it time and time again throughout his novels in different contexts with both positive and negative examples, and examples more often that are situations somewhere between outright success and desperate failure or extreme ignorance. As Nabokov's inaugural novelistic character, Ganin is more successful than most of his descendants at least in providing some signposts for the good reader to follow down avenues of inquiry—the bad one might well dismiss him as a self-absorbed though mildly malevolent neurotic. "Lunatics are lunatics" Nabokov writes, "just because they have thoroughly and recklessly dismembered a familiar world but have not the power—or have lost the power—to create a new one as harmonious as the old" (*LL* 377). The gap separating the criminal and the artist, or banal villainy and the mind of genius, Nabokov says in several places, is the gulf flooded with imagination.

If the self, as seems to be the case in *Mary* as well as in modernity, is an arresting agent that immobilizes that which it embodies in a kind of myopic stasis or ennui, an anchoring entity because it welds ties to everything that constitutes it and spreads its solidifying web out recklessly and locally, then we are left with few alternative options that do not situate it centrally. For Nabokov, the past is empowered (or can be as much as it can be a trap) because it represents something that is no longer the self as it was once constituted and because it is subject to the imagination's revision, capable of producing diverging pathways.[29] It is in the pursuit of the

[29] In a legal, juridical, or civic framework, an authorized institution must punish a body because an action or a state of mind cannot be punished. In a temporal sense, the self as it is situated in the contemporary moment is different than at any point in the past. As Ricoeur writes in *Memory, History, Forgetting* in agreement with Derrida and

other, the othering of the self and the other within the self, that we might be afforded access to the non-self and, like Ganin, a sense of both mobility and wider vision. For Píchová, whose reading of *Mary* finds Ganin's imaginative journey a prerequisite for the "new physical and mental self he gains" from these revisitations which allow him to "set out on a real journey" to France and beyond in order to capture the future and whose reading of Nabokov finds that stories "woven out of memories have great powers: they grant physical and mental recuperations [and] impart perspicacity and meaning" (28-9; 45), the metaphor of the nation-state fits well. Ganin's inability to physically return to Russia because of political predicaments forces him to resort to personal memory before he can move forward, according to Píchová (17-9), and her emphasis on the exilic experience as a widening condition for kaleidoscopic vision is most apt. But the point is larger than this, and nether *Mary* nor Nabokov are reducible to the predicaments of exile. If Píchová's reading makes more porous the national borders of the displaced exile and proffers the productive potential behind a plurality of visions, then my reading of Nabokov seeks to make more porous those too-often ironclad borders of the ego separating the self from the other and obfuscating that endless other dwelling within the self.

IV

Ganin submits to a transformation that reinvigorates him through the adoption of the other. But the extent to which he has achieved a permanent transformation remains a critical question. How long until another state of stagnation arrests Ganin into a depression the solution for which he must repeat the strategies of surrendering to otherness as he has in the novel?

Another central question posed by the current investigation concerns the additive nature of the self: does not bringing this stuff of the Other into the self transform it into the self, the You under a transformative acceptance? To answer in the affirmative is to maintain the axiomatic assertion of the centrality of the self, to enunciate it as an unchanging core that receives, in this encounter with otherness, additive or auxiliary components but remains unaltered though appended or fortified with additional equipment—like clothing a creature and claiming the clothing makes no difference to the creature itself.[30] The emphasis must be moved or shifted from the self as the central, guiding, axiomatic entity that exists as a cemented authority (and by extension comfort) emanating object to the otherness that it is already composed of, to the otherness already in and of the self. Despite the epistemic emphasis, one can never be oneself in the first place. Where Píchová lauds the personal memories of Nabokov's narrators as the instruments that afford them increased vision and thus psychical and philosophical rejuvenation, she does not leave space for a "personal" memory that does not belong solely to the person, for a memory that is not the person's. A memory cannot merely be personal and quarantined off from everything else, devoid of otherness. The modern self, already strange, is the cause of otherness.

---

acknowledgement of the seriousness and difficulty of the problem, "separating the guilty person from his act, in other words forgiving the guilty person while condemning his action, would be to forgive a subject other than the one who committed the act" (490). Eligibility for that notion of a subjugated, guilty self "results from the fact that citizens belong to the political body in the name of which the crimes were committed" (474), which is to say a notion of a self constituted within a specific epistemological field.

[30] The cybernetic understanding that a self can be extended in any number of ways is helpful here and serves to undermine the conventional notion that is also being interrogated in this project. See Bateson's discussion of systems in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* or N. Katherine Hayles's discussion of the cybernetic movement in relation to information and embodiment in the contemporary moment in *How We Became Posthuman*.

As Julia Kristeva writes, the foreigner, the estranged, the other, admires those who are able to welcome him and whom he lives among, but

> At the same time he is quite ready to consider them somewhat narrow-minded, blind. For his scornful hosts lack the *perspective* he himself has in order to see himself and to see them. The foreigner feels strengthened by the distance that detaches him from the others as it does from himself and gives him the lofty sense not so much of holding the truth but of making it and himself relative while others fall victim to the ruts of monovalency… In the eyes of the foreigner those who are not foreign have no life at all: barely do they exist, haughty or mediocre, but out of the running and thus almost already cadaverized. (7)

For Píchová, too, the foreigner or exile stands in a better position to perceive his own otherness, made strange himself in his alienated position. And so Nabokov, as a doubly-exiled artist, is particularly suited to producing narratives that resonate with and articulate this pertinent theme, a fact that remains indubitably true throughout his novels. Though an apt metaphor for our own understanding, the foreigner or exilic personality cannot presume the monopoly on increased perspective: that it is the self as we have conceived it above that is responsible for many of the insidious existential problems we face in modernity, and a philosophical increase in perspective, an ekphrastic conception of beyond-the-self, must be learned and cultivated. As Kristeva says, our treatment of others as non-entities is a reflection on the self as such as well: the cadaverized though animated life of the non-foreign self is one locked into the narrow, ego-bound worldview and restricted from what I have begun to articulate as an ekphrastic perspective that I assert to be the primary aesthetic of Nabokov's art.

Another claim appropriately advanced at this point is that fiction stands as one of the best places for divesting the self because of its ability to put us in contact and combination with the other, but, so much like the alternative possibility to conceiving the self or reaching thought beyond the self, fiction is elided and dismissed and interpreted as unreal or stopped short of its transformative potential. Whereas, as Gilmore states, the autobiographical mode derives its authority from its proximity to a truth claim as a method of power in modern discursive hegemony and, because of this, elides and marginalizes the unreal or fictive into a lower, subordinate category, Kristeva (and Nabokov, through the same avenue) succeeds in subverting this mercantile grasp on modern authority by swerving into and giving greater weight unto alternative discursive arrangements. In confrontation with the foreigner both rejected and identified with, be it interpersonal interaction or fictional engagement, Kristeva writes that

> I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container… I lose my composure [and] the uncanny strangeness allows for many variations: they all repast the difficulty I have in situating myself with respect to the other and keep going over the course of identification-projection that lies at the foundation of my reaching autonomy. (187)

At this point, as Kristeva continues, she invokes Freud's separation of the "uncanniness provoked by esthetic experiences from that which is sustained in reality" in order to "stress those works in which the uncanny effect is abolished because of the very fact that the entire world of the narrative is fictitious" like the fairy tale in which "generalized artifice spares us any possible

comparison between sign, imagination, and material reality" and in which artifice consequently "neutralizes uncanniness and makes all returns of the repressed plausible, acceptable, and pleasurable" (187). Uncanniness occurs, Kristeva writes in what begs association with Nabokov's project, when the "boundaries between *imagination* and *reality* are erased" (188). Thus, we might not only enjoy the aesthetic, but be transformed (realistically) by it without the epistemological limitation of its non-reality. We might, in other words, find not only fiction empowered by abolishing its separations from reality, but reality as well endowed with greater transformative abilities when these neighbors become no longer defensive.

As Ganin goes about in the guise of otherness, he proposes a new kind of loss, the potential of which requires us to define it negatively: as a process of invited non-melancholic mourning, a welcomed ridding of the self, a loss wanted.

§3: The Ultimate Encounter with Otherness: *Lolita* and *The Enchanter*

I

Far more an exploration in vision than an exploit of vicarity, Nabokov's examinations of madness and his focus on aesthetics should not produce the effect that he was indifferent to the horrors of the world. However, what many readers experience as jarring, reprehensible, or unreadable are these very depictions themselves. Here I want to suggest not *why* this reaction pervades in our reading practices (the answer, of course, is an epistemological one related to the framework of modernity discussed above), but to investigate *how* Nabokov derisively critiques this attitude.

The thesis that *Lolita* and *The Enchanter* (particularly effective because of their content) are novels that implicate the reader is well trod. I intend to approach the topic neither in the traditionally understood fashion that problematically makes the reader an accomplice to rape and murder, nor in the stylistically recursive aspects of the novel on the formal level, nor in the unreliability in which a reader who plunges into a strange and compromising world must stretch their imagination into uncomfortable territory. Instead, I claim that these novels implicate the reader as the othering party, as the perpetrator of the very disgusted, discerning judgement that they condemn in the characters. In other words, the effort of the novels reveals the means by which the reader participates in the acts of the condemning, thoughtlessness they reject, in the inability or unwillingness to understand, or try to understand, the other; and finally the becoming a monster of incuriosity.

Such a practice of reading does indeed possess a healing potential. But this is not how all reading takes place, and I want to claim here that this is among the epistemological problems not only of most interpretations of *Lolita*—and to some extent the lesser known but equally illustrative *The Enchanter*—but also of a worldview of modernity that so often precludes the authentic investigation of otherness and reinforces, in the stratified layers of dominating structures, the priority of the self. There remains cemented in our reading practices only a narrow opening to explore the deviance by which the other enters into our range of accepted articulation. Otherwise it must fall into the rejected abhorrent and antagonistic unspeakable or into another epistemological realm whose relationship to the world departs from a normative understanding.

Again, the claim that the reader is entreated to recognize the otherness of himself, to confront the means by which he or she perpetrates the mark of otherness upon the non-self rather than recognizing the self's strangeness. In a novel (*Lolita*) replete with cruel and reprehensible

behaviors muddled into charming and beautiful verbal expressions, a novel that Alexandrov claims is brimming with a narrator who fails to recognize his own mistakes and is woefully unaware of patterns and consistently self-contradictory,[31] the aim of the book and the point that the protagonist persistently puts forth, is often lost upon the reader: with an attack on our epistemological assumptions, Humbert at least reveals them to be frail and by no means founded upon transcendental principles; with his ability to oscillate between epistemological spheres (his own, and that of the modern reader) he at most identifies in the reader—and their very projections upon him—a self that fails to sympathize, that others, and that participates in the disgusted vision it judges and condemns.

This orientation begins to clarify early on, not merely when John Ray, Jr., Ph.D, writes how magically *Lolita*'s "singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita" that renders readers "entranced with the book while abhorring its author" (*AL* 5), which for De la Durantaye "urges us to see our own fates as connected to those of others" (6). The entranced reader is also implicated—an accomplice to Humbert's deeds—insofar as he fails to exhibit the empathy absent in Humbert for which he is condemned.

Relying upon Hannah Arendt's development of categories of judgement, De la Durantaye concurs with her that we should judge the "life of the mind and the acts of men" beneath the "sign of intellectual empathy, under the sign of seeing into the strangeness and wonder of another's world" (5). The detrimental trait characterizing Humbert, as De la Durantaye puts it, arrives as his "inability or unwillingness" to think from the standpoint of another, highlighting this "evil or cruelty" as "*thoughtlessness*" (5). While he rightly says that we should read the novel with empathy and remains aware that it invites its reader into a position of judgement, De la Durantaye's highlighting of the detrimental and damning *thoughtlessness* of Humbert—what Rorty more poignantly calls a "monster of incuriosity" (161) typified by many of Nabokov's characters[32]—constitutes what would seem an obviously overlooked implication for the reader. We may find that that our condemnation of others is a reinforcement of the self, even a hypocrisy, because condemnation of an other is the assertion of the self's priority. To direct thoughtlessness at Humbert or any of the mad protagonists in Nabokov's oeuvre, to be satisfactorily unable or unwilling to understand the other within and beyond fiction, is to become an incurious monster. This is the activity of and the advice given to the reader of *Lolita*, and it is that reader whose othering precludes the ekphrastic vision Nabokov offers.

The openings of both novels display highly self-aware central characters. Both men are strangers who have recognized their own strangeness in the world. In the case of *The Enchanter* the unnamed European (the Ur-Humbert) at the center of the narrative continues to struggle between his normative functional role in modern social space and the dormant desires that haunt him. He expresses a desire—existential and rhetorical—to bring the latter (his desires) into the realm of the former (acceptable modern society):

> "How can I come to terms with myself?" he thought, when he did any thinking at all. "This cannot be lechery… So what if I did have five or six normal affairs—

---

[31] See the sixth chapter of Alexandrov's *Nabokov's Otherworld*. One can question the degree to which Humbert is fumbling through fields of unrecognition or producing them in order to sway the reader, and the ultimate hermetic effect is that in either case, Nabokov's (and not necessarily Humbert's) machinations retain their significance as either positive or negative examples.

[32] See chapter seven, "The barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on cruelty," in his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989).

> how can one compare their insipid randomness with my unique flame? What is the answer? …For I cannot even consider the thought of causing pain or provoking unforgettable revulsion. Nonsense—I'm no ravisher. The limitations I have established for my yearning, the masks I invent for it when, in real life, I conjure up an absolutely invisible method of sating my passion, have a providential sophistry. I am a pickpocket, not a burglar… I now discard all that and ascend to a higher plane… It is a strange, strange thing—and strangest of all perhaps, is that, under the pretext of discussing something remarkable, I am merely seeking justification for my guilt." (*E* 3-6)

The lengthiest expressions of his direct thoughts throughout *The Enchanter*, these initial cogitations conjure up a character who remains indecisively on a precipice between two worldviews. He is clearly self-aware of having to be other, of having to perform roles while at the same time drawing an authority from the frameworks that confine him, not to mention certain pride in regulating himself within them: his sophisticated restraint, his gentleness and harmlessness, his creativity in coping (Humbert will also be proud of his self-control, with different purposes). Barring the superiority implied by the narrator, a "higher plane" can simply mean a different one (as John Ray clearly indicates in his foreword to *Lolita*), and it is on that difference that we wish to focus.

The Enchanter's narrator in this instance has not yet given over to the change of which he finds himself on the threshold, struggling between exclusive ethical realms. Humbert is more developed, further along in his proclivity, and more dangerous in the face of a normative epistemology. He is more able to harbor and harness the authenticity with which he relates to the world. While *The Enchanter* begins with a narrator's gesture toward introspection, Humbert opens his manuscript by imploring his audience to enter into a deliberation on their own perspective, their own proclivity and attitudes. The enchanter's thoughts are to himself; Humbert's are to you. After the tender evocation of devotional lyrics to the girl herself, the rapid Freudian accounting of his youth, and the promise of "a fancy prose style," Humbert delves directly into an invitation:

> Ladies and gentleman of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns. (*AL* 9)

Having in place the literary acumen evidenced by Poe and the psychoanalytic as a potential position, Humbert juxtaposes and then melts together the lofty civic-juridical framework upon which modern epistemology is composed and the (misguided) realm of divinity from which the latter derives its authority, effectively dismantling both and entreating his readers to look upon the tangles in which it is all caught, to look at a terrible complexity—which already flies in the face of what most readers are willing to do.

The legalistic language of *Lolita* has been much remarked upon, and De la Durantaye is correct to affirm that the novel invites readers into a position of judgement. The entreaty to "look at this tangle of thorns" (*AL* 9) can be expressed as an exclamation more than an invitation, as an obligation or an imperative. It implies the need for readers to look, to deal with what is presented before them, with what Nabokov already knows and what Humbert always knows. It must be delivered to readers in such a way that enables them to look without the infectious expectations

and pervasive frameworks that already police our reading practices: those moral, ethical, social judgements; the pervasive presence of the didactic possibility threatening to pirate the meaning of a text or the dismissive charge of the unrealistic. Such an achievement in perspective is difficult. Appel writes in his introduction to *Lolita* that "readers trained on the tenets of formalist criticism simply did not know what to make of works which resist the search for ordered mythic and symbolic 'levels of meaning' and depart completely from post-Jamesian requisites for the 'realistic' or 'impressionistic' novel," citing Nabokov's "failure to conform to some accepted school or *Zeitgeist* pattern" along with the "fantastic, a-realistic, and involuted forms" evoked consistently by his earliest writings as evidence that he had "always gone his own way, and it was not the way of the novel's Great Tradition" (*AL* xix-xx).[33] Aimed at abolishing these firmly held perspectives through the aesthetic, these modes of reading mostly make the reader feel strange and uncomfortable and find it difficult (or complex) to condemn but still condemn: always looking toward the other and not the self. If Morrison says that readers of *The Bluest Eye* remained "touched but not moved" by the socio-aesthetic imperative of the novel and thus labels it—or its readers—as a failure, then *Lolita* has a similar claim to make because readers remain repulsed, judgmental, but not introspective. The problem in this mode of reading is not Humbert (though he certainly is a problem not necessarily resolved fully by a reading of the novel) but the reader who listens, enchanted, to the narrator but succeeds only in throwing Humbert's own lesson back into his face, citing his failure to recognize what is so clear to the reader. Meanwhile the reader, caught in the ego-prison of moral superiority or ethical righteousness, cannot look into themselves.

Both central figures of *Lolita* and *The Enchanter* are capable of oscillating between their epistemology and our own, and do so not only for the sake of communication but for the benefit of the reader himself. Both are self-aware of their difference—of what so many readers cannot help but label as their deviance (certainly a path to less understanding)—and both are able to occupy a dual space that the reader often is not, cannot, or is unwilling to.

Lolita remains critically and commercially Nabokov's most successful novel, the book that allowed him to retire from teaching, unburdened him financially, and permitted him to exist exclusively as a writer. It is also the book whose content has stirred the most controversy and has threatened to overshadow the achievements of all his other novels. Long before *Lolita* gained notoriety and then became notorious—it would be his twelfth novel (thirteenth if one counts *The Enchanter* as a novel) among a number of other works including plays, poetry, and scholarly writings—Nabokov was interested in the borders of madness and the boundaries of thought, in the epistemological possibilities offered by aesthetics, and in the proclivities that normative society would consider deviant. When asked about the affinities between his previous novels, *Lolita*, and his own personality, Nabokov has said that it would be "more correct to say that had I not written *Lolita*, readers would not have started finding nymphets in my other works and in their own households" (*SO* 24). The implication is at least tripartite. First, Nabokov points out the retroactive capacities of our interpretive practices, the means by which privilege or priority is pillaged by temporal proximity and traced backward. Second, Nabokov makes a specifically epistemological claim in that his work on the novel and his investigations into the psyche of its driving character have opened a way to consider and communicate about the happenings as those he describes. Finally, we can come to the comment on the content of the novel: if the purpose is to show or effect an epistemological shift as I am claiming, why the content choice to depict a

[33] Further, Appel writes that the "vertiginous conclusion of a Nabokov novel calls for a complicated response which many readers, after a lifetime of realistic novels, are incapable of making" (*AL* xxxi).

pedophile narrator instead of anything else, something more benign or less alienating, and if this is the case why are we made at times to admire and respect him, to laugh and celebrate him at the same time that we are repulsed? Unburdening it from any ethical concerns, it remains effective because it rests on or beyond the boundary of our normative acceptance of deviance; and it, in its "shocking" nature, invites a different set of questions for consideration. Of course, gross misinterpretation is among the great risks of fiction,[34] and these arrive in no shortage. Nabokov's assertion, rather, indicates that this material is what has occupied him as an artist from the beginning: not pedophilia, but the approaching and pushing of borders of consciousness and thought, the confounding of general ideas, the resistance to any philistinism that has come to distract from the more important and pressing qualities of existence. The artistic material occupying Nabokov is the existence of and ability to move among two or more separate epistemological worlds or worldviews: one a dominant, normative, modern epistemology; the other not. And if one can move between these two, if such movement is made possible, it wrests the priority and dominance away from the singular claim that one (the epistemology of modernity) has on and against all others—this is the object, outside of ethics, with which we should concern ourselves.

The social function the characters of both novels possess also remains a disturbing facet of the critical interpretations—that is to say, not how they function socially but how they function within normative society. They are navigators of a world to which their views are unwelcome, but they are consummate navigators nonetheless. This, of course, is something we might find admirable or toward which we might extend empathy in less abhorrent contexts—in Kafka, for example, where we may root for characters and creatures that struggle to free themselves from the clutches of oppressive machinery, or Ellison's retrospectively empowered Invisible Man in his struggle for self-awareness and his gestures toward social justice. Both Humbert and the unnamed protagonist of *The Enchanter* are fortunate in their professions (men of letters, socially respectable occupations), both of them sophisticated Europeans and by all account better than, or at least likely to be better than, the kind of pre-ordained deviant we might find in the classes of the depraved and impoverished.[35] Because they conform to the shapes of the socially normative and are thus more difficult to spot, to stereotype, to other, they are able to move more smoothly and freely about the world with less notice. They are, in a word, among us (as many unacknowledged, unspeakable, or unspoken things are). This implies not only a justification for the suspicious withdrawal of understanding and empathy, but also the certified presence of difference within intimate, common space that dispels the productivity of denial or ignorance which so readily results in the production and persecution of otherness. For a description of its anatomy, we may return to Jameson, who, following Nietzsche, finds that in the contemporary world evil or the other "continues to characterize whatever is radically different from me, whatever by virtue of precisely that difference seems to constitute a real and urgent threat to my own existence" (*PU* 115). I would say the other is one that does indeed constitute a threat to the existence of the self by virtue of its difference, but revise by saying that that difference need not be too very radical: that in terms of the self, only a small difference constructs deviance. In a pertinent psychology of othering, Jameson goes on to write that

> from the earliest times, the stranger from another tribe, the "barbarian" who speaks an incomprehensible language and follows "outlandish" customs, but also

[34] See Michael Wood's study *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*, already mentioned above.
[35] Compare, for instance, the milieu of these two novels to that of Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* (Verso, 1973).

> the woman, whose biological difference stimulates fantasies of castration and devouration, or in our own time, the avenger of accumulated resentments from some oppressed class or race… behind whose apparently human features a malignant and preternatural intelligence is thought to lurk: these are some of the archetypal figures of the Other, about whom the essential point to be made is not so much that he is feared because he is evil; rather he is evil *because* he is Other, alien, different, strange, unclean, and unfamiliar. (*PU* 115)

Jameson's description dispels evil, abomination, wickedness, depravity from the dynamics of othering and focuses on the root cause: difference, and, by implication of his statements, understanding: an understanding that is neither initially present nor subsequently extended. And while the abolition of morality or the equity of all behaviors are by no means implied by Nabokov's novels—he dislikes many of his characters, and describes them as debased—the space to have an understanding of difference, a landscape separate and unfamiliar to the self, remains central.

II

In some sense, then, *Lolita* and *The Enchanter* are condemnations of commonsense, of the self-centered-ness of the self; both Humbert and the reader (who can securely define Humbert as a selfish solipsist, a cruel creature who cannot understand and proceeds to harm others) can be said to be participating in the same banality.

We have already detailed the means by which both Humbert and the protagonist of *The Enchanter* are capable of moving between epistemological realms and have especially highlighted the means by which *Lolita*'s opening immediately invites judgement, framing the entire narrative within a pseudo-legalistic discourse. Such judgement, as we have seen also, intrudes immediately into the narrative of *The Enchanter*, and thus each novel has established a partial pattern of judgement which continues throughout.

Among the most obvious ways in which the reader is placed into the position of the other—and into the position *to* other—and also the reason for the notorious popular culture reputation of the author is *Lolita*'s representation of pedophilia. Couched not as a condemnation of the perversion (although there are certain moral alterations Humbert can be said to undergo), *Lolita,* confined within this normative interpretive frame, cannot persist with the admirable abandon that other works of prose fiction are allowed.

Part one of chapter five provides the most sustained description of the now-famous nymphet that represents the foundation upon which Humbert becomes necessarily othered by a reader who might otherwise be permitted to admire his poetic control, laud his wit (which digresses, sometimes, just for your amusement), or praise the method by which (like a trickster of folktales) he has found his way into the social machinery without succumbing to its crushing demands.

One must be, Humbert famously informs us, both "an artist and a madman" to discern the nymphet, this "little demon among the wholesome children" who stands "unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power" (a quality we might also attribute to Humbert himself, for the encoding stealth and singularity are obvious in both) (*AL* 17). Humbert's world (and the world of his bewitched fellow travelers as well) consists of "not one but two sexes, neither of which was mine" though "both would be termed female by the anatomist": that is,

male (his), female (not his), and nymphet (not his) (*AL* 18). Necessary, too, is the nymphet temporal space on the "enchanted island haunted by those nymphets" stretching between the ages of nine and fourteen; along with the requisite distance that the "lone voyagers, we nympholepts" (and the "students" who study Humbert's treaties) must exceed, a "gap of several years, never less than ten I should say, generally thirty or forty, and as many as ninety in a few known cases, between maiden and man to enable the latter to come under a nymphet's spell": all of this a "question of focal adjustment, of a certain distance that the inner eye thrills to surmount, and a certain contrast that the mind perceives with a gasp of perverse delight" (*AL* 16-7). Finally in this cursory anatomical summary of nymphet and nympholept, Humbert stresses that the advent of a nymphet is a rarity, a term not applicable to all children of the delineated age range.

Aside from these aforementioned structural facts about Nabokov's nymphet, Humbert supplies an array of sultry descriptions and a digression on legal matters pertaining to the age difference between consenting adults, along with a stock of literary precedents that would better support the case—especially in the case of the artist—for a union of nymphet and man. These I do not quote at length. The entire chapter of the novel is more or less an extended meditation on the matter of the nymphet, society, legality, and normalcy. Along with the early portions of *The Enchanter* when the narrator states that he is "not attracted to every schoolgirl that comes along" and underlines the "transition from one kind of tenderness to the other, from the simple to the special," from the one genre of benign affection to the "rare flowering of the other on the Walpurgius Night of my murky soul" (*E* 5), this chapter of *Lolita* echoes the ekphrasis mentioned at length above: a gap of years, a temporal and focal adjustment, the attainment of the perception of a rarity, and so forth. What Humbert and his fellow enchanter depict in their thirst for the nymphet is an aesthetic and existential rarity, a singularity that is more transcendent than the confining horizons of normalcy and commonality can supply: it is in this ekphrasis that they observe the entirety of a thing itself, and that which they attempt to tragically seize hold. Because it dismisses and transcends with such impunity the confines of normative categories of acceptability it becomes abject and abhorrent, and thus must become other.

Urging the reader even more into the practice of othering, Humbert petitions for understanding on a number of occasions: not so much to bring the reader to his side of things as to reveal the difficulty in understanding that arrives for the reader: that in bearing it—as one bears witness to this or that catastrophe—one bounds just beyond understanding, for if a thing must be born as such, it must be done so through the lens of abjection. And despite this, Humbert asks the reader to stay with him, to bear with him the events he shall describe, drawing us through at least two orgasms and countless other instances of impropriety of both body and thought. Addressing his remarks to the "learned readers," Humbert invites us to "participate in the scene I am about to replay," to "examine its every detail and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is if viewed with what my lawyer has called, in a private conversation, 'impartial sympathy,'" ultimately prefacing his scene with: "So let us get started. I have a difficult job before me" (*AL* 57).

Elsewhere, when the sleeping pills he administers to Dolores are not as effective as presumed, he again beckons the reader to bear witness: "Please, reader," he writes, "no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me; try to discern the doe in me, trembling in the forest of my own iniquity" (*AL* 129). Humbert continuously emphasizes the difficulty of bearing witness to his descriptions from within a modernist epistemology (he even begs with emphasis here, in a mutually constitutive voyeurism,

to be imagined in the throes of his perversity and thereby incites the reader to create the act as well).

In an article whose chief purpose is to elicit the same humanizing effects for psychoanalysis that novels have had for their mentally distrusted protagonists—entitled "Shrinks and the Shrunken in Modern Fiction: The Psychotherapist as Villain"—David Dempsey identifies the unchanged satirical siege leveled against psychiatrists in works of fiction, citing *Lolita* as an inaugural example and finding that as a "confession [Humbert's]… is a story that only a madman would write and only a therapist abet" (514). What the psychoanalytic apparatus makes possible, Dempsey emphases, is its ability (or its legitimating authority) to provide alleviation and expression of hitherto repressed or concealed psychic suffering.[36] However, at the same time Dempsey acknowledges the "need for compassion" for which he credits psychiatry as the introducer allowing for deepening the "novel's knowledge of abnormal behavior" (520), he already delineates as off limits the space in which Humbert's psychic geography might be understood (a confession *only* a madman would write, and *only* a therapist abet).

Dempsey is right to assert the positive potential of the therapeutic machine: in its systematic extension over the social sphere it has permitted a great deal of relief, understanding, and humanization, especially considering its revelatory retroactive energies in retracing the trajectory of mental illnesses of the past framed in contemporary clinical treatment (see witches, autism, prophets, schizophrenia, etc.). To make public and de-diabolized—to make speakable, comprehensible—remains one positive (dare we say progressive?) result of the therapeutic apparatus. Such a publicity which seeks not only to spread understanding of what would otherwise be regarded as mental deficiencies or deviances promises to help its members beyond the material level. The dissemination of understanding, the making public of hidden psychic toil and suffering, aids a shift in epistemology that moves away from a production-oriented model of human value.

It is, however, Dempsey's counter-assertion that remains problematic: that psychoanalytic and therapeutic machinery ought not to be criticized, that it ought—as it has allowed the novel—to be humanized and recognized as the superior authority. Calling, for instance, Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* nothing if not entertainment,[37] Dempsey embraces a mode of "realism" that is not the concern of fiction and situates the novel, rather than on its own terms, within the categories of illegitimate representation when it threatens therapy's authority, effectively delineating what a novel ought and ought not to be, what and how it ought and ought not to represent.

In the case of *Lolita*, in the case of Humbert, we must wonder *why* Dempsey persists in dismissively labeling the narrative the work of a madman. The person most suited to comprehend and assist exhibits in this case the rejection: the one whose occupation and expertise it is to understand madness as a socialized and normative category takes recourse to discharging his responsibility by citing madness itself. Humbert is well aware of this: for him the psychoanalytic apparatus is one to be navigated but never submitted to, and *Lolita* contains

---

[36] Dempsey writes that such satirical attacks upon the psychiatrist are, in light of the evidence of psychiatric history, "hardly surprising: in fiction, as in life, people are no longer expected to endure their suffering but to relieve it therapeutically. Wine and fellowship, the great tranquilizers of so many Victorian novels, have given way to Valium and encounter groups. Where at one time emotionally disturbed characters suffered in silence, worked through their problems, or were possibly locked up, they can now be referred for treatment" (515).

[37] With concern to Kesey, Dempsey writes: "The story is nothing if not entertainment, and Kesey holds out interest at all cost. But the cost is considerable, for we are asked to accept the dubious Laingian premise that in a 'crazy' world, the demented have a special insight into what reality ought to be" (520).

countless examples of Humbert's ridicule for, trickery of, and mastery over this very apparatus of power. So long as one says yes to the psychiatrist, Humbert seems to intonate, plays by their rules and on their terms, their authority—supported by the superstructural logic of modernity—will deem you docile enough to remain in its total space rather than be confined in its prison or its asylum. Dempsey criticizes Nabokov for viewing the "patient's problem as iatrogenic, a result of the treatment as well as the disease" (515), which elevates the clinical apparatus as the solution if the patient would but heed it. I speculate rather that modernity and its surrounding epistemology—in which psychoanalysis is deeply inculcated and subordinate—is the condition of the disease afflicting so many from which madness seeks to cure itself: thus, the treatment would be epistemological in nature as well.

Having significantly problematized the psychoanalytic machine as a means for authentic expression, we might briefly turn to the legal apparatus: perhaps the only space left in which such unspeakable stories can be heard (the trial, the courtroom, the confession, the recording and accounting), and simultaneously a place that radically confines them and utilizes their enunciation to reinforce not only the authoritarian apparatus of its power but also the hegemonic stipulations it exerts on society at large, rendering conformity by the production of negative examples, each case a refinement of its expectations. It is thus a wonder neither that such a power structure established our notion of ethics and enforces it nor that throughout *Lolita* Humbert must strategically frame and forego his narrative in such terms: to push us readers through its problematic efficacy, which applies as much to the legal as it does to the psychoanalytic.

Instances beyond these confines briefly penetrate the narratives of both *Lolita* and *The Enchanter*, whereupon we are further urged to engage in the practice of othering, having found ourselves in a world not without ethics, but beyond them: in a world where "wrong"—constituted by those very machines of modernity—does not exist as such, but where the world is lain bare: the way it is anyway, the way it already is, but a world we find apart from our own.

As Humbert wraps up his definition of the nymphet he digresses into brief (utopian or apocalyptic) fantasy which, along with a limited number of other such instances, produces a disjointed feeling, as though partially out of place in the novel's narrative:

> A shipwreck. An atoll. Along with a drowned passenger's shivering child. Darling, this is only a game! How marvelous were my fancied adventures as I sat on a hard park bench pretending to be immersed in a trembling book. (*AL* 20)

In a strikingly similar instance in the *The Enchanter*—after the narrator remarks on the "invisible method of sating my passion" and his conformity to modernity's limitations—we read:

> Although, perhaps, on a circular island, with my little female Friday… (it would not be a question of mere safety, but a license to grow savage—or is the circle a vicious one, with a palm tree at its center?). (*E* 4)

Both ring in their reference to Defoe, conjuring up a more primitive regression into a pre-civilized (and premodern) mode of being, and, for this reason, both conjure up a place populated by all manner of monsters and dark possibilities, an offensive and other geography—one in which permission is not granted, neither by legal nor ethical nor ideological frameworks because they are all at this juncture absent, but where all beings are permitted to do all things.

Beyond the reach of the legal apparatus, beyond the hegemony of modernity, beyond the judgement and jurisdiction of a jury, these spaces render us other because we equally other them. When all life is shown to be bare life, we most often make recourse to our own epistemological frameworks and, unable to comprehend what is unspeakable beyond the boundaries of that structure, articulate it as other.

Humbert's frequent longing for "some terrific disaster" (*AL* 53) exhibits a willingness to accept or enter into an epistemological change. We have already asserted that both Humbert and *The Enchanter*'s narrator occupy altered epistemological understandings and nonetheless navigate the normative world. Thus, we come to the question of changing or shifting an epistemology as it is articulated in the novels.

Both novels propose such a means of shifting epistemologies—easily associated with force, manipulation, and coercion[38]—that might reasonably be successful and yet remain, I presume to most readers, abhorrent: means that relate (and repulse for the same reasons) to the aforementioned connection with Crusoe. The task, an exceedingly difficult one, is to come to see how othering is proffered by the reader, and to see further the means by which such othering is produced by hegemonic epistemologies of modernity.

The care and delicacy with which the two men imagine such a change, an elongated incubational effort of the most precise labor to bring another into the realm of their epistemological world, come in what I would posit are perhaps the most reprehensible and abhorrent aspects of both novels and, for this reason, the most acute inspiration of our own othering practices as readers. Both instances come when the respective nymphets are already in the custodial grips of their two abusers. The problems of time and of social interaction—of maturity, boys, girlish gossip, the construction of normalcy—are concerns both characters have as they muse about how to deal with the ramifications of having acquired what hitherto has only been a fantasy. The narrator of *The Enchanter* envisions a means to raise the unnamed girl into his own epistemology:

> He was convinced that, as long as novelty still prevailed and she did not look around her, it would be easy, by means of pet name and jokes confirming the essentially aimless simplicity of given oddities, to divert a normal girl's attention ahead of time from the comparisons, generalizations, and questions that might be prompted by something overheard previously, or a dream of her first menstruation, so as to prepare a painless transition from a world of semiabstractions of which she was probably semi-conscious (such as the correct interpretation of a neighbor's autonomously swelling belly, or schoolgirl predilections for the mug of a matinee idol), from everything in any way connected with adult love, into everyday reality of pleasant fun, while decorum and morality, aware neither of the goings-on nor of the address, would refrain from visiting. (*E* 54-5)

[38] Underlining the radical contingency of ideology, Gramsci writes that "coercion is not the issue, but whether we are dealing with an authentic rationalism, a real functionalism, or with an act of the will. This is all. Coercion is such only for those who reject it, not for those who accept it. If it goes hand in hand with the development of the social forces, it is not coercion but the 'revelation' of cultural truth obtained by an accelerated method. One can say of coercion what the religious say of predestination: for the 'willing' it is not predestination, but free will" (401-2).

His work of "raising drawbridges" as an "effective system of protection until such time as the flowering chasm itself reached up to the chamber with a robust young branch" (*E* 55) would succeed temporarily and thus the addendum which follows shortly "against the light of that happiness" so that

> no matter what age she attained—seventeen, twenty—her present image would always transpire through her metamorphoses, nourishing their translucent strata from its internal fountainhead. And this very process would allow him, with no loss or diminishment, to savor each unblemished stage of her transformation. Besides, she herself, delineated and elongated into womanhood, would never again be free to dissociate, in her consciousness and her memory, her own development from that of their love, her childhood recollections from her recollections of male tenderness. Consequently, past, present, and future would appear to her as a single radiance whose source had emanated, as she had herself, from him, from her viviparous lover. (*E* 56-7)

While our enchanter's plans for maintaining his nymphet's distance from normalcy—manipulating, protecting, coercing, shielding—are drastic, Humbert's own machinations may be yet more radical, adopting much the same position but extending it into more distant reaches of time.

Humbert's long-term plans emerge in a retrospective reflection as he plots a better course of action than putting her in private school or the journey across the United States that occupied much of the novel's second part. Rather, after attaining legal rights over Dolores with the death of her mother Charlotte, Humbert imagines "scrambling across the Mexican border" and lying low

> for a couple of years in subtropical bliss until I could safely marry my little Creole for I must confess that depending on the condition of my glands and ganglia, I could switch in the course of the same day from one pole of insanity to the other—from the thought that around 1950 I would have to get rid somehow of a difficult adolescent whose magic nymphage had evaporated—to the thought that with patience and luck I might have her produce eventually a nymphet with my blood in her exquisite veins, a Lolita the Second, who would be eight or nine around 1960, when I would still be *dans la force de l'âge*; indeed, the telescopy of my mind, or un-mind, was strong enough to distinguish in the remoteness of time a *vieillard encore vert*—or was it green rot?—bizarre, tender, salivating Dr. Humbert, practicing on supremely lovely Lolita the Third the art of being a granddad. (*AL* 173-4)

Horrified, one might imagine some isolated, tropical, equatorial Humbert-built utopian community whose codes the reaches of modernity neither grasp nor dictate (one can turn also for similar examples to a number of religious communities to find problematic affinities within the ethical boundaries of modernity itself). In any case, both examples breach a realm of unspeakability most readers are unprepared to endure: unspeakable *because* unprepared to endure or bear witness to. They are radical alternatives to our normative notions of ethics and comprehensibility.

Both instances—Humbert's multigenerational begetting of nymphets; the enchanter's collapsing of fatherhood and loverhood into a single indistinguishable unity—represent an effort to create the world differently from normative modernity: that is, to change (not for themselves, who have already partly or completely managed the shift, but for another—to inculcate, to interpolate, to condition in the same way that normative frames are imposed upon the citizens of the world) the epistemological outlook of another.

That a different world can be constructed and inhabited (mutually, singularly; temporarily, eternally) becomes the aspiration of these characters: a world altered. This aspiration at wonderlanding that kills both of them: the enchanter directly, via automobile; Humbert, dying in jail, indirectly. What primarily arises as a readerly and scholastic criticism is the means by which such a shift represents a selfish and reprehensible instance of harm, which is visited indifferently upon another and results in the—in this case the nymphets of the two novels—abstracting from their personhood and humanity and dimensionality as beings as the individual girls are transformed into the aesthetic objects of the mature, master-puppet men and thus become others themselves. We need not deny the accuracy of such a character criticism. Nor need we deny that the same structure and economy which allow such a criticism to be leveled—the epistemological standards of an ethics—is shared by those who proffer it as well as those against whom it is leveled: which is to say the logic that permits criticism and thus generates the other.

The main problem often identified with Nabokov's negative characters—the two under discussion here are primary examples—is this unconcerned harm they perpetrate on others. Their problem resides in their radically ignoring the other they subject to their own aesthetic fantasies. For De la Durantaye, their inability to see or think from the standpoint of another makes them atrocious, immoral, and evil. To summon and rephrase Rorty again, their incuriosity becomes the source of their monstrousness. Here we finally turn to the prospect of self-recognition.

III

If a reader's horror rests on the absence of empathetic comprehension for characters, then it is also perhaps the reader who fails ultimately to extend that which they condemn: this is the central message these novels secret. Both characters achieve self-recognition, and it kills them, and so: would it do the same for the reader? What the characters achieve in the novels the reader is offered as well. However, this self-recognition is not the high point, nor the general pursuit, from the typical perspective of a reader (or, as Nabokov might posit, from the perspective of a typical reader): instead, it is the perversion. Offered the opportunity to take up this self-recognition, the reader is confronted with the question as to whether or not they are willing to understand what has been rendered unspeakable and if they can come—by suspending their own incuriosity about the strange psychic contours of the other—to cope with that very understanding.

The self-recognition of Humbert—to some extent present from the opening of the novel, in which the narrator is clearly aware of his own otherly standing, eager and willing to discuss it, disposed to reveal his sordid inner thoughts and celebrate his sinister victories as common morality would have it, to "save not my head, of course, but my soul" (*AL* 308)—comes in the famous finale of the novel, when he realizes and ruminates upon the effects his actions have had upon Dolores Haze rather than his Lolita. Preceding the strange slaying of Clare Quilt, Humbert drives to a grassy slope and listens to the world: "What I heard," he says, addressing the reader

directly, was the "melody of children at play… this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic," and here he recognizes that the "hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord" (*AL* 308).

In *The Enchanter*, the self-recognition arrives more directly and more poignantly: having brought his nymphet to a hotel and cajoled her into a fairytale sleep, already unsure how to pursue the actualization of a hitherto eternally distant fantasy, he begins fondling his foundling only to find that "she was fully awake and looking wild-eyed at his rearing nudity," upon which the self-recognition, the empathetic vision, the ekphrasic experience, the seeing beyond or beside the self besets him:

> For an instant, in the hiatus of a syncope, he also saw how it appeared to her: some monstrosity, some ghastly disease—or else she already knew, or it was all of that together. She was looking and screaming, but the enchanter did not yet hear her screams; he was deafened by his own horror, kneeling, catching at the folds, snatching at the drawstring, trying to stop it, hide it, snapping with his oblique spasm, as senseless pounding in place of music, senselessly discharging molten wax, too late to stop it or conceal it… (*E* 74)

From here, after failing to silence or catch her, the enchanter fleas from the room seeking suicide ("a torrent, a precipice, a railroad track" (*E* 76) and, cut off from the search by surprise, is crushed and dragged beneath the body of a passing automobile.

In both cases the characters come to see themselves as strange, however fleetingly. Such is a breakthrough in which the reader is also offered the chance to recognize themselves as an otherer, one whose capacity for understanding is stimulated—tried, tested, entreated, invited—throughout the novels, and whose ability to exhibit it is at stake: the example presented is a negative one (Humbert, the enchanter) in which we see displayed the central problem we are asked to address in ourselves. To identify the presence of this problem in the characters and safely condemn it and go no further is to miss what is being posed in the first place: to identify the self as unlike such characters, make no more effort (though Humbert's has been monumental), and close the book with less thought is to participate in the radical othering at the center of the novel, to remain bound by the confines of the common.

The enchanter, Dimitri Nabokov says in his afterword to the novel, "lives partially in an enchanted world" (*E* 98), and so too does Humbert: a world whose epistemology remains different than commonly conceived. To enter into a wonderlanded world[39] is highly difficult and defamiliarizing, difficult because defamiliarizing. We read, as one brief example, in *The Enchanter* how in attempting to make his way back to his nymphet the title character finds that "the staircase had vanished," how with strange agency "a cabinet, now a vacuum cleaner, now a broken stool, now the skeleton of a bed protruded with an air of fatality" (*E* 68) as space becomes strange in this world and the reader is made strange in familiar spaces. There are no shortage of such glimpses in *Lolita* either, and we are urged, rather than reckon such characters crazy, to recognize the occupation of space different from our own. Entering a wonderlanded world is difficult and defamiliarizing because it involves giving up not only the self, but the

---

[39] See James Joyce's (not the famous novelist) essay "Lolita in Humberland" for a preliminary discussion of the affinities between Nabokov and Carroll (the former the first Russian translator of the latter's famous novel) and a call to connect the two more firmly.

adjoining debris and psycho-social investment that surrounds and creates it: that is, the long-rooted epistemology. It is a different world, or rather one that is already present within and among our own: "For the time being," the enchanter says at one point, "my neighbor cannot see through the wall, and the chauffeur cannot scrutinize my soul" (*E* 66-7); and, concordantly and equally strikingly Humbert observes, "in the summer's black nights, what frolics, what twists of lust, you might see from your impeccable highways if Kumfy Kabins were suddenly drained of their pigments and became as transparent as boxes of glass" (*AL* 116-7)—a world seen differently, deeply, darkly: our very world enchanted or enigmaed in unspeakability.

Finally, one criticism emanating from the moral dimension leveled against Nabokov's negative characters is their inability to cope with reality (which is another way of saying normativity and dominant ideological apparatuses). As mentioned above, Maddox writes that the imagination is villainous in Nabokov because it keeps "his characters from ever confronting reality with the inverted commas removed" (6), which itself presumes a fundamental a priori world-base; and De le Durantaye writes that *Lolita* (and Nabokov) encourages "readers to remember to draw the fine line between art and life" (192), which stands in stark contrast to Nabokov's own disposition and the hierarchy of the imagination that I have lain out above. To draw these lines delineating the separation of art and life, to subordinate the imagination to a pervasive form of social conduct and permissible thought wrought by the standards of modernity, is the problem. Defining such boundaries, we prescribe our own position as primary and place the other on the opposite side, securing ourselves safely away from him, participating in the othering practices we ostensibly denounce.

What I have presented here has not been a total reading of the novels—there are far too many significant details to fit in this small space—and neither has it been an attempt to reveal some of Nabokov's gestures toward proper interpretation. This effort has been an attempt not merely to destabilize the dominant epistemology by identifying its radical contingency, but ultimately to garnish recognition of the self and its complicity in producing the other.

§4: A Democracy of Ghosts and The Pain of Strangers: *Pnin*

I

In summarizing Nabokov's forth English novel, Brian Boyd remarks that of all of them *Pnin* "seems the most amusing, the most poignant, the most straightforward" but quickly poses "awkward questions" about our ability to laugh at and be amused by the pain and suffering of others, about the existence of "consciousness and conscience" in a world replete with anguish (*AY* 271). Boyd concludes by elevating the salient humanistic proposition Nabokov stresses in the novel: that "*in this life* none of us can know directly another's pain" and that since we "cannot *know* the pain our actions cause others, we can [and should] try to imagine it" because only in the imagination can "we mortals act with sufficient thought for another's pain" despite how often we will fall short, in both reality and imagination (*AY* 286-7).

I propose that, rather than an exercise in empathy, in understanding the other or how beyond comprehension the other must remain, *Pnin* provides us not only with the empathetic imperative Boyd asserts, but more importantly with a character who gives up his narrative to others and a practice of reading that pushes us to do the same.

Following a trajectory of addressing issues of the self, *Pnin* restates the problem I have just described in *Lolita* and *The Enchanter* and offers a preliminary solution toward which

Nabokov's narrative strives: that of giving up the self at the same time that it poses the problem of the self continuously. To put this solution another way might be to state it thus: that the other becomes you contentiously and completely, and that there remains no distinction between the two. Indeed, to pose such a solution is one thing; to hold the thought and pursue the practice is quite another, more difficult, proposition. And the narrative of the novel pushes us to do so, frequently dissolving the title character into the background and shifting him to the periphery, moving the narrative to others and their own complexities, continuously taking us away from what conventional reading practices would deem—by tyranny of title—the focal point of the novel, and also to return illustratively to it.

As Boyd asserts, *Pnin* does *seem* the most straightforward of Nabokov's novels, the most generically conventional—campus novel, chronicle of an absentminded professor—and the least innovative in terms of sensational, clever content. Indeed, there is a staunch ordinariness pervading the entire book, one that is unexpected for readers of Nabokov: an émigré professor from Russia replete with personal idiosyncrasies struggling through environments private, academic, and cultural in America. The minor mishaps are many and there is something so minor about the novel itself. There are no monsters or madmen in this novel: only benign ones. Thus, the ordinariness becomes more diffused, more important, more wide-reaching in its implications into the non-exceptional realms of the world, and thus more significant for the ordinary reader, the ordinary life.

The story of Professor Timofey Pnin was brought out in several detached installments published in the *New Yorker,* much like what would become separate chapters of Nabokov's autobiography. The former actually being received with more enthusiasm than the latter, Nabokov hoped the installments would garnish money to supplement his income at Cornell while at the same time he awaited a publisher for *Lolita*, itself traveling around receiving rejection after rejection until ultimately finding a publisher—Olympia Press, founded by Maurie Girodias who sought "quick money by publishing in English, in Paris, every book rejected by Anglo-American censorship that came his way" (*AY* 266), eventually exploding into an unprecedented financial success for Nabokov which would allow him to retire from teaching entirely a few years later. One result of the serialization has been the charge that *Pnin*—as a set of stories collected as a novel—lacks the characteristics that would render it a novel and should not be regarded as such in the first place.[40] On that account, it lacks novelistic unity and structure and lends itself—perhaps in the same vein as Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up* or *The Pat Hobby Stories*[41]—the criticism of not being a complete composition: although real life, ordinary life is far less unified than novelistic life, and *Pnin* permits us to peer into that dull triviality for which we are all consorts. The very ordinariness of the novel is its magnificent ornamentation.

As the novel that comes next in line to *Lolita*, *Pnin* paints a different disposition—not to mention an almost entirely different atmosphere—for the reader to witness, at least on the

---

[40] Gennady Barabtarlo remarks how *Pnin* began with a "baffled publisher who had turned down its manuscript, as a strong of more or less detachable story-length episodes, never really congealing into a 'novel.'" Michael Wood similarly writes the "patterns in *Pnin* are not so arcane, and this is one of Nabokov's least patterned novels, prompting some critics to wonder whether it is a novel at all" (171). Wood goes onto suggest that "it is a sequence of stories which is altered, which becomes a novel, once we pay serious attention to the storyteller" (171)—a charge that, while true, I find the improper focus (indeed the negative distraction) of the more central point this study pursues concerning the novel.

[41] Both Fitzgerald and Nabokov shared an enduring friendship with Edmond Wilson, editor and critic: see *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*, ed. Simon Karlinsky (University of California Press, 1979).

surface. It is, as Boyd puts it, Nabokov's "reply to Cervantes," whose novel he found invited delight for the readers in the pain and humiliating of its characters (*AY* 272).[42] More interesting still is the way in which the two characters of these neighboring novels (*Pnin* and *Lolita*) strike a contrast in their very constitutions. Providing a swift preview of either novel's content, Boyd juxtaposes them in this way:

> Humbert, a foreigner easily accepted in America, thanks to his good looks and his suave English, conceals a rotten heart beneath his reputation as a scholar and a gentleman. Pnin's noble, generous heart, on the other hand, beats within the body of a clown whose every phrase in English is an unwitting joke. Humbert marries Charlotte Haze for his own sordid ends. Pnin marries Liza only to become the pawn in her callous games. And where Humbert abuses his role as Lolita's stepfather, Pnin's relation to a son not his own will be the purest and most touching triumph in his story. The gifts Humbert buys Lolita are mere bait for his trap. The gifts Pnin buys Victor seem emblems of the hopelessness of his desire to win the boy's heart, but the magnificent bowl Victor later send Pnin—can one imagine Lolita ever wanting to send Humbert a gift?—seems nothing less than Victor's tribute to a man he could have been proud to call his father. (*AY* 274-5)

What we might have in the novel on the surface is a book about a good person, sad at times, but genuine, where neither outrage nor ire are evoked, and the impersonal, social, surface interactions between people are described as they come together to formulate the picture of a particular person (or a set of people) but cannot quite create him (or them) fully—which, as it turns out, remains after all the banal certainty of ordinary lives.

Reading through the novel—especially in light of its predecessor and the Nabokov oeuvre in general—it is as though we are waiting for something to arrive, some surprise or supreme catastrophe, to find out some secret of the title character or the narrative. It is given to us gently, present the entire time from at least the thirteenth page: the vaguely sly "I" that emerges once in a while throughout the novel not only transforms the otherwise third-person story into a first-person narrative (changing the practices of perception quite drastically) but the narrator is none other than Vladimir Nabokov himself, the Russian writer and teacher who (however distinct here and there from the living Nabokov we speak of as author) at the end of the novel takes Pnin's place at Waindell College, displacing the title character and sending him sadly off into the horizon down the road.[43] This narrator is there the entire time, the spiking pronouncements of his pronouns difficult to miss, and yet this presence also stands as a distraction which nonetheless participates in the point of the book. The narrative structure entreats us to return to the metafictional and call that glamor the guts of the novel. I would prefer instead to posit it as a kind of distraction—one that leads, as much of Nabokov does, by negative example—from the primary focus of the novel. The mystique of metafiction in *Pnin*, the presence and purpose of the narrator, has been the subject of discussion by others (Boyd and

---

[42] See his *Lectures on Don Quixote*, ed. Fredson Bowers.

[43] Scholars who write on *Pnin* like to remind readers that the disparaged, displaced professor finds himself treasured tenure track security in a later novel, *Pale Fire* (155), where he is made to seem happier. It is also important to cast a darker shadow on this extra-novelistic happiness, for Nabokov had originally planned to have Pnin killed at the end of the novel by the heart trouble that plagues him in its opening chapters, but was persuaded against it (Boyd *AY* 256-7).

Wood among them). Indeed, the centrality of the narrative "I" is far less stressed and central and climatic in *Pnin* than in *Pale Fire* or *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, for instance, and it arises here as an unsurprising ordinariness, even a self-parody, and ultimately, I argue, stands as a contribution to the novel's notion that focusing upon the other is difficult. A stealthy background "I" in an otherwise third-person narrative poses a problem in the way of interpretation, in the way of understanding the other, a roadblock that reverts to itself, the narrator seeming to arise as the subtle void that sucks up a reader's attention, distracting him from directing it elsewhere as the entire novel encourages us to do.

The title itself is misleading: *Pnin*, which promises to be about the title character. This is true only in a shallow sense. But it is also very much not about him. Rather, the novel is filled with digressions into other people around Pnin, the details of their lives and backgrounds; and it is even more so about the way in which we are all flat characters in the lives of others (and others in ours, despite our self-knowledge of our own fully rounded complexity). One network of lives leaves others out, confining Pnin to marginalization, the same everyday banality that transforms people from the rich individuals they already are into terse platitudes, easy stereotypes, and highly simplified facades of utter flatness and one-dimensionality. Already being the superfluous semi-subject of others through the novel, the Nabokov-narrator's appearance (most directly in the final chapter) doubly detracts from Pnin as the central subject of the book, and makes it even more so about how it is not about our title professor Pnin. The self the novel promises to portray is given up to the other: the narrative itself is given over to and for others, and Pnin actively gives up himself for others as well (and perhaps the reader should as well, with and beyond the book).

From very early on, however, we are drawn away from this way of understanding the novel. In the narrator's promoting of perspective do we find ourselves lured away from concentrating on the other (which is also the problem of the self). In a bit of sudden, high philosophy that seems out of place in *Pnin*, the narrator tells us that one of the "main characteristics of life is discreteness," that

> Unless a film of flesh envelops us, we die. Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is a space-traveler's helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego. (*P* 20)

Not only a strong statement of the problem of the self (distinction, singularity, opposition) that concerns us here, the passage runs counter to what the narrative of *Pnin* is attempting to communicate to us. However submerged beneath the text the statement is, buried within the narrator's own contrary attitudes, it helps to point us down the proper pathway that much of Nabokov's project supports: that the tender ego is the problem, that the divestment of the self is desired, that the imagination can free it from the toils and torments of brutality, and that communion (unity, intimacy, empathy, closeness, conjoined commonality) constitutes the great capability of art.

The perspectival error made by the narrator is where readers of the novel should focus: it is where the problem presented is made clear for us. This concern for the ego on the part of the narrator arises just as he describes Pnin overcome with an "eerie feeling," a "tingle of unreality [that] overpowered him completely" just as he departs from a bus—escaping being on the wrong

train, almost with the wrong paper to present at a lecture in another town—and sits on a bench (heart trouble, dietary problems, ecstasy?) feeling "porous and pregnable" and even "terrified" (*P* 20). But this bodily attack returns him to childhood, it returns him to peace (formerly fretful over the lecture), it returns him to the recognition of patterns and the material beyond the ego-prison, himself having become more than a separated self able to move into an unbound mode of perception (across space and time and immediacy).

Far beyond the fantastical, too, it is in Pnin's gentle nature as a person to give up parts of himself for others, to sacrifice the self as such in order to recognize and respond kindly to the other. And it is also in the nature of the narrative to depart from Pnin, to delve into individuals who are not the assumed subject of the novel. Pnin himself does not seem to mind this. Unlike the narrator himself—or, again, those (demented to different degrees) narrators of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Pale Fire*—Pnin does not strive to syphon up all the attention.

Pnin often feels like a useful proxy for others—which is part of what makes his case a comical one, a sad one, and an instructive one. In a great number of instances *Pnin* seems a novel of introductions, much like the third and fourth chapters of *The Great Gatsby*, but without the pomp or interest: many people present, none enamored of anyone in particular but also being introduced and detailed. *Pnin*'s second chapter opens with a domestic portrait of the Clements, a family whose home Pnin will board in—the husband Laurence mocks his Russian accent and "flatly refuse[s] to have that freak in my house" while the wife Joan (whom the husband frequently talks over) considers him a "pathetic savant" who, of course out of pity, nonetheless invites him to join them for drinks (he declines), and Pnin himself enters into the home robotically reciting his personal curriculum vitae as though this formality were a prerequisite for boarding (*P* 32-37). But it is the history of the room in which Pnin will stay for the academic term into which the narrative digresses, detailing the background of the former tenant Isabel, the daughter of Joan and Laurence who has married a Waindell graduate with an engineering job in another state and thus vacated the room (she will later return to displace Pnin).

The same dynamic is at play soon after this incident when we are introduced to one of Pnin's students, Betty Bliss, along with her own background (of which we enjoy more later): a "plump maternal girl of some twenty-nine summers" who a decade earlier had had a "handsome heel for a lover, who had jilted her for a little tramp, and later she had had a dragging, hopelessly complicated, Chekhovian rather than Dostoevskian affair with a cripple who was now married to his nurse" (*P* 42). Or at the novel's opening where Pnin is described as he sits on the wrong train where he "might have appeared to a fellow passengers; but except for a soldier asleep at one end and two women absorbed in a baby at the other, Pnin has the coach to himself" (*P* 8). All constituted with their own diverse backgrounds and preoccupations (a warrior's dream world, a blooming child, a personal history) each of these people could be concerned with Pnin but they are not, absorbed in their own worlds. The narrative is distracted from its subject, and announces itself as being about not being about him.

The examples grow more telling and intense. As he boards in the house of the Sheppard brothers—Bill and Bob—while his ex-wife's son Victor visits him, the entire household swirls in a collection of its own worlds: Pnin asleep in a dream world "pacing a desolate strand with his dead friend," both haunted Russian fugitives in flight from the Bolsheviks "awaiting some mysterious deliverance to arrive in a throbbing boat from beyond the hapless sea"; the Sheppards awake in "adjacent beds, on their Beautyrest mattresses," one wondering if they should sell the house and the other "thinking of silence, of a green damp churchyard, of an old farm," of a distant relative killed by lightning; and Victor who for once had "fallen asleep as soon as he put

his head under his pillow," and all of them eventually asleep as the narrator relates how it was a "pity nobody saw the display in the empty street, where the autorial breeze wrinkled a large luminous puddle, making of the telephone wires reflected in it illegible lines of black zigzag" (*P* 109-10). All of these concerns that never meet, never communicate, never garnish the attention of one another, and by the very explosion of details leave readers uncertain which details, if any, are to be privileged. An open field of different thoughts and different lives with none to take precedence over the other.

Although not of Proustian proportions, the novel culminates in the putting on by Pnin of a dinner party—his English calls it a "house heating" party—in a home he had been staying in but which he intends to purchase the next morning. "Finally comfortable," one of his guests (Joan Clements) remarks (*P* 164), Pnin will find soon that he will not, of course, be able to purchase the house or stay at the university. Amid the guests, one Mr. Thayer would later write down the following lines to describe the gathering: "We sat and drank, each with a separate past locked up in him, and fate's alarm clocks set at unrelated futures…" (*P* 163), obviously indicative of the nearly-insurmountable ego prison. And later, lauded for one of the few times in the novel, Pnin's academic protector Dr. Hagen compliments him thus in response to the more general concern of the personality of a lecture which *ought* to count for something:

> "It does not!" shouted Hagen. "That is the tragedy! Who, for example, wants *him*"—he pointed to radiant Pnin—"who wants his personality? Nobody! They will reject Timofey's wonderful personality without a quaver. The world wants a machine, not a Timofey." (*P* 161)

Save for the final qualification, the compliment could read as an insult (another negative example of Nabokov's prose). What it helps us to see, however, is the acknowledgement of how empathy and understanding *ought* to occupy a central place in the world, especially among humanists, but that it does not (machines and surface semblances being what "count"). Dr. Hagen's acknowledgement is all the more complicated by the fact that he already knows Pnin will be unable to purchase the house and unable to remain at Waindell College. The only person who stands up for Pnin and more or less keeps his position—somewhere between languages and literature in the one-man Russian department—Dr. Hagen has accepted a generous position elsewhere. Toward the end of the party, Dr. Hagan reveals the news to Pnin. In this instance it has not been just the narrative which has been given over to others (those who are not Pnin, those who are not our supposed subject), but also Pnin himself: he has been given up for and by another, Dr. Hagan, consigned to an unknown and potentially ruinous fate for the latter's benefit.

That through this entire ordeal—and the myriad other tragedies heaped on Pnin throughout his life—the title character is not transformed into a vengeful, vindictive, villainous personality (unlike Hermann or Humbert, for instance) speaks to the point about the giving up of the self (perhaps the cause of such a violent transformation) that Nabokov underlines in the novel (and throughout his narrative project). Even at the conclusion of this part, the novel's dramatic climax, Pnin remains unaffected in his personality, his goodness, his concern for others, his ability to give up that self which has received so many blows. As he straightens up the aftermath of the party, alone again, no malice manifests in Pnin. In fact, in such trying times his generosity and considerateness soars:

> He scraped various tidbits off the plates into a brown paper bag, to be given eventually to a mangy little white dog, with pink patches on its back, that visited him sometimes in the afternoon—there was no reason a human's misfortune should interfere with a canine's pleasure. (*P* 171)

Pnin's consideration for the other extends even beyond the human with a degree of empathy that is absent in the novel's other characters and which reminds the reader of their own culpability in viewing the title character as an object to be laughed at or amused by.

Indeed, then, it is not only the narrative itself that gives over its subject, pushing him into the margins of description to concentrate on tangential tangles, to discuss the other as most of these examples illustrate so far, but also Pnin (as with the dog) who actively gives up parts of himself—his life, his ambitions, his time, his love, his tenderness—to and for others. Let us now examine a few of the most pertinent examples.

The most concrete instance in the novel involves his unadulterated—despite his being the cuckold—willingness to raise and nurture the child of his (now ex-) wife Liza. A psychoanalyst in training and an amateur poet at the time Pnin meets her, she and Pnin marry, and it is not long before she has eloped with one Dr. Eric Wind, a man who, she tells him on the telephone as she assures him that they would never meet again, understood her "organic ego" (*P* 46). It is also not long before she returns, trampling back into Pnin's life through his door, "puffing and carrying before her like a chest of drawers a seven-month pregnancy" and announcing that "it had all been a mistake, and from now on she was again Pnin's faithful and lawful wife" prepared to follow him "even beyond the ocean if need be" (*P* 47). As it transpires, the need to travel across the ocean is her own, and Dr. Wind is also clandestinely aboard the boat that sails for America. During the passage Pnin and Wind meet, and the latter divulges the plan that he is to marry Liza in America, all of which had been (as a result of some complications of Dr. Wind's own not-yet-ex-wife) Liza's plan the entire time.

Even before this chain of events unfolds—before Liza leaves him for the first time—we are told that he "of course would have given her a divorce as readily as he would his life" all "wrapped up as crisply as at the earth-smelling florist's when the rain makes gray and green mirrors of Easter day" (*P* 46). And his initial letter of love and proposal of marriage is no less a sign of devotion: "I offer you everything I have," he writes to her, "to the last blood corpuscle, to the last tear, everything… this is more than any genius can offer you because a genius needs to keep so much in store, and thus cannot offer you the whole of himself as I do. I may not achieve happiness, but I know I shall do everything to make you happy" (*P* 183). And when she returns to him pregnant with the child of another, his declarations of love remain: "He was not only ready to adopt the child when it came," Nabokov writes, "but was passionately eager to do so" and as he says this and thinks of its first words and divulges his enthusiastic pedagogical plans for the child, we read that "those days were probably the happiest in Pnin's life" (*P* 47).

To compound all of this, and add to its cruelty, we learn that Pnin was merely the next thing to come along into Liza's life and his letter she read with "tears of self-pity while recovering from a pharmacopoeial attempt at suicide because of a rather silly affair with a litterateur" and was advised by five analyst friends to take the man up on his offer—"Pnin—and a baby at once" (*P* 45). To compound it yet again, Liza shows up in the novel's present to request that Pnin reserve a certain amount of money on a monthly basis to help support the growing boy (now fourteen years old) because neither she, her now-ex-husband Dr. Wind, nor the man she is currently involved with, could be relied upon. Pnin of course does and even has

the child Victor stay with him during the novel as he attempts to act as the surrogate father he was enthusiastic to become years earlier.

Even Pnin's disdain for the psychoanalytic apparatus—a sentiment his creator shares—and which Liza is dedicated to does not prevent him from extending his love and his understanding. Long after their separation, it evokes in Pnin a "twinge of revulsion and pity," wondering if the anguish and sorrow psychology seeks to resolve and banish from the psyche is the "only thing in the world people really possess" (*P* 50-2). In this light, psychoanalysis is among the factors that remove and reduce the capacity for exhibiting empathy and understanding for the other by removing the tools that make such sharing possible. In his initial marriage letter to Liza, Pnin writes: "I want you to write poems. I want you to go on with your psychotherapeutic research—in which I do not understand much, while questioning the validity of what I can understand" (*P* 183). Actively positioning himself as the negative otherer, Pnin nonetheless accepts what he finds to be absurd and reprehensible in Liza's pursuits and encourages her to pursue them. He exhibits the openness to both recognize himself, in his disdain for Freudianism, as the culpable otherer and, in his awareness of that limitation, to stop its harmful effects by resigning himself to acceptance. His affection is a testament to the totalizing understanding so absent in the modern world, for his affection entails an ekphrastic element as well, open, as it is, to all dimensions of the personality (Liza's) of the other—"To hold her," comes the lamentation just as she departs after securing some of Pnin's savings for Victor, "to keep her—just as she was, with her cruelty, with her vulgarity, with her blinding blue eyes, with her miserable poetry, with her fat feet, with her impure, dry, sordid, infantile soul" (*P* 57-8): to admire and love and understand every unqualified aspect of her soul completely.

Such affection on Pnin's part extends from the intimate knowledge and friendship (or fiendship, a close companionship either way) of his ex-wife, to the inhuman and helpless animal (canine companion above), to the anonymous shadows of the unknown non-acquaintance. As he leaves his home one afternoon Pnin recalls a "book the college library had urgently requested him to return, for the use of another reader," and though he "struggled with himself" because he still required use of the item, "kindly Pnin sympathized too much with the passionate clamor of another (unknown) scholar not to go back for the stout and heavy tome" (*P* 65-6). Of course, by some archival oversight combined with Lethean mist of literary leaves storming through the scholastic mind, Pnin is both the retainer and requestor of the volume in question, recognizing himself in this instance—however unknowingly—as a stranger, as the other, in greater need and again giving up the very self he seeks to selflessly satisfy.

Perhaps this example of a misplaced monograph seems too shallow to warrant serious consideration because it seems a clownish coat of pejoratively commonplace pseudo-comedy draped around the shoulders of already pathetic Pnin, quite apart from the more severe instances of self-submission discussed above. If we feel against Humbert Humbert and the Enchanter, we feel *for* Pnin (or we should), but we are also made to laugh at him, to pity him, to see ourselves as above him perhaps, as too refined or confident to make the same mistakes and missteps: and this is the trap Nabokov has set. If there is a villain in this novel it is the benign behavior of the everyday being who has no enduring conceptualization of or connection to—and thus no investment in—the vastness of a humanity beyond so limited a physical, personal, and mental sphere and, as a result, visits untold, untallied, unfathomable harm on these numberless others who are both immensely distant and equally proximal.

The novel most often positions Pnin as a proxy for and of others. At the Pines, where a fellow Russian gathers a collection of émigré for the summer, Pnin emerges from the car he has

recently learned to drive stylishly dressed and described (quite different from the novel's opening where he sits on the wrong train), where he can discuss the *Anna Karenin* as the best example of relativity in literature to an interested and unridiculing audience, where he can proficiently play croquet, being transformed from his "habitual, slow, ponderous, rather rigid self" into a "terrifically mobile, scampering mute, sly-visaged hunchback" where he dominates the game with "geometrical gusto" and accompanying "cries of admiration from the onlookers" (*P* 130). It is also a place where he might—however briefly—mention the name of Mira Belochkin, a former love transferred by "cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart" whose memory Pnin practiced staving off this last decade in order to "exist rationally" because "no conscience, and hence no consciousness" could exist and thrive in a world where such deaths are possible (*P* 134-5). So this he must give up too as best he can, the very memory of her, to save her specter from its suffering: for with the conjuration of this memory Mira "kept dying a great number of deaths in one's mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again, led away by a trained nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower bath with prussic acid, burned alive in a pit on a gasoline-soaked pile of beechwood" (*P* 135).

The gathering at the Pines easily shows the not-one-sided personality of Pnin among his own people, a temporary aside from the dominant reading practice proposed by the novel. The details, sometimes dormant, are waiting to reveal the depth of all things—*The Defense* and *Transparent Things* are two other poignant examples—if we do not first find ourselves in the failure of imagination. As the reading ego fortifies itself against the foreignness of the central figure and understanding him as we are initially entreated to understand him, on the shallow, comic, comfortable, dismissive terms by which we, too, become the banal executors of untold pain.

Pnin, we are told, did not "believe in an autocratic God" (*P* 136) in which many can find the comfort and justification for all things and the elevation of responsibly and the equipment to adorned the egomaniac unchecked. Pnin's giving up of himself—in both the novel's narrative and his own submissions—involves, as I have been arguing all along, steps toward the disillusion of the ego-boundaries, of the concentrated self-centrality that is the dominant mode of modernity and the derivation of all its problems. It entails a democratic sacrifice—not in relation to governmentality or the political—in which the self becomes or enters the process of becoming abolished while approaching a realm of understanding. Pnin did, we hear, "believe, dimly, in a democracy of ghosts" the souls of which "perhaps, formed committees, and these, in continuous session, attended to the destinies of the quick," of others (*P* 136). Certainly the dead continue to attend to our destinies, leaving in their wake the fragile pathways of inheritance or reaching more actively through the veil of the Otherworld (it does not much matter which), but it is the living, perhaps more than these, who shape and situate the violence, subtle and invisible but of monumental consequence, perpetrated by the self. It is Pnin, with the ekphrastic splendor that somehow allows him to understand this, who proceeds in giving up dominion—so exemplified and so basically in the novel—to hear and communicate those other voices, to a kind of democracy of otherness rather than the tyranny so often touted by the self.

II

Where might we locate the strategic deployment of such an approach that radically questions the self as a central entity, entails the abdication of its intellectual and psychic

dominion, and permits proliferated attention to and comprehension of those so many other voices—human, animal, divine, inert—that constitute the ultimate landscape on which we all stand? Does the call for such a practical deployment (and we will move more toward the practical and the active as we broach Pynchon and Morrison below) make much sense in Nabokov's context or indeed in the world at large? The answer is at least twofold, on one side purposively and topically restrictive while on the other publicly imperative: for the former the epistemological ekphrasis—as it is concentrated on the problem of the self above—must take place in a private realm, in the area of the intellect, where mentality achieves an understanding of restrictive received notions, of underlying axioms, of the confined world of modernity whose intellectual limitations are ubiquitous so that severe contemplation is the only requisite and goal of the shift (this being the purposively restricted aims laid out in my assessment of Nabokov's narrative project and the problem of the self, discussed above); for the latter, one begins to pose questions of the applied ramifications of the ekphrastic (which are to come later in a different study) and how it is to be comprehensively communicated into the public world. This articulation becomes the next great step but requires the achieved contemplation of the first (this being the publicly imperative aspect of such a project—in brief, the answer to the question of what to do with this epistemologically altering ekphrastic vision once the private individual has attained it as an unframed framework). Without addressing this complicated problem of the self, practitioners and participants of all sorts will be confined to the repetition (and mercantile competition) of a small field of loud ideas in a static constellation of contemporary contemplative habits since to do is to remain sifting about in the same sands that have made us static in the first place—the quicksand of which so many of Nabokov's characters are similarly cemented and sunken.

Another example which pushes beyond the theoretical, individually contemplative realm so frequented by Nabokov—though it remains quite on the cusp in terms of application—and displays the potential for an amalgamated praxis is his final unfinished novel *The Original of Laura*. It is a novel (subtitled *Dying is Fun*) in which the central theme—the meditative, self-willed divestment and disappearance of the self—interacts quite spectrally with the historical circumstances of the novel's production, where thematic content interacts between textual imagination and actual practice: strange, indeed, that the protagonist Philip Wild's efforts at self-erasure correspond to the fading fragments of the incomplete novel. One might understand it as an ultimate example of a metafictional and/or meta-real literary display or chalk it up to the easy interplay between happenstance and personal inspiration (those surrounding fragments of the real that find themselves conscripted into fiction) which serve for nothing more than a coincidental curio in literary history. Form and content have long been intertwined but there seems something more here if we wish to make it. Form and theme unite as well, but between the fictional and the real, because it would have been otherwise had the author survived and completed the manuscript: it would have been something else entirely. And it is interesting to see the enduring themes of Nabokov's narrative project brought to their paramount articulation in an unfinished novel of fragments. Although I have subjected it to only a brief analysis here, the praxis I hope to enunciate is that fiction is not ancillary to our lives, but that it is our lives—and better yet that art functions to make authentic, serious, life-changing insights (artists, I hazard to guess, understand this better than audiences, who are beset by reductive arguments about entertainment and the separation of the real from the make-believe), so that literature and art become in a monastic or devotional sense a form of life and a way to live.

What I have attempted to do in the preceding sections is articulate one strategy for confronting and overcoming the problem of the self, namely the ekphrastic, and to provide a set of concrete literary examples along with a theoretical discussion of the concept. We might continue to think about the epistemologically ekphrasic in a number of different ways. Music—which Nabokov himself would not be in the mind to hear—perhaps presents a useful parallel (though certainly not a precise metaphor) where singularity is sacrificed for something more, where the symphonic sounds taken together become the ekphrastic dimension; which is not to say that Nabokov is about the democratic in a governmental sense, but instead articulates something larger about community, about connection to and rapture with a force of perception more powerful and pure than the focus on an elevated individual. On a different hand, animation also represents the erasure of singularity that finds a sibling in the ekphrastic as I have discussed it—the flipping of slightly different pages drawn by various hands creating the illusion of fluid, conscious movement interspersed with sound and story to generate the appearance of organic life while the anonymous efforts of its composers withdraw into the abyss. Also the painting itself offers the most original grounds for expression of the ekphrastic, which, taking in the entirety of a framed portrait, resists the focused and exclusive contemplation of what we call a "detail" of a painting, that forceful attraction to the eye—center place, vanishing point, concentrated action, and so forth—that allows us to marginalize the thing in its entirety, to peer beyond the singularity. But let us do away with confined painting and musical metaphors, mixed as they are, for real life is far more layered and complex, and figurative comparisons are close to what is outlined above, but still not the same—though we can, and should, practice in fiction to apply outside of it.

Reading fiction itself tends to focus us on a single individual or a single set of characters while it forces others to become peripheral, reduced to stock in their dimensions, but we—empowered readers—can shift that attention and peer into that marginally relegated life that glows on the sidelines (authors like Morrison will render these same lives central, supplying them with unseen interiority so that even between novels separated by generations of time the same sidelined characters are becoming described in greater detail).[44]

Historical circumstance, temporal location and distribution, literary mode, dominant reading practice, and selected genre all converge to cause this centralized focus whose inevitable outcome is the de-emphasis of the ekphrasis—although this need not be its erasure. Indeed, the great temporal and spatial—let us perhaps say even existential—drawback of linearity becomes a difficult problem to confront because we are accustomed to it and are naturally forced to operate within the bounds of sequence. In speech, where words must appear in a certain order, in reading as Nabokov says, where the eyes must gaze over individual words before the meaning of a sentence, the cadence of a paragraph, the world of a novel (not to mention the comparative landscape of the literary field itself)—all must serve sequence's sovereignty (at least in the initial set of encounters, for there is only re-reading as Nabokov tells us and which any good reader already knows). Among the most immediate, obvious, and dominant epistemologically binding dimensions of physical life is time, an enemy that Nabokov's own autobiography sets itself the task of resisting: the hope of splitting open its vicious sphere into a serene spiral.[45] I bring this up again to highlight yet another dimension of modernity's epistemological dominance with the dimension of time. That in our contemporary moment time seems to assert itself upon us—consider the psychically pressing, exteriorized, capitalized (in the sense of being from

[44] See Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.
[45] See chapter 14 of Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*.

capitalism) power of abstract time that arose with modernity[46]—but also that it can, and has, been articulated and rearticulated in different ways throughout historical periods and in diverse cultures strongly indicates that it need not reign with the supremacy it currently enjoys.

The point of the ekphrasis as it has been illustrated by Nabokov is a movement away from the domination of received notions and naturalized understandings of socialized and constructed concepts and toward the perception of a holistic landscape in which the self, so responsible for the divisionary practices of the contemporary world, merely constitutes—and is in fact constituted by—a small part of the larger worldscape it frequently fails to perceive let alone acknowledge. Despite their monumental complicity and richness, which rival real life, Nabokov's work provides us a ground on which to grasp these concepts so that we might remove them from their literary landscapes and recognize them in the wider world, where they already are in the first place.

[46] See Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*.

Part III: Pynchon and the Cartographication of the World

"But this dynamic is also a doom and a necessity: the system cannot not expand; if it remains stable, it stagnates and dies; it must continue to absorb everything in its path, to interiorize everything that was hitherto exterior to it. Thus, by a chiasmus that has become dialectical, everything bad about the qualification of the closed has been transferred to the open, without the opposite necessarily also being true. Capitalism is thus what is sometimes called an infernal machine, a perpetuum mobile or unnatural miracle, whose strengths turn out to be what is most intolerable about it."

-Fredric Jameson, *Representing* Capital*: A Reading of Volume One* (146)

"There might also be, say, a few visionaries: men above the immediacy of their time who could think historically."

-Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (135)

"Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our homes from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign."
-Paul Valéry, quoted in Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (219)

"It does not matter what both the Book and the word say; it matters that they *speak* and that there is a center of elaboration of their speech. When people gather around a flag, it does not matter what exactly the flag symbolically means, since it can have multiple senses; what matters is that the flag undoubtedly *means something to them*. The power consists in possessing the key for the right interpretation or (which is the same) in being acknowledged by the community as the one who possesses the key."

-Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (152)

§1: Interpretive Confusion and the Encyclopedia Entry: *The Crying of Lot 49* as Prefatory Guide

To approach the works of Thomas Pynchon is a confrontation with size—a cursory glance at *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon*, or *Against the Day* will immediately confirm this—but also with notional combinations that are usually placed in conversations of a contrasting nature: depth and breadth together, scope and specificity conjoined, and so forth. Although these kinds of contrasts seem to thrive on their symbiotic co-existence, even to create their own abiding distinction from one another in a dialectical fashion, locked in the relationship of a tenuous nature they nonetheless tend to resist their own union. To pursue one is usually at the expensive neglect of the other, as though knowledge is mercantile and hierarchical (though perhaps time is, running us through its endless process of depreciation or, in the inevitable Pynchon parlance, our entropic decline). More than this exclusionary element, the subordination of one apparently comes at the behest of the other, as though these two modes of classification—the general and the specific—demand each other's denigration, condemned to compete and fight in some vague Darwinesque struggle for priority whose exchanges are nonetheless cyclical and ultimately repetitive. Impossibility lies at the heart of the matter, or incapability: for every day that passes brings new material to totality as world enough and time expand their fathomless reach. Settling safely in the shallows or surrendering to the separating pull of the depths does not terminate the tension. Straying too far in either direction shoves us up against a number of serious problems, the most basic of which generates the dilettante generalist or the incomprehensible specialist.

This is the position of Pynchon's readers as well. Situated on some mezzanine where the choices fall between retreat into the surveyor's tower and leap into the nebula's abyss, a certain degree of hesitation is not unexpected. Between the futility of it all having already been done by someone else (steps you might simply retract) and the opportunity cost of devoting one's life to a specified pursuit. To plunge or not into an exhaustive endeavor that traverses multiple, if not all, fields of knowledge and seems to demand ubiquitous mastery. Either attempt—complete mastery, broad survey—is a readerly choice, a readerly approach that can be selected. A consternating election between complete mastery and broad survey, it requires a commitment and entails a decision. This is the aura surrounding Pynchon both critically and popularly. And thus, the scope of reading a Pynchon novel—let alone the entirety of his narrative project—seems to ask what it cannot enact. Even his shortest novel abounds with a range of elements that are at times intimidating in their vastness, at others suspect in their connectedness. The confrontation with Pynchon is as intimidating as it can be amusing, but any encounter entails the mandate that we become a certain kind of reader.[47] This is not to say that that the reader is

[47] Richard Poirier sketches five different types of Pynchon readers, starting with the "educated young reader" trained in the mid-sixties to "read hard books" who is "sympathetically responsive to the cultural manifestations of the late sixties," and proceeding to the older generation of similarly sympathetic academic readers, the new academic readers interested in costumed puzzles, individuals in the book business hungry for the next "great writer," and finally the collective that takes their cue from these previous four who are "enthusiastic about a phenomenon without the capacity to understand it" (17). Seeming to extol none of them, he adds a sixth group: the "central mass of educated readers" whom he describes as "tepid, condescending, unwilling or unable to submit to the intense pressure of Pynchon's work" who "admire (when they manage to admire him at all) only what is separable, cute or charming or what is compact or economical" (17-8). In terms of a discourse that legitimates an acceptable reading of Pynchon—or an acceptable reading at all—it is not difficult to see how Poirier has erected a privileged fortification of interpretation and specialization. In one sense, any reader of Pynchon is automatically placed in a disadvantageous position, in too deep for their own ability.

somehow defined beforehand or restricted to an elite ministry of the worthy, but that as with any text the how, when, any why surrounding its arrival before our eyes matters.[48]

At stake for critics and readers who renounce the scholastic claim remains how to read Pynchon. This is always the question behind the criticism, shifting focus ambivalently away from the craft of the writer to the wiles of the reader (à la Barthes). More importantly, I claim, we ought to recognize not just the freedom this entails, especially for a writer like Pynchon whose work is so markedly open or so un-demarcated (in quite a contrast without conflict to with Nabokov), but also the respondent reaction that restricts our reading practices and becomes domineering and corrective. The notion that Pynchon's novels are inaccessible to the general reader, that one has to be a God or a genius, a savant or a mentat, to read Pynchon properly—as though "properly" were an established, unambiguous concept in the first place—is a hegemonic act confining the openness in his work that I ultimately claim (§2 below) is Pynchon's most strategic contribution for epistemology shifting.[49]

Further, as I will come to, this shift in reading and its ramifications are the issues at which Pynchon's narrative project is attempting to arrive. This section will make a claim as to the kind of readers we should be, or rather the kind that we should stop being in approaching Pynchon, but first we must construct the framework illustrating why such a change is necessary.

Accordingly, I would also suggest that Pynchon is not an exclusive or excluding writer, and that there are other ways to read his work aside from what the reputational aura demands—playful, yes; serious, very much so; frightening, indeed; exciting and childlike, indubitably. None of which is to diminish the gravity or artistry of his craft.

Often in the case of Pynchon (that is, in the commentary and criticism) the reader's inability is conflated—or contrasted—with the writer's capacity. In his forward to Joseph Slade's 1974 *Thomas Pynchon*—one of the first monographs on the author—Terence Malley proposes that the most impressive aspects of Pynchon are the "incredible breadth of his knowledge" and the apparent impossibility that a writer at the time in his thirties could not only know so much but "assimilate so much into his fiction" so it "appears that he *has* made use of virtually everything" (10). In what is perhaps among the most succinct and pertinent statements pertaining to reading Pynchon, Malley writes or warns that Pynchon "seems to know virtually everything" (11). Slade himself reiterates essentially the same attitude when he writes that Pynchon's "great learning" seems to have "sprung full-blown from the core of an IBM 360" (17), a statement whose hardware metaphor could easily be upgraded to our time and still retain its validity.

---

[48] As Andreas Huyssen writes, for some time "artists and writers have lived and worked after the Great Divide" between popular, mass culture and high culture and it is "time for the critics to catch up" (ix). Naturally the catching up is necessary, but it is also my point that reading attitudes can change and can even be selected from as a form of choice (what else might the postmodern condition entail if it is anything at all?). A shift in content, for instance, or an alteration in genre should make a different on how our reading practices deploy themselves. When we are reading a serious narrative and suddenly find ourselves having accomplished a quantum leap into the heavy arena of an advertisement or the trite landscape of fairytales—when feng shui becomes a serious preoccupation in the wilderness, when mechanical ducks are exerting metaphysical power over the living, when giant carnivalesque ears are offering a pathway into the afterlife, or rolling pieces of fairground cheese are launched into the air and mistaken for the moon, itself responsible for adolescent lycanthropy (all examples from *Mason & Dixon*)—it matters, and Pynchon accomplishes this mixture so fluidly that traditional reading practices ("seriousness" is only one way to approach a text) should be and are confounded.

[49] Thomas Moore writes in *The Style of Connectedness* that *Gravity's Rainbow* is "among the most widely celebrated unread novels of the past thirty years" (we can add an extra decade or more to that) (1). More to the point, books have reputations. Asking someone about *Gravity's Rainbow* will garnish a certain response, as would *Lolita*.

Richard Poirier writes that Pynchon's unrivaled imagination includes the entirety of our collective culture "more abundantly and more playfully than anyone now writing" (again as true today as it was in 1976) and that in his "inclusiveness he is a kind of cultural encyclopedia" (16).

The general tenor of most Pynchon discussions concerns the overwhelming territory covered in his novels. The many knowledge fields subsumed in his work stand either as *the* topic of discussion, or are presented as a prefatory qualification that permits one to step inside and demarcate smaller lines and latitudes to address more manageable pericopes of Pynchon's work. Whether it be protest and countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the technological threat to humanity, or the documentation of systematic ideological and institutional oppression, or any other item of a seemingly limitless list of pressing contemporary subjects, they will almost undoubtedly receive at least tangential mention. Quite naturally in crafting the previous few paragraphs my own voice has joined this very choir, which is more to the point about dominated narratives out of which I will try to find my way in what follows. The discursive gravity of what we might call the cultural encyclopedia or cultural archive with which Pynchon so freely plunders and plays seems to demand not only that we discuss the sheer size and scope of Pynchon's project—which is absolutely appropriate and productive—but more problematically that we subordinate ourselves to it, becoming so to speak its intellectual subaltern.

In an essay that articulates the general chords of Pynchon criticism and highlights all of the pertinent themes whose legacies continue today, Edward Mendelson supplies additional leverage to the perspective on Pynchon I have lain out. Speaking specifically of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Mendelson writes that labeling it a novel is convenient but inappropriate because it belongs instead to what is "demonstrably the most important single genre in Western literature of the Renaissance and after it" which has "never been identified"—the encyclopedic narrative (161). Evolving out of epic as it does, Mendelson identifies within this newly recognized, background-lurking genre the likes of Dante, Rabelais, Cervantes, Goethe, Joyce, a combination of Chaucer and Shakespeare, and Melville as primary examples.

As Mendelson defines it, the encyclopedic narrative appears "near the beginning of a culture's or nation's sense of its own separate existence" and attempts to "render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the logical perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge" (262-4).[50] Having already established Melville as the North American encyclopedic writer, Mendelson proffers to Pynchon the "existence of a new international culture" generated by the "technologies of instant communication and the economy of world markets" (164-5)—essentially crowning him as the encyclopedic curator of postmodernism (Jameson later says he would have called it globalization had the word been available in 1991). In completing such a move, knowingly or not, Mendelson gives an even more central and impossible position to Pynchon than being the more updated, more comprehensive Melville or being the representative of a yet newly emergent, self-cognizant cultural entity. Rather than rendering him American's encyclopedic narrator—if there is such a place or such a person[51]—Mendelson has positioned Pynchon even more powerfully over the

[50] Additional characteristics of the encyclopedic narrative as Mendelson describes it are its inclusion of at least one technology or science; its inclusion of an art outside of fiction; its presence as an encyclopedia of literary styles (which the novel already is); the inclusion of giants and gigantism; a focus on statecraft; and a polyglot dimension that includes a history of language (161-173).

[51] Interestingly, Mendelson already casts doubt on the authenticity that an encyclopedic narrator can be or do what the apparently new genre demands of him: "Because they are the products of an epoch in which the world's knowledge is larger than any one person can encompass, they necessarily make extensive use of synecdoche" (162).

other examples in terms of size and scope. Instead of representing the total range of a single cultural compendium, Pynchon, Mendelson suggests, encompasses the authority of the entire encyclopedic pursuit: the author of the global or total encyclopedia. An easy survey across his novels at least geographically confirms this—from the movements between the Mediterranean and Africa in *V.*, to the northerly and sometimes-unmapped voyages of the skyship *Inconvenience* of *Against the Day*, to the quasi-ulterior, non-physical dimensional extensions of the Deep Web and virtual reality of *Bleeding Edge*.

To comprehensibly account for a totalized world culture is quite an undertaking. Pynchon as the encyclopedic narrator Mendelson suggests has recorded or accounted for the culture of the globalized world: which, as its dynamics suggest, is destined to in fact become the world itself if it has not yet already: an incendiary and ideologically homogenizing set of movements that entails the elimination of unincluded marginality or the absolutely connected proliferation of it everywhere.

We must wonder to what extent such an encyclopedic reckoning is possible, necessary, or desirable. As Mendelson himself says, none suppose these monstrous encyclopedic novels are "attractive or comfortable books" (165).[52] The endeavor of a single individual to generate such a cultural encyclopedia, let alone a diachronic group of people to say nothing of one's ability to grasp one in its entirety, may very well be an illusion. A brief juxtaposition with utopia might shed some light on the matter, since both ideas (encyclopedia, utopia) arrive already conceptually doomed in one way or another. Rather than serving the negative purpose of estranging our epistemological assumptions and productively showcasing the imagination's poverty,[53] the encyclopedic effort is intrinsically destined for failure because it can be seen as an inviting and additive endeavor that seeks to elicit and include the imagination entirely in the conspiratorial hunger of its size and scope. As much as the utopia is a negativity productive concept, the encyclopedia is an eternally expansive and illusory one concerned not with the imperative to stoke the fumes of a moribund imagination as much as to harvest all that can be made to yield. The illusory aspect of the encyclopedia is that it might one day become complete or that once it is concluded, a person might ever be able to recognize its completeness.

On one hand the encyclopedia accounts for the imaginative poverty utopia highlights, proving that anything thought is already or can immediately be accompanied by precedents whose characteristics and anatomy become part of the encyclopedia. On the other hand, clapping in comic unison, it testifies to the gravity of the endeavor itself: the encyclopedia is open and all-subsuming and does, or will, contain all that will or can be conceived in a disquieting teleology.

Undercutting the possibilities even as he makes an effort to define it, Mendelson's emphasis stays with the impossibility of an authentic encyclopedic narrative either for its producer or its consumer.

[52] Though the necessary space is not supplied here, I would like to argue as well against Mendelson's claim differentiating the genre of the novel (which Mendelson says is "a narrative of individuals and their social and psychological relations" [161]) from the encyclopedic narrative—the latter, in my view, is subsumed by the former. In his proliferating and indiscriminate inclusiveness, Pynchon comes far closer to fulfilling the space of the novel and actualizing its totalizing power. Although Mendelson acknowledge Bakhtin's laughter as a solution for the plight of *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is important to note that Bakhtin has also already explained that the novel is undeveloped and incomplete, limitless in its scope: that perhaps the novel becomes the great openness when we consider all novels as a single novel and read them together as such. But as Mendelson will go on to say, who wants to do that? Thus we are blocked, generically and in the obfuscation of the worth of our literary labor, from viewing the novel in its capacity to encompass everything. Rather than an encyclopedic narrator, Pynchon is a novelist who gets closer to actualizing the genre.

[53] See Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), specifically part II, chapter 4.

With good reason this is a position that dominates attitudes about Pynchon for scholars and general readers alike. Even those who do not elect to focus on this aspect of his work are nonetheless by necessity subordinated to it. And the inevitable statements of that submission are clear. The instructive claim that "Pynchon knows more than his readers" (Mendelson 180) is foretold. Or, as Poirier suggests, we "don't know *enough* to feel as he wants us to feel," because we cannot "possibly claim to be as conversant as he wants us to be with the various forms of contemporary culture" (20).

But we should recognize—and often we *seem* to—that neither can Pynchon. This is not to diminish his intelligence (he does seem to be some kind of genius) or tarnish his talent, but to point out the impossible mantle with which he has been critically saddled, one that he seems to bear with amusement rather than trepidation if he pays attention to academic conversations at all. Furthermore, it is not as though artists read theorists and philosophers with an easily expert eye and then rearticulate these ideas in their novels so that all that remains for scholars is the parallel task of overlaying the two texts and noting where the interstices conjoin to form a solid plain of consistency. If one reads, say, a prison novel, to take an easy example, and overlays it with a Foucauldian analysis replete with panoptic self-censorship, psychic docility, and unbalanced power dynamics—as though the expression of these notions were the exclusive purpose of the novel—then, really, we don't need the novel at all and can simply stay with Foucault: which is to say, the novel is a facsimile, or a mere effort of reference, whose authentic expression lies elsewhere. While the tracing of conceptual overlapping is useful for a parallax understanding, the point about applied theory threatens to be problematically foregrounded as the task to be completed as an end in itself.

In the case of Pynchon scholarship the rhetoric of the encyclopedia has also infected the criticism. Thus, the activity of forging and tracing connections *toward*—in an endless ontological fashion—some ultimate end played out by characters (Stencil, Oedipa, Doc, and so forth) frequently becomes the preoccupation of the critical reader as well.[54]

The ultimate endpoint where the connections coalesce into some comprehensive and epiphanic understanding does not arrive at the end of a Pynchon novel. Just as the concluding sentence of *The Crying of Lot 49*, which could just as well serve as its opening, prepares to set in motion a whole other lengthy crusade of explorations and paranoid connections rather than providing a calming closure, we find that our sense of conclusion is canceled, its deferral continued.

The ekphrastic vision granted us in a reading of Nabokov is not permitted in the world of Pynchon. One reason for this is that Nabokov's aesthetic world is controlled and closed, a private space offered for our comprehension. Pynchon's on the other hand is wide open. It avails itself beyond its own confines.

This is not to say that Pynchon's novels are illusory or concerned, in the way that perhaps Nabokov's are, with manipulating and testing the wiles of their readers, but rather that the encyclopedic endeavor itself is the impossible illusion.

---

[54] There is an analogous situation in Shoshana Felman's discussion of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* in which the dynamics and thematics of the novella have also entered into, perhaps even infected, the criticism that discusses it. "Could the critical debate itself" she asks, be "considered a *ghost effect*?" The vocabulary of the criticism, she convincingly illustrates, also "seems to echo and repeat the combative spirit that animates the text" (98-9). Though there are plenty of otherworldly occurrence throughout Pynchon—consider the new liminal cyber-necropolis space afforded by the Deep Web in *Bleeding Edge*—criticism of his work is more haunted by the plight of knowledge and power and social architecture that he pits his characters against than the presence of ghosts.

What I want to claim about the encyclopedic endeavor and the reading of Pynchon, then, involves the interpretive problem he foists upon us with the unwieldly narratives he offers. The critical mood of encountering novels inviting the fever of interpretive mastery and the tracing of proliferating material: connections, context, concepts, definitions, experiments, and each one something to be researched and figured out before returning to the novel itself and inserting new knowledge.

To what extent does such an interpretive attitude contribute to the endeavor? Does the role of interpretation itself constitute an impossible conundrum? To what extent can information be said to be inertial? That is to say, once information is set in motion will it continue indefinitely, accruing in its endless rampage details and connections and smashing other inert and dormant pieces of data into the same maelstrom?

I claim here that the critic or reader is the (sometimes) unknown generator of the expanding encyclopedia, adding entry after entry and powering this endless self-producing epistemological category. I similarly claim that Pynchon's novels are encyclopedic only in the sense that they are able to set in motion an endless potential of links (a referential mania that is overwhelming) that can be followed without termination. The scholar attempting to master these links comprehensively will be contributing (as an outside source) only additional material, mass, volume to follow in this doomed endeavor: manufacturing meaning or purpose and ascribing it backwards to Pynchon. Each additional entry, that is to say, renders the endeavor that much more voluminous, that much larger, and that much more impossible.

Describing early and evolving conceptions of the encyclopedia in Western Europe in a set of statements that could just as easily describe the vast theater of a Pynchon novel, William West designates encyclopedic desire as

> a kind of playing, and like play it is non-climactic and sustainable; it does not achieve a moment of satisfaction that is also its limit, but can be extended indefinitely. This is why encyclopedias require the external limits of border, rules, and goals. These limits are subsequent on the initial delimitation that calls the encyclopedia into existence—observe *here* and not there, *now* and not at another time. (35)

Episode- and entry-oriented like the progression of a Pynchon novel, the encyclopedia too seems at a glance to be an open system into which anything can be poured and, with enough effort, where everything can also be connected. Both are in this sense nomadic sites or rhizomes. More interestingly, Pynchon's novels, like the entries in encyclopedias, seem to close not because they *have* to, not because the extensive sequence of events they have just described is completed, but because they need to for practical reasons of publication. Any of them might go on indefinitely.

The playfulness associated with the early encyclopedias and subsequently forgotten presents another useful analogy in reading Pynchon. As West says, the many early encyclopedias presented themselves as theatrical works that would "stage, feign, imitate their own impossible completeness by casting themselves as dramas of knowledge" whose cultural project has in more recent generations become "blinded by its own Enlightenment" wherein the "encyclopedia may be Western culture's unwitting joke on itself" because it "continually reforgets what it knew about the limit of knowing and the irony of trying to master all possible knowledge and begins to take the task seriously" (41). Unlike its Enlightenment counterpart whose legacy dominates the contemporary world, the encyclopedia in premodern Europe contained the additional feature of

demonstrating "itself to be a self-defeating project" (West 41). Pynchon is much closer to this earlier encyclopedic conception than to its subsequent Enlightenment counterpart, and much freer as well.[55]

Having taken the task of dominating the world in all of its aspects seriously—Adorno and Horkheimer provide unsurpassed examples of this governing cultural tendency[56]—modernity has forgotten in its frenzied desire for (self-elevating) mastery the limits of its own knowledge and the factory of illusions that produce the sense that knowledge is limitless. Blinded by its self-assured investment in the hermetic, systemic means to map and capture the world, modernity has committed itself to an epistemology that must soon reach an endpoint where it can no longer smoothly sustain a sense of its own equilibrium.

Attempts to master and map all of his references and allusions continue, as do exhortions of Pynchon as the representative genius who knows and has mastered everything, the updated and authentic Renaissance man in earnest—the thing we know no individual can be. One safety the encyclopedia presents, West points out, is its ability to "reproduce the world without becoming involved in it," establishing for its readers boundaries not only because reality is threatening but because "the contemplation of reality is also so absorbing," a factor that necessitates the encyclopedic tool but also seeks to limit it (23, 28).

Lest the distinction between record and reality fall to indistinguishable pieces, the object that records the real world (encyclopedia) and the thing itself (reality) must remain separate. One might even venture to suggest that this field in which units of information are "abstracted from their real existence, codified and ordered" (West 28) and then subsequently re-inscribed into what they presumably contemplate is part of the dialectical generation of the real itself: of what can be said to be understood and of what can be brought into being. It is precisely the same dynamic governing the oppositional complacency of breadth and specificity discussed above. And it is precisely this kind of generative and looping binary that Pynchon is attempting to direct us away from.

Pynchon can represent the encyclopedia not just in West's sense that contemplation itself is a "practice devised to help one prepare for action" (28) or that contained representation allows something to be "safely viewed, interpreted, or admired without actually absorbing the viewers" (24). A novel prepares one for being in the world more richly—not necessarily for action in the most pedestrian sense of starting an underground mail organization or arranging a network of anarchists, but for simply *being*, for contemplating one's positionality. Pynchon can also represent the encyclopedia in the sense that his works help to set in motion the earnest though illusory project of the Enlightenment drive to master all knowledge. In the more important sense, I argue that one of the primary thrusts of his work is to reveal the futility of this endeavor and urge readers to understand a different strategy of reading. Pynchon indicates with his information-saturated novels that we need to change our approach not just to reading but to reckoning with the world itself. I suggest critics stop reading Pynchon with the intent of

---

[55] I would argue that he is not a producer of the encyclopedic narrative, whatever this is, and remains a novelist. As Bakhtin says, the novel's unfinished, all-inclusive capabilities make what Pynchon does an even more powerful candidate for actualizing the genre's potential.

[56] Reiterating the point throughout *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they succinctly write the following: "What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts. Ruthless towards itself, the Enlightenment has eradicated the last remnant of its own self-awareness" (2). See also Raymond William's essay "Ideas of Nature" for an even more expansive understanding of the subordinating forces that are so readily identified as Enlightenment ideology in social contexts and capitalist machinery in economic ones.

achieving content and knowledge mastery. This is not the key. It is in fact the fathomless snare of the compromised encyclopedia project, where each effort at contribution merely increases the quantity of material to be mastered. Rather, the key is to recognize how Pynchon is laying bare this reality and preparing for confronting it, however massive and totalizing it may turn out to be. Reading Pynchon, like all reading, is practice for coping with modernity, practice for bringing a strategy of recognition from the novel-world to the "real"-world: cartography and navigation become the primary means by which Pynchon presents a strategy for epistemological shifting (detailed below in §2).

I would like to reiterate the present point: Pynchon's works are encyclopedic in the sense that they reveal the problems of the encyclopedic endeavor. This involves primarily the obsession with mastery through fixation on binary thinking that dominates Western epistemology to this day. The encyclopedic endeavor necessitates its own endless expansion: because of its inability to separate or its desire to merge itself with the subjects it contemplates, the encyclopedia is a self-generating, self-feeding (might one say an anti-entropic?) machine. Any instance in which information is added to it, the encyclopedia becomes that much larger an endeavor to be mastered. Pynchon's efforts to reveal this epistemological trap arise in the response he garnishes from readers who want to trace the totality of his connections: Pynchon effects the increase in kinetic information by the sheer presence of potential.

Let us say Pynchon has access to an encyclopedia and an almanac. In the last five decades access to information has become increasingly available. Pynchon also has a wild and wonderful imagination, intense skill as a writer, and an extensive heritage that values education and curiosity. Let us say, perhaps, that this is enough for someone as creative and imaginatively powerful as Pynchon. Let us say that Pynchon's knowledge—a posturing to display something more relevant about the limits of knowledge itself—is much closer to the encyclopedia entry than the encyclopedia itself, a tool that he can summon and use in the grand fashion of play.

It is with the knowledge of the encyclopedia entry rather than the encyclopedia that he sets his readers upon interpretive tracings of knowledge that aggregate into an endless abyss of potential connections. It does not make too grand a difference if Pynchon is or is not expert in all that his fiction touches upon. The point is that his narrative project is attempting to make us aware of this fevered tendency to viciously pursue mastery in its totality, and in doing so to us point out of this troublesome (epistemic) obsession.[57]

The interpretive confusion that arises in the reading of Pynchon between the real and the fictional is also an important addendum to this point. In Pynchon's work, fiction and reality participate in an equally crucial fashion. Be it history, literature, science, or popular culture, as Steven Weisenburger writes, Pynchon never "insists on keeping the different channels discrete" and permits each to openly "partake in a gargantuan whole that is fearfully inclusive" (149). Many commentators note that one can become confused reading a Pynchon novel, uncertain if the material he refers to is fictional (as Borges might conjure up a monograph) or historical.

---

[57] An illustrative parallel exists in the world of chess. When reigning grandmaster Gary Kasparov was defeated by IBM's Deep Blue in 1997, he claimed that the computational machine—capable of contemplating two hundred million positions per second—would need only a moderately well-trained chess player beside it, examining the proposals from a human perspective, in order to display an expertise of play on the grandmaster level. Computational power added to human intelligence and intuition would result in something greater than both of them. If we accept Kasparov's claim about the colluding human behind the machine (probably much worse than puppets or dwarves) then we might draw the same parallel with Pynchon wherein the powerful imagination has access, via the encyclopedia, to immense information and produces as a result confounding story-worlds whose reach is greater than the sum of their parts.

Often it is the latter despite initial impressions (Iceland spar seems to be real, as do rumors about Lemuria). The same can be true when reading Pynchon criticism, which often attempts to trace the origins, sources, and connections between the materials his novels refer to (are Basil Collier's *The Battle of the V-Weapons* and David Irving's *The Mare's Nest* historical books and authors or fictitious ones?). Even the known details of his life—his confidential Cornell transcripts, the high school principle he asked not to divulge any information, the records of his naval service that vanished in an explosion in St. Louis—seem to be melded into his fiction, lending themselves to all manner of conspiratorial conjectures.[58] Potential connections beckon in all cases.

The fixation on tracing sources and mastering links remains one of the occupations of Pynchon criticism, the attempt of which is also another problematic illustration of the futility toward which Pynchon directs his work. As though the unmasking of each reference—real or imagined—can bring us closer to the imagined level of encyclopedic knowledge with which we imbue Pynchon, when in fact the effort merely makes the mission more impossible. On to the side of the novels themselves one can place Weisenburger's *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel* or J. Kerry Grant's *A Companion to The Crying of Lot 49* to map out the material Pynchon has already utilized. Or one can take up *Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*—a collections of essays explicating the novel rather than a list of the sources it employs—to help orient and, as the title suggests, guide you through this vast work. The implication is that one person need not navigate on their own. But this, from Pynchon's perspective, is the point, and we critics too often work to defeat or deface it. An intellectual industry (consider the three books just mentioned) arises around these novels to re-inscribe them into the epistemological realm out of which they are pushing.[59] Pynchon's work is critical of these industries.

Interpretive irony becomes an issue as well. What is the point is in re-tracing the steps of something—a Pynchon novel—that have already been traced? A retracing in this manner, as I will argue in the next section, returns us to the point of origin: the novel itself, and nowhere forward. We critics become, in Poirier's words, merely a "species of sorting demon" for Pynchon (26). One always needs more, be it the endeavor of the encyclopedia or the hope to master the links in a novel. This is the dynamic and the theme of Pynchon's narrative project: the self-defeating impossibility of conquering all connection (thus dispelling conspiracy, corruption, and ideological domination).

At last, then, we may turn to a brief section of *The Crying of Lot 49* to argue how the novel encourages readers to adopt this approach. The latter half of chapter 3 will serve as critical periscope for this argument. Here, Oedipa Maas finds herself utterly engrossed in a Jacobean play entitled *The Courier's Tragedy*. This comes just after Oedipa, having already been deemed executrix of her late ex-boyfriend Pierce Inverarity's estate, is at Fangoso Lagoon (an Inverarity real estate development) and the conversation turns to the human bones that have been curated and placed at the bottom of the lake, along with other aquatic decorations, for scuba enthusiasts. These bones are of disputable or multiple origin, either moved from cemeteries to make way for Southern California freeways and/or harvested by the Cosa Nostra from the bottom of Lago di Pietà in Italy where in 1943 a number of U.S. troops held out against the Germans, their backs to the water, until they were eventually overtaken and thrown into the water. It is only after this barrage of information about human skeletal remains that one of the girls with the Paranoids, a

---

[58] See Mathew Winston's "Appendix: The Quest for Pynchon" in *Mindful Pleasures*.

[59] Mendelson puts it this way: "Charismatic books tend, like other loci of charisma, to develop a routinized critical bureaucracy around them" and so one "almost hesitates to report a discovery" when one finds it (170).

garage band from Oedipa's apartment complex, mentions the "most bizarre resemblance" to *The Courier's Tragedy* (*L* 48). All of these factors and more falling in the space of a few pages in order to prime a plot connection illustrates the manner in which the novel—like all of Pynchon—begs to be opened to the world, investigated, corroborated by historical and factual circumstances, and re-connected back into the textual machinery.

Oedipa hears the Paranoids recite the plot of *The Courier's Tragedy* made "near to unintelligible by eight memories unlooping progressively into regions as strange to map as their rising coils and clouds of pot smoke" (*L* 49) and the confusion, not to mention the play's loose connection to the Inverarity estate, urges her to attend the play itself. Like any good scholar, Oedpia seeks to experience the primary source material for herself and disentangle the eight desperate variations or contributions against the thing itself: first the play's performance and later the text. These eight strains—again like the blossoming potential material of a Pynchon novel—converge to form something incoherent enough that one is prompted to do the detective work, to master the links and merge them into a central story.[60]

Composed by one Richard Wharfinger, *The Courier's Tragedy* boasts an intricate and amusing plot and almost overloads, if such a thing were possible, the tropes of the Elizabethan and Jacobian stages. Like other bloody, popular, and seemingly incoherent revenge plays of the period—*The Spanish Tragedy*, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Jew of Malta*, and *The Duchess of Malfi,* along with some dashes of *Oedipus Rex*—*The Courier's Tragedy* is charged to the brim with violence and shallow plot. It seems too much to belong in the same arena of our celebrated playwrights. But it is wholly a Renaissance concoction: they are all here throwing out their lowest material—Kyd, Shakespeare, Marlow, Webster, the anonymous and uncredited, and even the antique Sophocles, whose violence would be displayed only offstage. But here "like a Road Runner cartoon in blank verse" each and every "mode of violent death available to Renaissance man" is deployed, not to mention the twisted calls of motivation and convolutions of plot (*L* 58). It represents yet another ultra-saturated site of information for readers to navigate.

For this reason, I will not attempt to expound the content of *The Courier's Tragedy*.[61] It would do little good but to reiterate what I have already said. It is a play that could be described only in a novel, one that could not be performed on stage any more than a Pynchon novel could make it to the screen.[62] There are parts in this "landscape of evil," Pynchon tells us, when things "too awful to talk about" occur and it is in the fourth act that "things really get peculiar, and a gentle chill, and ambiguity, begins to creep in among the words," a "ritual reluctance" arises, and despite the excesses of all manner hitherto in the play "certain things, it is made clear, will not be spoken aloud; certain events will not be shown onstage" (*L* 49, 55, 57). It is an enunciated

---

[60] At one point we are told that Oedipa would take all of these desperate pieces of information and "give them order, she would create constellations" (*L* 72). This obsession is one that sometimes spreads to the reader-critic even at the same time Pynchon points it out as a central problem to be addressed in each of his novels ("Remember that Puritans," Professor Emory Bortz reminds Oedipa, "were utterly devoted, like literary critics, to the Word" [*L* 128]).
[61] See *The Crying of Lot 49* pages 49-58 for the details of *The Courier's Tragedy*.
[62] For his own part, film director Paul Thomas Anderson attempted to adapt Pynchon's 1990 *Vineland* to the screen but could not figure out how (See Logan Hill's "Pynchon's Cameo, and Other Surrealities" in the *New York Times*, September 26, 2014.) Anderson's recent adaptation of *Inherent Vice* (2914) makes it the first of Pynchon's novels to move to the screen. There also remains a pertinent connection between Anderson's earlier *There Will be Blood* (adapted from Upton Sinclar's novel *Oil!*) and some scenes of *Against the Day* where the mine-working anarchist dynamiters of the Colorado silver industry are similarly engaged with revealing the problems of capitalism, industry, land speculation, and human exploitation.

silence, all "a big in-joke" the "audiences of the time knew" and the characters know but do not say (*L* 55). It is an invitation to conspiracy entreating further investigation.

In an effort to forward her search Odepia raids the backstage dressing rooms after the curtains close. Like an enthused reader-scholar-critic, she is urged by her curiosity to "see if there's a connection" (*L* 59) as she seeks out the play's director Randolph Driblette. His first response is to dissuade her efforts, and this remains consistent: "You came to talk about the play," he tells her. "Let me discourage you. It was written to entertain people. Like horror movies. It isn't literature, it doesn't mean anything. Wharfinger was no Shakespeare" (*L* 60). But of course we know that Shakespeare wasn't either, in a manner of speaking. Shakespeare was as much a bawdy writer of bloody popular culture as Wharfinger. Either way one wants to position it—the Shakespeare of genius and quality or the Shakespeare of low subject and popular culture (and there is no reason why we have to select exclusively between the two)—the role and power of the reader-observer takes center stage. Acting on the text, making it more or less than itself or something completely different by interpretive addition, is the maneuver at work here (the move Oedipa makes on the world, Driblette makes on *The Courier's Tragedy*, and readers make on Pynchon).

This returns us to Pynchon's narrative project. At the same time he offers us a different way into reading his material he also offers us this possibility of tracing endlessly—and often creating ourselves—the kinetic connections out of potential links. Instead of becoming aware of this maneuver, critics more frequently fall into this trap of tracing, following along the groundwork rather than perceiving the other options aside from the seemingly ubiquitous presence of an already-mapped total world that requires only exploration to unveil. Of course, I am arguing that Pynchon can be read differently. That is for a more philosophical position on the nature of connection, reading, binary notions of knowledge, and the possibility of intellectual conquest. Pynchon's work urges us not to follow the ceaseless connections but to recognize the conditions and dynamics of our subjugation in modernity that this encyclopedic pursuit ensures.

The Crying of Lot 49 points directly in this direction. Frustrated with Oedipa's insistence on searching out influences and connections in *The Courier's Tragedy*, Driblette describes the dilemma in terms of interpretation:

> "You don't understand," getting mad. "You guys, you're like Puritans are about the Bible. So hung up with words, words. You know where that play exists, not in that file cabinet, not in any paperback you're looking for, but—" a hand emerged from the veil of shower-steam to indicate his suspended head—"in here. That's what I'm for. To give the spirit flesh. The words, who cares? They're rote noises to hold line bashes with, to get past the bone barriers around an actor's memory, right? But the reality is in *this* head. Mine. I'm the projector in the planetarium, all the closed little universe visible in the circle of that stage is coming out of my mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also." (*L* 62)

Driblette positions himself in the place of the creator whose world emerges to be communicated into the minds of others. At the same time—taking Warfinger's material and projecting it onto the stage—he is also positioned as the reader who places onto what is there an interpretation of her own and, in the spirit of the director or adaptor, feels free to take new liberties. In the same moment the deluded reader is both Driblette and Oedipa, it is also the audience who follow close behind. And while Driblette claims to have his textual or theatrical world closed, Pynchon does

not—in fact, Driblette's warning is against reading the world as though it is open: for, as we know, it only leads down the overwhelming pathway of paranoia and anxiety that Oedepa will continue to confront beyond the close of the novel. Again and almost as a direct criticism of and warning to the disciples of literary studies, Pynchon warns audiences along with Oedpia as his negative example when Driblette says:

> You can put together clues, develop a thesis, or several, about why characters reacted to the Trystero possibility the way they did, why the assassins came on, why the black costumes. You could waste your life that way and never touch the truth. Wharfinger supplied words and a yarn. I gave them life. That's it. (*L* 62-3)

Just like Oedipa, Driblette is a reader. Both alert audiences to the indulgent fantasy that our interpretive efforts are anything more than the life-bearing power that animates a text. Rather than an effort to master links, to solve a puzzle that is already present, the act of reading is both the giving of life Driblette discusses as well as the contribution to the increasingly complex conundrum: to add an interpretation onto a thing, to attempt to settle it once and for all, is merely to aggregate yet another entry in the ever-expanding encyclopedia and to render the already-total landscape under critical scrutiny that much larger and more difficult to surmount.

To read strictly for information, for technical knowledge, or for practical instruction—rather than for fun, play, and more crucial than all for awareness beyond entertainment—is a similar tradition of reading, one that marginalizes the critical apparatus and deemphasizes the possibilities contained in literature. As Poirier insists, the damage wrought by this "consists of looking at writing as something to be figured out by a process of translation" that "omits the weirdness and pleasure of the reading experience" (19). The only options that remain to Oedipa—or the only options she believes remain to her, the only options she has been able to comprehend—are binary ones, and consist as "*either* Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, *or* a real Tristero" (*L* 150, my emphasis). Pynchon enunciates this either/or problem and then, by repeated and totalizing effort, entreats us to recognize it and swerve to another interpretive mode in which the strategy of cartography arises to help us confront the epistemology of modernity.

So far I have asked some important questions about the encyclopedia. I have used *The Crying of Lot 49* to complicate this already complex concern and make it comprehensible. Finally, I have argued that if Pynchon's work is so often read as a landscape of connections to be uncovered, baffling in their exquisitely monumental scope, then we should stop reading this way and focus on the revelatory nature of Pynchon's narrative project. There is another way to inhabit modernity, as his characters try to show us, to be among the interconnections but not to follow them everywhere and endlessly. Rather than hoisting our full participation into the binary machinery modernity presents and attempting to traverse the map-like web Pynchon has already loosely plotted (fulfilling the work like an enslaved sorting demon), Pynchon entreats us to recognize the manner in which the binary system—be it psychological, ideological, or institutional—functions to dissolve itself in its very dynamic and present a new set of potential relations for navigating the world.

§2: Pynchon's Cartographication

Although having just deeply questioned the too-common notion concerning the encyclopedic authority Pynchon commands from the perspectives of many scholars, it may indeed be fair to ask to what extent Pynchon may be characterized as a cartographer of modernity. According to Arthur H. Robinson in *Elements of Cartography*—an instructional textbook for geographers—the cartographer must employ a "mixture of science and art" and must "combine in some fashion the abilities of the geographer, the mathematician, and the artist" rather than considering the discipline as the simple drafting of figures and drawing of lines (v-vi). Indeed, such a disciplinary amalgamation seems appropriate for Pynchon and yet too narrow. His project over these last decades has been to chronicle the adventures and adventurers of a complex geography—American and so global—composed of different overlapping fields of knowledge and power and the infrastructural arrangement that sustains them.

Not unlike the encyclopedic project which endeavors to aggregate all knowledge in an accessible and finite space, the cartography similarly seeks to describe in miniature as well as in minute detail the spatial layout of the world. It is not difficult to extend the desires of cartography beyond the strictly material realm and into the wider arenas of the conceptual and ideological.[63] The cartographic process is implicated in power, history, and society. The use of the map arrives in its offer to create a knowable space for its interpreter. A tool of navigation, it renders what is vast and unknown to the individual comprehensible. Does it make sense to consider Pynchon's work in terms of cartography? Is it appropriate—and more importantly revealing—to consider Pynchon's narrative project as a cartography of modernity?

The short answer to this query is no. Even while Pynchon's novels deliver a detailed catalogue of the contemporary world, bearing witness to disasters and dispositions of historical import, plotting the trajectory of globalization, and showcasing the economy of oppression and subversion, and even though he can be and very frequently is read this way, I do not want to argue that he is simply a cartographer of modernity because this is in fact the function any novel can be made to serve and the function that any activity can be subsumed into. This manner of reading is what I have described above (§1) and the one which I suggest Pynchon urges readers away from.

Anyone who leaves a trace or an artifact behind contributes to the cartography of modernity. These unregistered leavings merely await incorporation into the apparatus: to be mapped or entered into the encyclopedia. While Pynchon does make a colossal contribution to the cartography of the contemporary world, his work does more than merely map its contours. Instead, my claim is that Pynchon displays the method of cartography itself throughout his work, the obsessive impulse of modernity to map and know, and, by showcasing the binary anatomy of this process once it is rendered total, succeeds in dissolving it. Read through this optic, Pynchon exposes the consequences of cartography in modernity—not the industry of capturing and representing terrain itself, of plotting points and producing models, but the ultimate endgame of

[63] In "Surveying, Mapmaking and Representation in *Mason & Dixon*," Robert L. McLaughlin discusses the means by which the creation of boundary lines generates the "conditions under which power" can be "established and maintained," including but not limited to the power to "tax, control land, to enforce laws, to privilege specific religious, social, and cultural codes, to enslave or kill those who are different" (183). In this sense, it is very easy to see the means by which maps "interpellate people into the officially sanctioned symbolic order of their societies" and "function as an Althusserian ideological state apparatus" (180).

the process to reveal all. This process I will call cartographication. Cartographication is the primary strategy by which Pynchon employs epistemological recognition and alteration.

I mean by cartographication not the simple act of drawing a map (doing cartography is not the act of cartographication here) but the thing that the mapping does, its result, the larger machinery of how it works and why: cartographication is the conceptual activity and the consequences of cartography, the consequence of this disposition to dominate, to control, and to know the world in its totality (in this sense, it is an arm of the encyclopedia which would also come to include this grand atlas). Pynchon shows us what cartographication is and what it results in and, taking a further step, effectively dissolves the process itself.

Pynchon's narrative project, then, revolves around revealing the problems of attempting to map the world—which is not unlike the obverse effort to master and index all knowledge for which the encyclopedia has its function. The dynamics are the same, and the application is perhaps even more versatile and problematic in terms of cartography because, unlike the encyclopedia which hopes to bring all knowledge to itself and retain it in its own arena, the map aspires to extend itself over the entire world and render the total world its arena. Concerns about cartographication give rise to a number of classic questions. If can be mapped, does it already exist? Does the map create the territory mapped? Better yet, what difference does the distinction make? I want to focus on the manner in which this binary relationship between the represented and the real—and this is just one illustrative set in a vast array—is dissolved in Pynchon's project. What happens when the interlocutors in the binary are revealed to be the same, when the apparent opposition or tension is exposed as fictitious? Pynchon employs this strategy of disillusion and offers in the resulting aftermath epistemological recognition that the dominant dialectical worldview need not be the only way the world can be viewed.

Borges provides us an initial answer to the inquiry concerning the eventual conflation of the representational with the real in a short story entitled "On Exactitude in Science." I reproduce it in its entirety here:

> In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Provence. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winter. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography. (325)

The fable contains a warning, the unconscionably miniature map reveling the obsessive priority of a desire to grasp the infinite and a discipline that supports it. Even though Borges's map is not entirely total—spanning the scope of an unnamed empire and currently deteriorating in the vaguely Western desert—it nonetheless discloses the self-defeating eventuality of the project (like the encyclopedia), demonstrates its pointlessness (when complete), and bankrupts the geographic discipline completely (it and its world are gone and aside from some animals and

vagrants the empire seems absent as well). Here the completion of the cartographic project is the ruination of a civilization.

With the actualization of the cartographic project, the mediator—map and mapmaker alike—vanishes and the distinction between representation and reality becomes nothing, the representation becomes real or is real. Because the map is total and complete it ceases to be a map, and so it is the world as it already was. Nothing has happened nor ever will. Pynchon's project shows us Borges's map—the very consequence of cartographication itself—and disorients modernity's epistemological stability but recognizes that the world does not enter into ruin (it remains, and does not become a wasteland) at the same time he dissolves the tension between representation and reality. Those later generations to which Borges refers, those whose fondness for cartography has diminished, must, were the map complete, continue to live inside the map which is also, and indistinctly, the world. Cartographication—this broader force that subsumes cartography—is destined to abolish itself.

Invoking the same Borges story, Baudrillard's interpretation proffers something that is not yet recognized or beyond recognition but which is nevertheless no longer useful. Although I would say that Pynchon has already shown and moved past his point, Baudrillard assigns Borges's story to that of second-order simulacra. This implies that the manufacture of the territory—which neither precedes nor survives the map—is somehow separate from the material out of which it is produced. That it is the real that deteriorates in the desert remains a simple inversion of the traditional priority, as though simulation has taken over. But it can't. Baudrillard's mistake is to too drastically empower modernity (or for him postmodernity) with both the agency and the ability to enframe or encage the world. This is precisely why it does not work. The point is that such a revelation shows us that this prospect (that of mastering all aspects of the world handed down to us at least by the Enlightenment) is untenable, also threatening to our epistemological security which is wrought, in the first place, by the comforting assurance that we can in fact rule over the world with our knowledge and rest safely on our models.[64]

So, it is neither an inversion of traditional binaries (which is also obviously a retention) nor a rearrangement of information after which I am striving, but a dissolving of arresting notions that keep this machinery running. It is probably safe to say that modernity thrives on incompleteness and that the epistemology that sustains it also survives on expansive motion and movement. It cannot become complete and live, and so has to adopt the impossible project that provides it its life force. This is the sustenance of both the encyclopedia and the map.

I hope to have accomplished two things by placing this opening example from Borges in conversation with Pynchon's narrative project: first, to reiterate the point about maps, encyclopedias, and the impossibility presented in the previous section, extending it to the wider geography of Pynchon's work—beyond *The Crying of Lot 49*—and the world it represents; and I would like to argue further that the attempt at mapping is pointless and that Pynchon presents it this way. Pynchon directs our attention to this impossibility.

The conversation thus far has been mainly theoretical and broad. One example from each of Pynchon's novels follows in order to illustrate more concretely how he approaches and depicts these dominant and domineering forces of modernity.

One such force is modern time: that is, abstract time, clock time, the time that subordinates to itself human movement and generates subjectivity. Early in *V.* Rachel Owlglass—the name already indicative of a time-tracking device—enters into the office of a

---

[64] Baudrillard also speculates that empire is what remains and that it is with the enduring imperialism that "present-day simulators attempt to make the real, all of the real, coincide with their models of simulation" (2).

plastic surgeon to observe what Pynchon calls a "turn-of-the-century clock" (40) mounted on the wall. Rather than a swinging pendulum, the clock is advanced by a disk that only makes quarter revolutions one way and then the other, departing and returning always to the same position and so essentially motionless. Opposite the wall, a mirror reproduces the clock, and Rachel observes "time and reverse-time, co-existing, canceling one another exactly out" (41). But this cancelation is not necessitated by the mirror since it is already happening in the back-and-forth ticking of the clock disk, itself harboring two "imps or demons, wrought in gold, posed in fantastic attitudes" (41) so as to indicate something diabolic in the procedure.

This is equally not unlike the human yo-yo with which Benny Profane is identified in the opening of the novel, entering the subway and riding back and forth all day from stop to stop without emerging at any destination. "The train itself," Pynchon later tells us, "ran on a different clock—its own, which no human could read" (77). The time also extends to dominate the industry of human labor. Along with a few friends, Benny Profane becomes employed by the Alligator Patrol, an outfit whose occupation is to gun down alligators and mice with shotguns beneath the streets of New York. Over time the patrol has suffered a withdrawal of support and so been reduced to a rag-tag conglomeration of uncertain hours and strange employees. As Benny and his buddies comfortably reckon the roving state of unemployment with their propensity to party, a kind of temporal reckoning is developed:

> It was Thursday night, tomorrow—they were working not for Zeitsuss but for the U.S. Government, since Friday is one-fifth of the week and the government takes one-fifth of your check for withholding tax. The beauty of Geronimo's scheme was that it didn't have to be Friday but could be any day—or days—in the week depressing enough to make you feel it would be a breach of loyalty if the time were dedicated to good old Zeitsuss. (146)

Here, it does not matter how time is divided, it is still subordinating. And the *when* makes little difference—be it Zeitsuss, the patrol boss, or the city itself, time is dedicated to labor that contributes to a subordinating institution (in this case, the U.S. Government). That is to say, the distinction between one's own time and one's labor time begins to enter into an ambiguous realm, to dissolve, and, under the auspice of an economically total system, to be essentially the same (one will be spending the money one makes from the system later within the system itself: another area of suspended motion with an illusion of limited movement). Having grown used to the "rotating shift system" of the diminished patrol, whereby he would party in the day and wouldn't know "till the day before which hours [he] would be working the next," Profane is placed on a "weird calendar which was not ruled off into neat squares at all but more into a mosaic of tiled street-surfaces that changed position according to sunlight, streetlight, moonlight, nightlight" (146). Though ripe for some discussion of potential liberation—temporal, economic, or otherwise—time in this instance subordinates Profane as he is awaiting the whimsical and sudden schedule of the patrol, having work and non-work equally blended into the fabric of his life so as to be indistinct.[65] This is to emphasize an insideness prescribed by the allotment of time that seems to have no outside when its counterpart, let us say non-labor-time, is constituted only in contrast as a subsidiary. It is the smooth way that these binaries might dissolve conceptually

---

[65] For an excellent explanation of how such an either/or, work/non-work, life/labor distinction becomes dissolved—especially in the context of the discussion I am having here—see Agamben's *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*.

that Pynchon depicts again and again, proposing a way out of the arrested exchange of binary relationships. These examples (prescribed time and personal time, work time and leisure time, etc.) are suspended between two limit-points. At the same time they are in suspense only because they are framed within a certain epistemological view that cannot think outside of itself (the case of time and labor being a well-discussed topic).

The Crying of Lot 49 boasts many cases of this suspended motion between two limit points. The most obvious example is the indistinction asserted between true conspiracy and personal paranoia. A continuous carnival of inside/outside confusions, the novel functions as an exemplary guide for Pynchon's wider project. It is often effectively presented thus in the classroom because of its digestible size, and I have already detailed the important and sometimes difficult instance in which interpretation and intention become indistinct (see §1 above). The instances mount on almost every page. There is mention of the Scurvhamites—a "sect of most pure Puritans" who were "utterly devoted, like literary critics, to the Word" (128)—whose society marks no authentic difference between chance or will and predestination.[66] There is the problematic contrast between the individual inventor and the corporate field, where each is made up of the other and where somehow each subsumes the other.[67] The bitterly debated ideas of Marxism and capitalism are easily conjoined as well.[68] There is a wonderfully stark comparison between the inside of an electronic device, replete with wires and boards, and the layout of the cityscape, all so as to imply no distinction between a technical, electrical apparatus that routs material from one place to another and the larger ecology of society itself in which we move, by way of asphalt conduits, from work to home, our choices diminished like the flow of those very electrical currents (we simply have, or think we do, a greater self-consciousness than electric particles).[69] Clearly, this tenuous contrasting of binaries is central for Pynchon.

---

[66] Their "central hang up," Pynchon writes, "had to do with predestination. There were two kinds. Nothing for a Scurvhamite ever happened by accident, Creation was a vast, intricate machine. But one part of it, the Scurvhamite part, ran off the will of God, its prime mover. The rest ran off some opposite Principle, something blind, soulless; a brute automatism that led to eternal death. The idea was to woo converts into the Godly and purposeful sodality of the Scurvhamite. But somehow those few saved Scurvhamites founds themselves looking out into the gaudy clockwork of the doomed with a certain sick and fascinated horror, and this was to prove fatal. One by one the glamorous prospect of annihilation coaxed them over, until there was no one left in the sect, not even Robert Scurvham, who, like a ship's master, had been last to go" (*Lot 49* 128). Even in the separation between God and automated darkness, between soulful vitality and entropy, the binary retention is held up for continued debate.
[67] "In school," Oedipa's lawyer tells her about the employs of a major research and development firm, "they got brainwashed, like all of us, into believing the Myth of the American Inventor—Morse and his telegraph, Bell and his telephone, Edison and his light bulb, Tom Swift and his this or that. Only one man per invention. Then when they grew up they found they had to sign over all their rights to a monster like Yoyodyne; got stuck on some 'project' or 'task force' or 'team' and started being ground into anonymity. Nobody wanted them to invent—only perform their little role in a design ritual, already set down for them in some procedures handbook" (*Lot 49* 70).
[68] "You think like a Bircher," Mike Fallopian, organizer of the Peter Pinguide Society, lightly berates Oedipa, "Good guys and bad guys. You never get to any of the underlying truth. Sure he was against industrial capitalism. So are we. Didn't it lead, inevitably to Marxism? Underneath, both are part of the same creeping horror" (*Lot 49* 36-7).
[69] "She drove into San Narciso on a Sunday, in a rented Impala. Nothing was happening. She looked down a slope, needing to squint for the sunlight, onto a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had" (*Lot 49* 14). On another hand, which can also fall into the same problem, Kit Traverse speculates in *Against the Day* that electromagnetism "could have been a religion, for all he knew—here was the god of Current, bearing light, promising death to the falsely observant, here

This atmosphere—of paranoia, circularity, confusion, and unrooted, dynamic power residing around every corner—pervades the narrative of *Gravity's Rainbow* as well, wherein one's recourse to authority or one's ability to determine, war zone or not, the distinctive identity of supposedly opposed combatants is blurred and abolished the more one reads. The stereotypically vague They—almost comically juvenile and yet weighted with serious gloom—operate with influence invisibility. Perpetrating both the righteous ethics and the violations that sustain it, the solution and the problem, the tension that produces polarity of mind, the engine that powers the inside/outside division, becomes a unified entity. Abstracted into its equally vague context, *Gravity's Rainbow* presents one formulation of it thus:

> What if there is no Vacuum? Or if there is—what if they're *using* it on you? What if They find it convenient to preach an island of life surrounded by a void? Not just the Earth in space, but your own individual life in time? What if it's *in Their interest* to have you believing that? (*GR* 710-11).

Apart from the forces that move and necessitate our physical and material action in the world, the ideological component is more pervasively the target of such duel exploitation. A more resounding example surfaces in the context of war, where it is shown to be just another fuel on which binary propulsion feeds itself:

> Don't forget the real business of the War is buying and selling. The murdering and the violence are self-policing, and can be entrusted to non-professionals. The mass nature of wartime death is useful in many ways. It serves as spectacle, as diversion from the real movements of the War. It provides raw material to be recorded into History, so that children may be taught History as sequences of violence, battle after battle, and be more prepared for the adult world. Best of all, mass death's a stimulus to just ordinary folks, little fellows, to try 'n' grab a piece of that Pie while they're still here to gobble it up. The true war is a celebration of markets. (*GR* 107)

War becomes an ancillary arm of the market. Substances, regardless of the material of their composition, can become identical and negotiable. This includes the substance of life, where, as Pynchon writes, Jews—or any other life—are every "bit as negotiable as cigarettes, cunt, or Hershey bars" (*GR* 107). The dynamics are wildly equalizing and inclusive. One is reminded of Milo Minderbinder's Malteseian syndicate from Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, where everyone has a share and everyone is a participant, desired or not, conscious or not.[70] Viewed under the framework of the epistemology of modernity, a choice between sides, then, becomes a serious difficulty because it is made a virtual impossibility.

---

were Scripture and commandments and liturgy, in all this priestly Vectorial language…what was going on inside the circuits he was obliged to work with" (*AD* 98).

[70] Heller's *Catch-22* represents a brilliant and sustained example of the kind of opposition-dissolving activity that I am addressing here, as does his subsequent sequel *Closing Time*, where, for instance, Milo and friends pitch an invisible aircraft that operates faster than the speed of thought (and therefore cannot be seen, heard, or substantiated in any way) to the military generals and the U.S. government, essentially selling nothing in sustained circles. Along with his equally revealing *Good as Gold*, Heller addresses the tripartite machinery of war, leadership, and capitalism (government, military, commercial) as a self-sustaining, self-supporting, expansive mechanism.

In institutionally or governmentally concrete terms, or, in terms of the repressive state apparatus, *Vineland* presents an intensely succinct posturing of the problem from the perspective of forces countercultural and those of the mainstream and law-abiding. Federal Agent Brock Vond's PREP (the Political Reeducation Program) project, which is more invasive but nonetheless not unlike the standard arrangement of labor under capitalism, presents the anatomy of an organizational mode inferred from modernity. Vond excitedly imagines the working of the program such that legality is and is not the governing force:

> The law, *his* law, would provide that detainees in civil disturbances could be taken to certain Justice Department reserves and there examined for snitch potential. Those found suitable might then be offered a choice between federal prosecution and federal employment, as independent contractors working undercover for, but not out of, the DOJ's Political Intelligence Office. After undergoing a full training curriculum that included the use of various weapons, they could be transferred—the contracts essentially sold—to the FBI and under that control be infiltrated, often again and again, into college campuses, radical organizations, and other foci of domestic unrest. (268)

While the either/or dynamic of snitch economy (a form of slavery) is fascinating and hermitically brilliant (as modernity itself), it condemns individuals into an interstices, making them ghosts both before the employment/prosecution choice and in the career/captivity that follows.[71] It is at this threshold moment, I want to argue, that Pynchon's binary-dissolving movements are at their most perceptible. The difficult part in retaining this perception, and Oedipa's continuous quest emphasizes and reemphasizes this over and over, is that it quickly folds itself back into the normalized tension teetering between paranoia and conspiracy, between participation and prosecution, and so on.

The entire enterprise in which Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon are engaged in *Mason & Dixon* is a direct and elongated meditation on the problems of cartography and its ideological underpinnings. The novel is a combination of the scientific pursuit of exactitude and simultaneous insurmountably of unruliness. Both, of course, belong to each other, produced and prescribed in their very tensions. Mason and Dixon encounter this problem persistently in their line-demarking mission of world-ordering, and wonder occasionally at the ramifications of their own participation in this process. Toward the end of the novel, Dixon, ruminating on the various missions the Royal Academy has sent the pair, asks Mason what the "Element common to all"

---

[71] The popular television shows *Breaking Bad* and *The Americans* occur as two recent cultural examples that play out this very notion in a similar way. With no hope of successfully defecting and integrating into American society without somehow becoming the operatives (and servants) of the American government, and no way of resigning their positions (without also offering their lives) as Soviet spies, the central characters of *The Americans* are always poised on a threshold of uncertainty. Similarly, with no authentic way to abstract himself from the world of drugs, forced to continue producing methamphetamine either under the threat of violence (keep producing or be murdered by various elements of that economy/community) or for personal gain and both equally sustained in the threat of being arrested by federal agencies whose scope he is already permanently transfixed in, the protagonist of *Breaking Bad* occupies an uncertain and largely agency-less space. With no recourse to any kind of authentic, satisfactory escape, both examples encounter the difficulty of giving oneself up completely to one or the other side of things and are left in a strange space: unable to depart, unable to not participate, they present the locked tensions between authentic/inauthentic, legitimate/illegitimate, legal/criminal, and so on. This is more or less the state of being in modernity.

seems to be and proceeds, after Mason's hollow rejoinder of "Long Voyages by Sea" (692), to elaborate on his own inquiry and answer:

> Slaves. Ev'ry day at the Cape, we lived with Slavery in our faces,—more of it at St. Helena,—and now here we are again, in another Colony, this time having drawn them a Line between their Slave-Keepers, and their Wage-Payers, as if doom'd to re-encounter thro' the World this public Secret, this shameful Core… Pretending it to be every somewhere else, with the Turks, the Russians, the Companies, down there, down where it smells like warm Brine and Gunpowder fumes, they're murdering and dispossessing thousands untallied, the innocent of the World, passing daily into the Hands of Slave-owners and Torturers, but oh, never in Holland, nor in England, that Garden of Fools…? Christ, Mason… Didn't we take the King's money, as here we're taking it again? whilst Slaves waited upon us, and we neither one objected, as little as we have here, in certain houses south of the Line,—Where does it end? No matter where in it we go, shall we find all the World Tyrants and Slaves? America was the one place we should *not* have found them. (693)

Again, Mason rejoins Dixon's anxious laments, this time more poignantly: "Yet we're not Slaves, after all,—we're Hierlings" (693). The extent to which this is true, of course, is a central question, as is the extent to which *more* comfortable subservience to oppressive forces remains nonetheless the same exploitative institution. Between exploratory adventure and enslaved movement, between used bodies and utilized minds, between the integrity of the investigator and the instrument of power that propels it, we encounter yet another instance in which the dynamics of distinction melt together and fall away. Slightly earlier in the novel, Dixon, suspicious of a "Global Scheme," wails that "Men of Science… may be but the simple Tools of others, with no more idea of what they are about, than a Hammer knows of a House" (669). Justified suspicions. There is perhaps no more succinct a description of the anatomy of the dialectical problem that we have been foregrounding here, along with a glimmer of possibility or a gesture at escape, than this statement on the explorer's own identities in this modern and expanding world:

> Betwixt themselves, neither feels British enough anymore, nor quite American, for either Side of the Ocean. They are content to reside like Ferrymen or Bridge-keepers, even in a Ubiquity of Flow, before a ceaseless Spectacle of Transition. (713)

But they must go further than this if they expect to locate some kind of solution to this conundrum, for despite the awareness of their movement between forces and their potential embrace of the fluidity that might be achieved, they remain constantly in motion.

If the awareness without action of *Mason and Dixon* presents its own set of issues for addressing the problem I have been detailing, the movement into action equally perpetrates additional difficulties—or maintains the very binds from which many of Pynchon's characters strive to depart. In one of its many narrative corridors, *Against the Day* presents the anarchist factions of the early twentieth century Colorado silver mines. In a sermon fueled by Christ's water-walking upon the Sea of Galilee from the Book of Matthew transposed onto "some American lake" where dynamite rather than a net has Christ "harvesting whatever floats to the

surface" (87), the Reverend Moss Gatlin pontificates upon the plight of the community and the weapons for transcending it:

> For dynamite is both the miner's curse, the outward and audible sign of his enslavement to mineral extraction, and the American working man's equalizer, his agent of deliverance, if he would only dare to use it… Every time a stick goes off in the service of the owners, a blast convertible at the end of some chain of accountancy to dollar sums no miner ever saw, there will have to be a corresponding entry on the other side of God's ledger, convertible to human freedom no owner is willing to grant. (87)

The duly-weaponized employment of the instruments of resistance draws an obvious parallel between employee and boss, between master and slave, and hinges merely on the potential gradations separating the two: however pregnant with relevance and resounding in the contemporary moment, it is a rather simple illustration of a symmetrical conflict that sustains and perpetuates itself. So, too, are Reverend Gatlin's prescriptive pronouncements as he continues to say that if you are not "devoting every breath of every day waking and sleeping to destroying those who slaughter the innocent as easy as signing a check" then "how innocent are you willing to call yourself" (87). Even without action, the choice is prescribed. Doing or not doing already pits you on a side, and the endurance of our epistemology thrives off of this perceived tension between two factions in all of these cases listed. Even more difficult becomes the quandary when it is recognized on a much deeper level (deeper than dynamite freedom fighters or participants in oppression) that the destruction of the workforce—of the workers themselves, by themselves—might offer the only viable solution for effectively combating the owners.

It worsens still, when the "more deadly" of these explosions "were really set off to begin with not by Anarchists but by the owners themselves" (85) and motivations muddle, distinctions naturally become confused, and we recognize the productively sustaining forces that both sides support—productive not in the positive sense, but in the sense that it maintains a dialectical and epistemological status quo, that the tensions both feed and fuel themselves because they are not opposites so much as they are complements.

Inherent Vice showcases a most succinct and more globally applicable articulation of the local, unsurmounted tension presented in the silver mining examples from *Against the Day* (itself simply a proxy for an endless proliferations of instances of labor exploitation in the United States and across the world). As the main character Doc—a hippie private detective—winds his way through an immense network of interconnected institutions both legally legitimate and illegitimate, he continuously encounters an entity called the Golden Fang and its various subsidiaries. The challenge of location is embodied by the Golden Fang, the most ubiquitous organization Doc encounters in the novel. Defining the Golden Fang is problematic: it is an insidious oriental crime syndicate, trafficking in maritime cargo (heroin smuggling); it is an elaborate and lavish schooner; an administrative office building (built in the shape of an incisor) that houses a series of dental offices, and these are only a few of its incarnations. It is, as one source of information tells Doc, what "they call many things to many folks" (159). At one illustrative juncture, recalling some talk of "vertical integration," it occurs to Doc

> that if the Golden Fang could get its customers strung out, why not turn around and also sell them a program to help them kick? Get them coming and going,

> twice as much revenue and no worries about new customers—as long as American life was something to be escaped from, the cartel could always be sure of a bottomless pool of new customers. (192)

Thus, positions of seeming conflict are revealed to be instead complements of one another. Competition—be it in industry, labor, or ideology—becomes complicity. Solutions and problems become the same. Supplies for addiction and rehabilitation emanating from the same source in this instance, Pynchon puts forward here the intense complementarity of what is usually perceived as a stake binary, a choice between on something or off of it, while our attention is directed laboriously back and forth between these two polarities.

If many of these examples restrict the presumed promise of free, available movement and activity in the world, they are also undergirded by the restrictions placed on freedom of thought. Pynchon's most recent novel attests to the complicated, if not contradictory, tension between controlled, curated information and its proliferation in the increasingly open-access world wrought by technology. *Bleeding Edge* delves into the extended world of cyberspace and virtual reality. On the Deep Web a virtual reality program called DeepArcher—a point of departure—is in the making. Like the frontier confronted and carved out by Mason and Dixon, this Deep Web sub-cyber resides under the same threat of ideological, to say nothing of physical/virtual, subordination. The Deep Web is "still unmessed-with country," one character tells Maxine, a fraud investigator and the novel's central character. "You like to think it goes on forever, but the colonizers are coming" (241). Soon, he warns,

> everything'll be suburbanized faster than you can say "late capitalism." Then it'll be just like up there in the shallows. Link by link, they'll bring it all under control, safe and respectable. Churches on every corner. Licenses in all the saloons. Anybody still wants his freedom'll have to saddle up and head somewhere else. (241)

The familiarity of the dynamic: like the movement of civilization, be it across the Atlantic to the New World, the manifest destiny spreading from one shining sea to the other, or the various other colonial dispersals of European modernity, this taming and caging of the frontier remains consistent as its reach extends into the virtual. A virtual space (mental, nonphysical) does not equate non-real space—it remains, despite its abstraction, imprinted with ideology, capable of being mapped, and susceptible to imposed boundaries and prescribed limits.

Perhaps more readily visible in its virtual articulation than the colonization of the Americas, the recognized antagonism is again overtly between degrees of freedom and degrees of slavery. It is more precisely one between the distinction between external determination and self-determination. With the liberating advent of information and the prospect of open access to an increasingly vast array of sources, the forces that arrive to regulate these sources are essentially coterminous. A combination of the free market harnessing potential for profit and commercial interests, the governmental body, and the ideological subordination that emanates from these are at work coopting the arena of available information, converting it into the revolving epistemology of conformity, and curating it to emanate the very tenets it originally sought to circumvent. A new ground does not generate a new dynamic, and cyberspace does not necessarily enjoy the label of novelty while remaining within the same epistemological confines.

As another character tells Maxine, the potential for a technologically fueled exit from the epistemology of modernity is closing at a quickening rate:

> Look at it, every day more lusers than users, keyboards and screens turning into nothing but portals to Web sites for what the Management wants everybody addicted to, shopping, gaming, jerking off, streaming endless garbage… Meantime hashslingrz [a computer security firm] and them are all screaming louder and louder about "Internet freedom," while they go on handing more and more of it over to the bad guys… They get us, alright, we're all lonely, needy, disrespected, desperate to believe in any sorry imitation of belonging they want to sell us… We're being played, Maxi, and the game is fixed, and it won't end till the Internet—the real one, the dream, the promise—is destroyed. (432)

Yet again, we witness a platform in which the very act of protesting becomes participation, in which the promise of openness becomes confined to the curated interests of capitalism.

I have given examples from each of Pynchon's eight novels—some of them broadly applicable, others highly specific—all of which are intensely susceptible to a critical reading of binary relations. I have wanted to show, not the means by which these binary oppositions function in their dialectical relationship but the perspective that permits them to be understood not as divergent or competing claims but as indistinct, equal, undifferentiated objects, artifacts, or ideas.

So far, I have shown examples of how various factors engineered to syphon time and agency from modern subjects, however illusory, are in the act of effecting an in/out, on/off, labor/self opposition (*V.*) and how a search for or manufacture of total connection teeters between conspiracy and paranoia, offering an authentic/fictional, real/unreal, sane/insane, functional/dysfunctional set of binaries (*The Crying of Lot 49*). I have offered examples demonstrating that participation and non-participation are contributions to the same cause so that protesting against/partaking in serves allied consequence (*Gravity's Rainbow*) and where agency and the availability of choice are so drastically reduced as to make the volunteer/conscript dynamic indistinguishable (*Vineland*). I have discussed the indivisible non-boundary between drawing order and confronting chaos (*Mason & Dixon*) and the increasingly transparent equity of struggles for oppression or liberation (*Against the Day*). Finally, what I hope to have made clear: the plausible interconnected nature of helping and harming, treatment and disease, and the pure indistinction between inside/outside (*Inherent Vice*) and also the conjoined modern practice of freedom/slavery and external/internal determination (*Bleeding Edge*).

I hope that in these examples I have been able to clarify the consequence of cartographication. Pynchon helps point out that these infinitely producible instances are not, in fact, oppositions in any real or meaningful way because they are this only in a specifically epistemological sense.

Pynchon's strategy for epistemological shifting is to *show* the great map in which modern subjectivity becomes constituted from elsewhere, from an unelected but historically and ideologically imposed epistemology. By way of this display, Pynchon moves to rid the distinctions that sustain it.

I have focused here on broad examples, identifying the problem and pervasiveness of upheld binaries. The following section moves on to provide a specific elaboration, focusing on

technology as an example, to show the dynamics of dissolving of oppositions, and finally to discuss what kind of altered or shifted epistemology can result.

§3: Technology and the Museum of Humanism

Central to the catastrophes of the contemporary period have undeniably been concerns about the human being, specifically its place around and among other members of the species. Equally indisputable is that the interrelationships between individuals, communities, or populations, in whatever variety such interactions are articulated and whatever motivations sustain them, present themselves as the source of these problems. That is to say, the challenges of modernity and the disasters that accompany them are problems between human beings. Man has been the measure—in the public, political, and social discourse—at least since the Renaissance, which is not to say that the human being's intense self-focus arose as a dominant concern only at that point. However much the ideological apparatus of modernity had been solidified and set in motion at the time of the Renaissance, the point of historical humanism should not, and cannot, represent an authentic starting point for the anthropocentric disposition that continues to dominate, and we equally cannot ignore the atrocities of premodernity as bearing an ancestral consistency with those of our memories both living and historical.

Apart from whatever other contributions they have made, the tools of modernity have been employed as a means to deal with human beings. Be it the refined practices of the biopolitical, the constitutional fever of establishing a socially normative world, or the institutional (secular and religious) imposition of ideological and legal parameters, there is no way to deny that modernity has as one of its central and integral elements a mechanism geared toward the management of bodies and beings.

Alongside this administrative machinery—as a way to combat the problematic contradictions between official doctrine and prevailing practices—has been a discourse on the worth and dignity of the human being. This usually includes the indubitable assertion that the human being, by the mere fact of its being, is in possession of value that cannot be alienated from it, subtracted or removed, or in any way sundered from its essence: in this way, what makes a human being human is that it always already contains or possesses this dignity. This claim to value and its continuous violation—what we might terms the human rights contradiction—dehumanization, creeping toward inhumanity, is the central problem of our age: it is a question of what to do about each other, about how to treat people and why, and far less about threatening externalities as about dynamics between individuals or communities.

Technology presents itself as one of the primary tools by which this problem can be framed, and this will be the focus of the remaining section. The management of people constitutes one of the central problems of modernity, begging the question: what shall we do about one another? The various deployments of technology provide a number of answers if not to the question what shall we do about one another then to the more material vocalization of what we have done with one another. In modernity, technology is the grand tool for dealing with those who occupy it.

We can situate this discussion perhaps more clearly—or more comprehensibly—within the circle of the posthumanist debate wherein the binary fear constituting and continuing the problem must feed off of the drastic opposition between remaining human and becoming something other than human. While the latter possibility contains the signature of an authentic epistemological alteration, scholars seem more often to support the former disposition.

The discussion of the posthuman frequently entails a steady campaign to resist epistemological alteration, to retain stubbornly the contemporary idea of the human being—constituted and problematically exploited by modernity (and held up as a paragon that is persistently violated)—at the same time the enabling tenets of modernity are themselves placed under critical scrutiny.[72] One possible way to account for this persistence in the discourse on posthumanism where scholars are either unwilling or unable to give up the position of the human being that they already know or take pause at what implications recalibrating a worldview would have. Here, then, one is poised between the possibility of preserving man and allowing him to be completely eradicated: one must choose between remaining human and upholding all the dignities and rights supposedly enshrined within its being against allowing this other alteration that represents an abandonment of the human being and Western civilization, something that might well amount to ideological genocide. Beneath the banner of humanism, which we scholars often share, one's selection is quite loaded. And it would not be inaccurate to point out the manner in which a humanist framework threatens to transform efforts of the posthuman into the realm of the anti-human.

Thomas Moore writes that *Gravity's Rainbow* asserts that "at this end of a three-hundred year Western cultural dispensation our understandings of life, our sympathies for and in it, suffer too much from the habitual reification of 'either/or' contraries out of what is really a holistic cultural field" (3). Citing the binaries of high and low art, the disciplinary fields of the arts and sciences, the passed over preterite and the divinely elected, Moore goes on to say that Pynchon "seeks to penetrate all interfaces that seem to separate" in what I have outlined as modernity's dependence upon binary thinking (3). Confronting the habitual recourse to this manner of thinking, Pynchon opens a wider horizon that does not straddle itself with the weighty burden of a prefabricated model.

In *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, Mark Greif identifies four areas of crisis that the citizens of modernity must face: history, philosophy, faith, and technology. He goes on to say that it is this fourth area of crisis—technology—that has consequences we all acknowledge, ramifications that "no one will fail to understand" in the contemporary moment when it comes to questions of ethics or ideology (Grief 227). This makes technology quite distinct from the other three areas in being prescribed far more credence in the public sphere.[73] It also makes the field of technology one that garnishes more attention and, for this reason, more anxiety about the potential consequences for the human being. Nowhere is this problem asserted more forcefully than in Pynchon's first novel *V.*

At one point one of the novel's protagonists, Benny Profane, takes a job as a night watchman at the Anthroresearch Associates, a Yoyodyne subsidiary. This is where he encounters two humanoid representations: SHROUD and SHOCK. SHOCK—synthetic human object,

---

[72] See, for example, Mads Rosendahl Thomesn's *The New Human in Literature* in which he concludes that "if nothing else, the visions of the new human may bring about a re-enchantment of the human" (224), or N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* in which she writes that Norbert Wiener's "nightmare was the human reduced to a cog in a rigid machine, losing the flexibility and autonomous function that [he] regarded as the birthright of a cybernetic organism" (140).

[73] This separation in itself represents another problem of compartmentalization in modernity. One solution is to make technology a part of philosophy, history, faith, and other fundamental fields. See, for instance, Robert Pippin's *After the Beautiful* in which he draws attention to Hegel's radical claim that philosophy "*has the same content and the same end as art and religion*" (Pippin's italics) (7). Another statement about the divorce of conversing discourses is in line here, since the separation is problematic in that it restricts or disallows concepts to enter into conversation and thus to recognize the abiding unity of what has been engineered into a binary opposition.

casualty kinematics—is a "marvelous manikin," a kind of automobile test dummy "entirely lifelike in every way," complete with "dentures worn today by 19 percent of the American population," a "blood pump in the midsection and a nickel-cadmium battery power supply in the abdomen," all of which so horridly frighten Profane the first time sees it hanging out of a smashed window shield (310-311). SHROUD—synthetic human, radiation output determined—disquiets Profane more. With a "skeleton [that] had once been that of a living human" body, lungs, sex organs, thyroid, and so forth made of clear plastic and a "human skull that looked at you through a more-or-less abstracted butyrate head," SHROUD responds to Profane's rhetorical inquiry and menacingly engages him in conversation:

> "What's it like," he said.
> Better than you have it.
> "Wha."
> Wha yourself. Me and SHOCK are what you and everybody will be someday.
> (The skull seemed to be grinning at Profane.)
> "There are other ways besides fallout and road accidents."
> But those are more likely. If somebody else doesn't do it to you, you'll do it to yourselves.
> "You don't even have a soul."
> Since when did you ever have one? What are you doing, getting religion? All I am is a dry run. They take readings off my dosimeters. Who is to say whether I'm here so the people can read the meters or whether the radiation in me is because they have to measure. Which way does it go?...
> "What do you mean, we'll be like you and SHOCK someday? You mean dead?"
> Am I dead? If I am then that's what I mean.
> "If you aren't then what are you?"
> Nearly what you are. None of you have very far to go.
> "I don't understand."
> So I see. But you're not alone. That's a comfort isn't it? (312)

Another conversation a hundred pages later as Profane, having overslept, arrives at work in the midst of an electrical disaster maximized by his neglect for which his employment is terminated:

> Bon voyage.
> "What's that supposed to mean?"
> We'll see.
> "So long, old buddy."
> Keep cool. Keep cool but care. It's a watchword, Profane, for your side of the morning. There, I've told you too much as it is.
> "I'll bet under that cynical butyrate hide is a slob. A sentimentalist."
> There's nothing under here. Who are we kidding? (409)

These final lines—"the last words he ever had with SHROUD" (409)—in which SHROUD authoritatively insists that it is unequivocally an empty, inanimate shell represent a symbolically divested, inorganic, assembled representation of a human being. It has no meaning beyond being

used. It worships no God, endures no suffering, indeed is the kind of innovation elevated by modern science, another step on the way to creating a mechanical life form.

A second example from *V.* comes from the Egyptian episodes focusing on the novel's other protagonist, Stencil. As Waldetar, a "highly religious man," passes by a train car he encounters the following scene in which a crying girl is frightened by a man sitting across from her:

> "But have you never played with a clockwork doll?" the man insisted, the voice muffled through the door. "A doll which does everything perfectly, because of the machinery inside. Walks, sings, jumps rope. Real little boys and girls, you know, cry: act sullen, won't behave." His hands lay perfectly still, long and starved-nervous, one on each knee…
>
> "Come. May I show you a mechanical doll. An electromechanical doll."
>
> "Have you one—" she was frightened, Waldetar thought with an onrush of sympathy, seeing his own girls. Damn some of these English—"have you one with you?"
>
> "I am one," Bongo-Shaftsbury smiled. And pushed back the sleeve of his coat to remove a cufflink. He rolled up the shirt cuff and thrust the naked underside of his arm at the girl. Shiny and black, sewn into the flesh, was a miniature electric switch. Single pole, double-throw. Waldetar recoiled and stood blinking. Then silver wires ran from its terminals up the arm, disappearing under the sleeve.
>
> "You see, Mildred. These wires run into my brain. When the switch is closed like this I act the way I do now. When it is thrown the other—"
>
> "Papa!" the girl cried.
>
> "Everything works by electricity. Simple and clean."
>
> "Stop it," said the other Englishman.
>
> "Why, Porpentine." Vicious. "Why. For her? Touched by her fright, are you. Or it is for yourself." (80-81)

Interestingly, in psychological studies concentrating on theory of mind, scientists conclude that infants do not recognize agency in mechanical objects despite their contrived animate features, attributing neither intentions nor goals.[74] The more lifelike mechanical agents become in general, the more apprehensive children as well as adults act toward them. As witnessed in the passage above and corroborated by infant psychology, the roots of this anxiety may very well develop in childhood and continue into adulthood, as we see in Bongo-Shaftsbury goading's of Porpentine. With SHROUD's fatalistic description of transitory life and Bongo-Shaftsbury's menacing performance, the pretending automaton is an object of anxiety. It is the imposter who appears to

---

[74] For example, see Andrew N. Melzoff, "Understanding the Intentions of Others: Re-Enactments of Intended Acts by 10-Month-Old Children" (*Developmental Psychology* 31(5): 838-850), whose investigation into whether or not infants could successfully (re)enact an adult's attempt to perform a targeted act after the adults had failed (the point here is to determine how soon infants recognize intentionality in others even when the intended goal is not obtained). When an adult attempted the task, children could infer intended acts via observing failed intentions. On the other hand, when the adult was replaced by a mechanical object performing the same task children reacted differently, failing to produce the target acts and therefore to ascribe intentionality to the inanimate objects. One implication of the study is that children by this time both understand other people within a framework of intentions and goals and also do not ascribe the same qualities to lifeless things.

be but is not like us, recognizable in its actions but alien in its essence. The issue is not so much that automatons take away our significance, that they simulate and thus replace us, but rather that by existing and appearing so humanly mimetic, they urge introspection and self-recognition of the human not as a unique being but as a composition of mappable material and in this way deplete us as significant creatures.

This provides us an insight into how we view ourselves and what the onset of what some deem a postmodernity—which according to Scott Drake Pynchon's work "enacts, by means of fiction, the very problematics that poststructural theory reveals" (224)—has done to that self-perception. Generalized and essentalized views of American and Western civilization are perhaps as known to the West as they are agreed with by a great deal of self-critical/self-aware individuals residing there. As Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit write,

> To be equipped with the mind of the West is like being an idiot savant, mentally defective but with a special gift for making arithmetic calculations. It is a mind without a soul, efficient, like a calculator, but hopeless at doing what is humanly important. The mind of the West is capable of great economic success, to be sure, and of developing and promoting advanced technology, but cannot grasp the higher things in life, for it lacks spirituality and understanding of human suffering. (75)

Although Buruma and Margalit are focused on contemporary political conflicts drawn out since before the attacks of September 11, the point is no less pertinent for Pynchon's fiction or the way in which the West is generally viewed. The view that Westerners venerate technology and worship the material does not come as a surprise for many in the West either.

Profane and Stencil place on display the technological threat to human beings: first example in a laboratory (what for us today is the museum of the future) and in the second the perhaps more threatening instance of the automaton walking and blending in among us (passing, as it were, for human but content to spread panic with its truth). This represents a distinct assault upon the inherent dignity of the human being by placing alongside it the inanimate. This is why Greif can claim that Pynchon's history is about the "progressive dehumanization through wars and politics" and more substantially that it is not "the dehumanization of men by other men in cruelty and organization but dehumanization by the increasing confusion of human beings (and parts of human beings) with inanimate objects" (236). This is also how Kathleen Fitzpatrick can claim that *V.* explores through decadence and degeneration a "threatened inversion of the traditional cultural dominance of human over machine," the human's movement toward "technological inanimation" wherein the "body itself comes to appear a machine" (91-2).

Knowledge of the inanimate enters into a contrast with the inanimate knowledge that these non-entities seem to possess. This latter form of knowledge presents the threat of equivalence that would ultimately dethrone the human being as the divine, dignity-holding, value-laden creature it has considered itself. Fitzpatrick can speak of a cultural arrangement which technology threatens to invert only because there is a prior cultural commonplace to be inverted. Fitzpatrick says that "human culture has lost any possible means by which to think itself out of this connection to the machine" (92). This is because human culture—or the particular epistemology of Western culture that dominates today—continues to rely not only on the binary conceptualization of the wider world but also because it persists in considering itself

the paragon of all creatures (living, extinct, potential).[75] The human has no way out, as Fitzpatrick puts it, because under the current definition part of what constitutes the human being is its tendency to contrast itself (binary) against all other things and we need another way to understand this human, another epistemological outlook.

In the wake of their silence and indifference, the humanlike machines confront us with the destabilizing inquiry into our own existence.[76] In thinking through the human—"none of you have very far to go," SHROUD tells Profane, and us all (*V.* 312)—the mechanical silence, far from shielding introspection, reflects a human emptiness and ultimately poses questions of an existential nature. As SHROUD assures us, we do not have, nor need, to go too far in our thinking to recognize the radical contingency of the human being and to consider different ways of understanding what it might be.

Placed alongside the human being, the machine here either becomes alive and human-enough to evoke the existential anxieties, or, obversely, the human is revealed in the face of its inert resemblance as equally bankrupt and empty, but oversaturated with centuries of social construction, a mere substance thriving as a temporary animated biological assemblage of organs and systems, and in questionably fortuitous possession of a consciousness that the robot may or may not or soon will or already does possess.[77] Our three initial examples—Yoyodyne's prototypes SHOCK and SHROWD and the wire-rich Bongo-Shaftsbury, authentic robot or human pretender (does this distinction matter so much for the point it procures?)—indicate the connection between existential anguish and advancing technology in modernity.

While the two instances presented here are not the only places where Pynchon addresses this angst, he does more than merely account for its presences. Instead he provides an occasion for confrontation and contemplation. Pynchon puts on display the exceedingly relevant deliberations upon the state of modernity and upon the human beings inhabiting the world, his novels presenting themselves like museum of humanism.

Vineland takes the exhibition of technology's revealing capacity beyond the mere emergence of technology—the robot, cyborg, android, thinking machine—as a destabilizing other being and extends the discussion to its ability to directly effect and even take control of the human being, to engineer and shape her. On one hand, technology can embody a space of becoming-human or becoming-equal-with-human, and, often at the same time, constitute an invasive mechanism of oppression in taking on that human role. On the other hand, we might ask what technology can do for us. *Vineland*'s answer chiefly concerns the television as a central artifact, in which technology can transform the human being. The point is to address these frames of reference and to arrive at an understanding of our dominant epistemology as neither

---

[75] No wonder, too, that machines kill us all the time in our own creative fantasies. This, perhaps, is one way out of Fitzpatrick's problem: to see that we have a deeply rooted desire for self-destruction, for apocalyptic alteration, which can also be articulated as a desire to think differently, or at best to identify the psychosis of a desire continuing to play itself out in reality.

[76] As W.J.T. Mitchell writes, the "power of idols over the human mind resides in their silence, their spectacular impassiveness, their dumb insistence on repeating the same message (as in the baleful cliché of 'terrorism'), and their capacity for absorbing human desire and violence and projecting it back to us as a demand for human sacrifice" (26-7).

[77] Mitchell's critique of the biological definition of life throws more light on the current issue. Taking as he does the definition of a living organism from a biology textbook, Mitchell writes that an attribute such as "responding to stimuli" is "vague enough to cover photographic emulsions, weather vanes, and billiard balls" (52). Especially considering how we can treat a cue ball in a certain way and not acknowledge its biology, we can and do also apply—as witnessed by history—various modes of treatment to human beings without the ethical consequences that accompany discussion of life.

natural nor necessary and to see that different relationships beyond their binary can be articulated. Still cast in the human-rights-related discourse outlined above, questions of what counts as human being extended to what is traditionally considered non-human yields some insightful answers concerning the technology's relationship to the human.

In the opening to his study of biopolitics and philosophy, Robert Esposito describes a series of real-world events in which the legal-juridical, ethical, and governmental-administrative apparatus are thrust into a kind of limit-zone where their functionality is temporarily arrested. In one instance he describes a child suing for his right not to have been born following a genetic misdiagnosis that permitted him to live while in utero, the very decision resulting in his ability to be considered a rights-entitled entity; in another, Esposito refers to the humanitarian confusion amid way in the Middle East where air raids intend to defend life and extend aid by dropping supplies at the same time loosed bombs are wreaking destruction, a destiny apparently intended to kill and protect the same people; in yet another instance he postulates the emergence of life from death via mass ethnic rapes in Rwanda as the inversion of traditional war giving way to the strange generation of new life. Esposito summons up instances of these murky political frontiers to frame his project and, following Foucault, poses the question as to why a "politics of life always risk[s] being reversed into a work of death," answering that this form of "epistemological uncertainty is attributable to the failure to use a more ductile paradigm" (8-9).

Toward the end of *Vineland*, Pynchon presents a similar case that might find its way into Esposito's volley of opening examples. We learn here of one character's ex-wife, Debbi, who

> during the divorce proceedings, on the advice of some drug-taking longhair crank attorney, had named the television set, a 19-inch French Provincial floor model, as correspondent, arguing that the Tube was a member of the household, enjoying its own space, fed out of the house budget with all the electricity it needed, addressed and indeed chatted with at length by other family members, certainly as able to steal affection as any cheap floosy Hector might have met on the job. (348)

While Pynchon's example might be a while off from finding a space for legitimate deliberation in a courtroom—the claim in question is thrown out as a frivolity and a no-fault divorce imposed—the demands that it makes on readers are as pertinent and pressing as those instances Esposito evokes. Pynchon continues the line of thought, posing the more philosophically pertinent and unnerving question:

> Is the Tube human? Semihuman? Well, uh, how human's that, so forth. Are TV sets brought alive by broadcast signals, like the clay bodies of men and women animated by the spirit of God's love? There'd be this parade of expert witnesses, professors, rabbis, scientists… (348)[78]

---

[78] Compare this consideration of life to the following from *Mason & Dixon*: Mason's father, a baker, "believes that bread is alive—that the yeast Animalcula may unite in a single purposeful individual,—that each Loaf is so organized… one may presume, so forth, down to the Limits of the Invisible," whereas the "baker's trade terrified the young [Mason]… when he began to see into it,—the smells, the unaccountable swelling of the dough, the oven door like a door before a Sacrament,—the daily repetitions of smell and ferment and some hidden Drama, as in the Mass,—was he fleeing to the repetitions of the Sky, believing them safer, not as saturated in life and death? If Christ's Body could enter Bread, then what else might?—might it not be as easily haunted by ghosts less welcome?" (204-5).

Any attempt to answer this question would be one of a transdisciplinary nature, summoning the doctrines of the learned elite from academic, scientific, and religious communities because the very question itself—what does, should, and should not count as human—is undecided, as Esposito's examples make clear. This is true among the officiating and legitimating institutions of modernity.

This is indeed another way to think about what Greif terms the crisis of man—an entire epistemology thrust into a crisis because of the arrival of unprecedented situations whose anatomy and ramifications are far from completely resolved. Although the increasing interest in the biopolitical and other related subfields begins an inquiry into modernity's response, it is a question with which the current epistemology as I have articulated it above is not yet capable of dealing.

Like the motion of capitalism, the epistemology of modernity has an unprecedented knack for being blindly inclusive (which of course is the general problem of globalization). Pynchon's novel possesses this characteristic. Amid concerns that "they're gonna be coming after everything, not just drugs, but beer, cigarettes, sugar, fat, you name it" because "they need to control everything," Mucho Maas—crossing over from *The Crying of Lot 49* for a brief appearance and evoking the omnipresent They featured prominently in *Gravity's Rainbow*—warns *Vineland*'s protagonist Zoyd Wheeler that

> They just let us forget. Give us too much to process, fill up every minute, keep us distracted, it's what the Tube is for… just another way to claim our attention, so that beautiful certainty we had starts to fade, and after a while they have us convinced all over again that we really are going to die. And they've got us again. (*VL* 314)

From Tube Police to Perfume and Music Police to Good Healthy Shit Police (*VL* 313), Mucho Maas speaks to a concern that Heidegger has articulated differently (where high philosophy at last meets the populist players of Pynchon's portrayals): that our attention here in modernity is not allowed to rest on the fundamental characteristic of technology. This is so because the impenetrable and paranoia-inducing They have designs contrary to Heidegger's advice, designs that reinforce only a singular epistemology.[79]

Again the gap between expectation of human dignity and the forces appropriated into positions that restrict it. David Thoreen writes that in *Vineland* Pynchon has "documented some of the attendant threats to our individual civil rights" (217). This includes a specifically elaborate documentation of the War on Drugs, which, as Thoreen puts it, is the fourth "non-war war of the century" along with the post-Great Depression war on economic problems, the Cold War, and Johnson's War on Poverty (224-5). Stepping into the current century in which Pynchon

---

[79] This form of obfuscation gives rise to the problem of being unable even to talk about an issue or concept because the vocabulary to do so (the equipment, if one likes) has been overlapped so frequently as to confine it to a remote region of obscurity, about the struggle of identifying the subject to be discussed or of distilling its essence for conversation, and, finally, the problem of ascribing agency or personhood to such a thing of modernity. On this latter point, Žižek writes that "we do indeed seem to have witnessed the rise of a new form of prosopopoeia where the thing which speaks is the market itself, increasingly referred to as if it were a living entity that reacts, warns, makes its opinions clear, etcetera, up to and including demanding sacrifices in the manner of an ancient pagan god" (94). Along similar lines, Deleuze writes that we are "taught that corporations have a soul, which is the most terrifying news in the world" (6).

continues to write, the War on Terror (and *Bleeding Edge* particularly) adds a fifth ongoing non-war war.

Along similar lines and in search of a solution that accomplishes more than an identification of the problem, David Dickson understands *Vineland* to be an exploration of ways that "conceptual liberation might be possible" (182). This is nothing less than characters finding "complex routes to a degree of liberation from preconceived historical designs" located in new ways of narrating "in-between accepted rules of mediation" that "govern both what can be said and what can be heard as truth" (Dickson 194).

Of course, Pynchon does more than document historical movements under the banner of liberal politics (Thoreen) and show possible liberating avenues (Dickson). The Berkeley-based Death to the Pig Nihilist Film collective represents one avenue of conceptual liberation described in *Vineland*. Condemned to "live out the metaphor of movie camera as weapon," their manifesto claims that a "camera is a gun," an "image taken is a death and a Judgement," and the organization promises to be the "architects of a just Hell for the fascist pig" (*VL* 197). Rich with us/them rhetoric, this brand of activism clearly does not produce the conceptual liberation it promises. Content to pursue epistemological repositions rather than revisions, the film collective is more likely to fuel the tensions that sustain modernity and remain within its operating dialectics.

Despite this the camera remains a tool for epistemic alteration, and the television is the site upon which it projects itself. Committed so extremely that she abandons her infant daughter Prairie in order to pursue this cause, Frenesi Gates participated in the collective's activism. When Prairie has come of age, she comes to know her mother through viewing these films, which are filled with all manner of countercultural carnival. It is in this process of viewing that Prairie understands her mother as the agent behind the camera and that if she "kept her mind empty she could absorb, conditionally become, Fernesi, share her eyes, feel, when the frame shook with fatigue or fear or nausea, Fernesi's whole body there, load the roll, get the shot" so that Prairie "floated, ghostly light of head, as if Fernesi were dead but in a special way, a minimum-security arrangement, where limited visits, mediated by projector and screen, were possible" (*VL* 199).

Indeed, such a technology is pregnant with liberating potential, but, like the irony that can always continue its turn, its emancipatory power easily becomes compromised. It is not much later in the novel when Federal Agent Brock Vond comes to interfere with Fernesi's cinematic activities, despite her "open access" mentality (which stretches to our contemporary period with equally important ramifications):

> She told herself she was making movies for everybody, to be shown free anywhere there might be a reflective enough surface… it wasn't secret footage, Brock had as much right as anybody… But then after a while he was not only seeing the outtakes, but also making suggestions about what to shoot to begin with, and the deeper she got into that, the deeper Brock came into her life. (*VL* 209)

With the circular binary of subversion and counter-subversion, the federally appropriated films of anti-government activism come to dictate the traces that embody Prairie's encounters with her mother. With Vond's appropriation of the filmic eye, the authenticity of this relationship comes into question so a weaponized camera record coopted by the forces it was supposed to oppose in the first place mediates Prairie's sense of identity and heritage.

The countercultural enterprise of protest and revolution advocated by Fernesi and compromised by Brock, while utilizing technology for its own dialectical means, suffers for this very reason from the ongoing binary battle between two factions—people and government, insurgents and incumbents, status quo and revolutionaries, official authorities and urban guerillas—locked in the common conceptual space of the epistemology of modernity. Along with Fernesi, Prairie, and Brock, readers are distracted from the essence of technology and its epistemological revelations.

One more authentic deployment of conceptual liberation Prairie gravitates toward is communication with her mother's cinema-ghost, watching her mother's films "as if somehow, next reel or the one after that, the girl would find a way, some way, to speak to her" (*VL* 199). This allows the mythical to be restored to modern technology which, because of its steadfast association with scientific discourse and the heritage of the Age of Reason, is typically evacuated from any kind of mythic, mystic, or spiritual consideration. Prairie's method for making contact with her mother implies a serious affiliation not just with time travel but with necromancy through technological means (technomancy) that relate the machine as a kind of ghost, a form of life.[80] Thrusting itself through from another epistemological realm, we lose this mysticism along with the vision it offers if the camera is just a tool for modern political participation or simply a means to generate a representation (which is how both Brock and Fernesi understand it) or if the television is merely an apparatus to entertain, distract, and police audience ideology.

We can turn to our contemporary equipment for updated examples of this attitude. The proliferation of smartphones stages the drama of an information society married to a surveillance apparatus. Equipped as they are with a camera on either side of the screen (some Janus-like semi-god that can report information anywhere across its massive network of connections) and a functional microphone with the ability to listen anytime (hey Siri), contemporary smartphones possess reach that can seem dominating and divine. Taking our records and conversations as prompts for our anticipated inquiry, search engines, anticipating our desires and curiosities which despite the information proliferation of our age can result in a more limited appraisal of available data (limiting what one will search for and what one will find). These devices are capable of listening at all times, unfatigued, and reporting conversations into a vast and fathomless database—easily searchable or retrievable when the proper climate demands it—spread across mainframe banks, floating fiction-like through the mystical ether of cloud storage, increasingly expanding the connections, duplicating our thoughts into the digital abyss of cyberspace. This might sounds particularly Pynchon-esque and easily dismissible as a conspiratorial paranoia, a distraction from legitimate concerns. Consider, for example, the Amazon Echo, a home automation hub whose entire function is to sit and wait, listening passively until the proper words are spoken into it—its "wake words"—as though summoned by the incantation of some ancient spell. Even though only the proper words make it come alive, it always listens.[81] And why is this

---

[80] That we have been unable to wipe these discourses out in the technologically explainable landscape of modernity and that they remain as quite more than residue is interesting and implies that modernity is incapable of explaining such phenomena adequately enough to prevent communities and individuals from seeking ulterior understandings. See Pynchon's essay "Is it OK to be a Luddite?" for a discussion of the periodized nostalgia that moves through adjacent eras of social development and the enduring tether of labor and technology across the last few centuries.

[81] A slightly older example which involves humans communicating with machines comes in the trusted traveler program: in the summer of 2012 several newspapers reported on a new kind of border patrol agent jointly developed by the University of Arizona and the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency. At a checkpoint on the U.S.-Mexico border in Nogales, pre-approved, low-risk travelers—part of the "Trusted Traveler" program—can stand at what one design team member characterized as an "ATM on steroids" and respond to a series of questions

technical power not the equipment of God? Why are we loath to combine notions of the divine with properties of the technical? And why do we find it so difficult to locate the mystical in the technical? To convert the consideration of technology into a religious-mystical discourse is not *the* solution to the issues I have been covering; this prospective provides a different avenue to consider the essence of technology and allows it to expose some limits of reason, rationality, and dominant registers relating to technology.

Pynchon makes this consideration at one point in *Vineland* (and *Bleeding Edge* picks up this line of thought some twenty-three years later). Writing like a prophecy, Pynchon foretells how "it would all be done with keys on alphanumeric keyboards," how

> If patterns of ones and zeros were "like" patterns of human lives and deaths, if everything about an individual could be represented in a computer record by a long string of ones and zeros, then what kind of creature would be represented by a long string of lives and deaths? It would have to be up one level at least—an angel, a minor god, something in a UFO. It would take eight human lives and deaths just to form one character of this being's name—its complete dossier might take up a considerable piece of history of the world. We are digits in God's computer… And the only thing we're good for, to be dead or to be living, is the only thing He sees. What we cry, what we contend for, in our world of toil and blood, it all lies beneath the notice of the hacker we call god. (*VL* 90-1)

As with the mannequin robots from *V.* who reflect back humanity's existential emptiness, the essence of human life is couched in terms of meaninglessness (God doesn't care and is not susceptible to the anthropocentric personification that would answer pledges for meaning).

---

asked in either Spanish or English, speaking to the machine as though it is a person (Hume). This virtual border official has been nicknamed Elvis or Pat by its developers, but is officially known as the AVATAR agent, an acronym standing for Automated Virtual Agent for Truth Assessment in Real Time. One is reminded of the plethora of Pynchon's abbreviated agencies and the secret technological projects that populate the pages of almost all of his novels: PISCES, for example, the Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender, or ACHTUNG, the Allied Clearing House, Technical Units, Northern Germany (*GR* 35; 18;) which show up in the first thirty-five pages of *Gravity's Rainbow.* The AVATAR agent monitors interviewees, checking for signs of lying, and has been able to detect deception about 90 percent of the time in the laboratory environment, quite a step above humans who are accurate only about 54 percent of the time (Hume). In order to perform this task, the computer "uses three sensors to assess physiological responses: a microphone, which monitors vocal quality, pitch and frequency; an infrared camera, which looks at pupil dilation and where the eyes focus; and a high-definition camera recording facial expressions," watching simultaneously for potential cues that indicate deception, since, according to researchers, such "cues that betray whether a speaker is lying could be controlled, but not all of them at once" (Hume). The AVATAR kiosk initially did not have the avatar (non-acronym) feature—a screen with an animated human body from the shoulders up, complete with facial features, reactions, and so forth (differences in dress and gender have evoked different reactions from users who tended to attribute a greater degree of authority to the male avatar than the female). The feature was added after developers "found that without it, people would tend to speak to the machine in a robotic, unnatural manner" (Hume). Aside from its practical potential to save money and time (fifteen minutes to process individuals) and be deployed in a wider range of the Customs and Border Protection agency's operations, the AVATAR, in both its ideal and material existence, evokes other concerns that are perhaps more unsettling than its stated practical purpose. Perhaps taken to its most drastic ends, the AVATAR represents an additional step toward essentializing the human being, mapping and forging direct connections between physical appearance and interior mental action, representing and reproducing a convincing humanoid machine.

Prior to high technology's infiltration of the everyday, intellectuals understood the cosmos as a computational object susceptible to mapping. In *Mason & Dixon*, which takes place in the seventeen-hundreds, Pynchon writes how "each Star is little more a mathematickal Point" that taken together "represent[s] some single gigantick Equation" in the mind of God, though to us appears "unreadable, incalculable" and "even impossible" (134). Neither the royal astronomer nor the surveyor nor the author himself attempts to support the grand aspiration to plot (and master) the cosmos (which also include the geography of the earth and the internal anatomy of organisms). The entire novel traces the frustrated attempt to overlay mathematical order onto the universe.[82]

Drawing latitudes and longitudes accordingly, to discover their hidden contours, be it on the face of the Earth or in the structure of the stars, hopes to reveal the central forces that govern the universe. The great fear that confronts the population of *Mason & Dixon* is that behind this quest to discover the mechanizations of a higher order they will find an emptiness commiserate with no anticipated reason or rationality. "What Machine is it," wonders the novel's narrator, the Reverend Cheerycoke,

> that bears us along so relentlessly?... Long before the Destination, moreover, shall this Machine come abruptly to a Stop… gather'd dense with Fear, shall we open the Door to confer with the Driver, to discover that there is no Driver… no Horses,… only the Machine, fading as we stand, and a Prairie of desperate Immensity… (*MD* 361)

That the supposed substance driving their enterprise has not merely subsided but was never there to begin with presents a clear problem of meaning. It is also the ambiguous, paranoid blueprint for reading Pynchon as a whole. The mechanism Cheerycoke forebodingly looks forward to has taken over in modernity: absorbing attention, confining the function of the technological to its appearance, concealing what it reveals and distracting us from comprehending, even considering, this fundamental essence that we are after in all kind of articulations (including the surveyors' latitudinal project).

Another confusion enters when the distinction of what constitutes life becomes ambiguous. So often bordering on profane, aberrant, or horrific, the animated human-like but non-human consciousness is capable of generating plaintive tensions for an entire species because its presence calls into question the long-standing assertion not just of superiority that the human being enjoys among other animals but also the claim of its unquestioned singularity as a creature. We can turn to Shelley's famous creature, strapped together from the ghoulish harvesting of her more famous scientist, or any number of other instances for examples of the disquiet produced, and induced, by the actualizing of these memetic possibilities. This is not to say that the only experience imagined by the introduction of such creations—one hesitates to call them creatures for reasons that are both obvious in themselves and as an indication of the considerations that drive this entire discussion—into our midst is always met with dread.

---

[82] Mason and Dixon's project—"to measures two degrees of latitude for the first time in history" (*MD* 222-3)—reinforces this as well, showing what I have called cartographication in action. To what extent, we are urged to inquire, are Mason and Dixon merely confirming theoretical knowledge by generating official and governable space?

Pynchon plays on technological anxieties in *Mason & Dixon* when he summons forth a "Mechanician of blinding and world-rattling Genius" in the form of a duck whose creator himself (Jacques de Vaucanson) had "trespass'd so ingeniously outside the boarders of Taste" in providing his autonotom with a "Digestionary Process, whose end result could not be distinguish'd from that found in nature" (372). The designer also intended to "repeat for Sex and Reproduction, the Mricales he'd already acheiv'd for Digestion and Excretion" and somewhere in the "final superaddition of erotick Machinery may have some how nudg'd the Duck across some Threshold of self-Intricacy" changing "Inertia toward *Independence, and Power*" (*MD* 373). De Vaucanson's duck makes several subsequent appearances, lovelorn and stalking one of Mason and Dixon's party members, a French chef who is outmatched by this mechanism with divine activities. As the chef Armand Allègre puts it, the duck's metaphysical powers grow daily, until she is able to fly, communicate, move between realms as "she continues upon her strange Orbit of Escape from the known World, whilst growing more powerful within it" (*MD* 383). Pynchon's comic portrayal here of what he takes more seriously in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* places the figure of the automaton in a different light. Despite its sidelined importance in *Mason & Dixon*'s narrative, the duck retains—if only for Allègre whom it pursues and plagues—its foreboding manifestations as a semi-living, semi-divine, supernatural entity beyond the comprehension of reason and science. As the duck's "Metaphysickal Powers increase, so do her worldly Resentments, real and imagin'd" (*MD* 449) so that, like so many examples of malevolent machines achieving sentience, coming "online" so to speak, the duck represents in these growing resentments of the terrestrial (human) world a threat to its existence. Coupled with its supernatural abilities, then, the duck's presence constitutes a perceived and imminent threat to the existential essence of the human beings who surround it. Pynchon's comic treatment of the subject divests it from its existential impact, which is to say that the image of a lovesick mechanical duck traversing the eighteenth century is far less threatening to modern subjectivity than the humanoid SHOCK and SHROUD I have discussed from *V.* in the twenty-first.

Nonetheless, the persistent resistance to understanding mechanization as anything different than an extreme non-human other reveals much about the contingency of human beings. The resulting polarization obscures from thought our radical relationship with technical bodies and beings. What can be considered as indistinct we nonetheless strive to separate and other. We resort to discussion of origins, creators, craftsmen, and so forth: but none will ascribe the same kind of craftsmanship to, say, a father for the creation of a son that they happily would permit themselves to a baker and his loaf of bread, a clockmaker and his intricate contraption, or a machinist and his machines, each the offspring of his vocation but not of something more fundamental. This characteristic makes Vaucanson's historical duck so insightful.

Opening in the period leading up to the September 11 attacks, *Bleeding Edge* (2013) takes up these issues of machinery, mechanization, and human management, along with the accompanying forces of resistance, and extends them an additional step into the virtual world. As an entirely new and difference space that is becoming organically incorporated into our everyday world, *Bleeding Edge* offers technologically generated virtual geographies as reflections on the nature of "reality" and modernity's epistemological limitations regarding its conception. My analysis of *Bleeding Edge* will focus on the virtual reality program DeepArcher and its presence in the Deep Web.

Following the exploits of New York fraud investigator Maxine Tarnow and her exploration into a computer security firm named hashslingrz, *Bleeding Edge* centers on a virtual reality program called DeepArcher. Intended to be pronounced as "departure," DeepArcher

signals the potentiality of a departure from modernity or what Pynchon might call the surface world. As the novel opens everyone, from gaming companies to the federal government, wants DeepArcher's source code because "there's a part about getting somewhere without leaving a trail" (*BE* 37). This coveted software comes from an anonymous remailer developed from Finnish technology: "What remailers do is pass data packets on from one node to the next with only enough information to tell each link in the chain where the next one is, no more. DeepArcher goes a step further and forgets where it's been, immediately, forever" making it "really just another maze, only invisible" (*BE* 78-9). For government organizations and corporations and the tycoons running them, the vanishing ability offered by DeepArcher's source code offers many obvious appeals (and includes most centrally the occlusion of the intricate architecture with which the U.S. government planned the September 11 attacks whose trace only survives today in the discredited rambling of conspiracy theorists and paranoid quacks).[83]

In the hands that programmed it, hands very different than those of the interests seeking its source code, DeepArcher represents something much more revolutionary than the practical, conspiratorial, abusive, and exploitive uses. DeepArcher was programmed to be a refuge from modernity. Its originators "had it in mind to create a virtual sanctuary to escape from the many varieties of real-world discomfort," a "grand-scale motel for the afflicted, a destination reachable by virtual midnight express from anyplace with a keyboard" (*BE* 74). Where one of the programmers wanted to "go back in time, to a California that had never existed, safe, sunny all the time" and another sought "someplace, you could say, a little darker, where it rains a lot and great silences sweep like wind, holding inside them forces of destruction," the synthesis of these that emerged as DeepArcher still intends to be a history-free, timeless place where all participants are travelers: "It is asylum, no matter, you can be poorest, no home, lowest of jailbirds, *obizhenka*, condemned to die… [or be already dead]… DeepArcher will always take you in, keep you safe" (*BE* 74, 373). This may be an escape, an alternative, a pure possibility. We might also read it as a vision of America that attempts to better align itself and its residents to its constitutional promises, but this association places us into treacherous waters. The aforementioned addition to the remailer becomes key for understanding DeepArcher's potential. In erasing its origins, it becomes less susceptible to conquest and regulation because its territory cannot be made known. Besides the individual and cultural memories of its users, each encounter with DeepArcher would be new in the sense of its worlding potential, that is, its ability to bring about a novel conceptual context.[84] One would arrive at it newly and almost unprecedentedly minus material conditions. DeepArcher promises a space untied from what I have been calling the epistemology of modernity.

Forgetting becomes a form of unbinding, where memory becomes a central problem, and DeepArcher avoids the conquest of overdetermination that allows modernity to be so dominating. In producing the erasure of its origins we witness the opening up of opportunity for thought, for being able to move and think in different directions that are not already overlaid with the premises that constitute modernity. The amnesic style of this organism (DeepArcher's source code) optimistically offers an alternative epistemological view.

While the aspiration remains a promising one, the assumptions of DeepArcher's ability to provide the unattached geography free of mnemonic modernity is complicated by the contours of

---

[83] For a meditation on the mechanisms of narrative control—official, unofficial, and newspaper reports—see the opening section of chapter 30 in *Bleeding Edge* (pages 327-9).

[84] For more on the notion of World as invoked here, see Eric Hayot's *On Literary Worlds* and Pheng Cheah's *What is a World?*

the otherwise catacomb-like Deep Web within which it is situated, despite the programming's ability to conceal its presence. What is supposed to be an "endless junkyard" populated with "obsolete sites and broken links" where, as archeologists unearthing the artifacts of ancient civilizations, "adventurers will come… someday to dig up relics of remote and exotic dynasties," the Deep Web, Maxine learns, only resembles this strange salvage-scape, behind or within which stands a "whole invisible maze of constraints, engineered" in permitting passage to certain places and preventing it in others so that it ultimately provides the "hidden code of behavior you have to learn to obey" as a "dump, with structure" (*BE* 226).

The Deep Web, then, is an uncurated but not uncontained space. Like the museum, whose official display hallways present only a selection of what they might have piled in vaults and attics, the Internet, Pynchon makes clear, presents a crucial analogy for our understanding of both the curative power of official narratives and the authorities who prescribe what can be known. This is true even in the face of the current computer age in which information is allegedly liberated and made available through open source mentalities.

Later in the novel, Maxine incredulously states that "nobody's in control of the Internet" (*BE* 419) and is rebuked with a brief chronicle of its history and purpose. Arising during the Cold War, the "real original purpose was to assure survival of U.S. command and control after a nuclear exchange with the Soviets," but the more pertinent notion was the central idea to "set up enough nodes so no matter what got knocked out, they could always reassemble some kind of network by connecting up what was left" (*BE* 419), which is precisely the opposite—that is, reassembly—of what DeepArcher's source code accomplishes. This instance features the contours of the military-technology-industrial complex alone. The Internet, a "magical convenience that creeps now like a smell through the smallest details of our lives, the shopping, the housework, the homework, the taxes, absorbing our energy, eating up our precious time" is the invention of these official, power-holding agencies, establishing a form of freedom "based on control" where everybody gets "connected together, impossible anything should get lost, ever again," the next step being to "connect it to these cellphones" to form a "total Web of surveillance, inescapable," the very thing they "dream about at the Pentagon, worldwide martial law" (*BE* 420). Actualized today, some diabolic amalgamation of the Internet's originary purpose (to establish distant connections) and DeepArcher's precious source code (to establish no traces) in the hands of the state forms a total and ubiquitous gaze. Under this condition constitutional principles are undeniably threatened, and the foundational ideas generating them will require more fundamental reassessment.

If the anatomy of cyberspace and the potentials of virtual reality—whether as a computer program like DeepArcher or as the official-governmental enclosure of space and knowledge (that is, our reality today, virtually constructed by information systems)—Pynchon provides a vision of a world which we have come to inhabit: in the aftermath of September 11, the activation of social machinery that ties itself back into the discourse of modernity. Amid the escalating attitudes of law enforcement officials, various announcements that the reading of fiction will no longer be assigned in some schools, and the sudden explosion of reality television in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks,

> Somebody needs this nation of starers believing they're all wised up at last, hardened and hip to the human condition, freed from the fictions that led them so astray, as if paying attention to made-up lives was some form of *evil drug abuse*

> that the collapse of the towers cured by scaring everybody straight again. (*BE* 335)

Of course, the central question—like revealing the identity of the ubiquitous They in *Gravity's Rainbow*—becomes who these somebodies are (and why they want what they want). One answer given in *Bleeding Edge*: the "terrible tragedy" of September 11 has made palpable the population's regression and has "infantilized this country" when it was offered a "chance to grow up" and instead it "chose to default back to childhood" (336).[85] Unanswered is why childhood and what benefit its retention distributes to the powerful: the official world engineered by government agencies, powerful institutions, and technocratic tools should be understood as a virtual reality (programmed, generated, managed) itself: that is to say, society (to use the most vast umbrella under which to situate all our ideologies, laws, and parameters) itself is a virtual reality, a reality established, programmed, and refined over great periods of time. More plainly yet: we live, today, in a "virtual" reality that, as we know, could be arranged in a completely different and completely alien fashion. Our social, communally shared world is virtual in the sense that it is an establishment bound by a specific—though very large—set of parameters. Our society and civilization are virtual in the sense that they are constructed, and contain nothing essential as far as the "ought" of all matters is concerned. I propose that we find the notion of a computer-simulated virtual reality widely appealing for this very reason. In this way whatever institutional conglomerates we attribute with organizing society have already provided us a virtual reality to inhabit. And, as we have seen, it sets itself the task, especially efficient when employing technology, of maintaining its own health and of expanding, which is why we remain its children and why we find it so difficult to think beyond its boundaries (since they are the very condition of our possibility of thinking in the first place).

With this realization that the shared reality we socially inhabit is itself a form of virtual reality, a great number of avenues are opened as the capabilities of technology to be recognized emerge and its transcendent properties foregrounded. With bleeding edge technology and the advent of DeepArcher, the Internet has "become a medium of communication between the worlds" (*BE* 427). This is especially exemplified when Maxine encounters Lester Traipse, a dead man participating in one way or another with the September 11 conspiracy, roaming the world of DeepArcher whom she "sees no harm in treating him as departed soul" rather than as a suspicious program or a malicious impersonator (*BE* 427). That technology, in this instance, can overcome or neutralize death represents one departure from our epistemic expectation about mortality in modernity. A refuge not only for the oppressed or the escapists driven to find refuge from the insane premises of the modern world, DeepArcher is a haven for the deceased, a place where they might live on under a different definition of life. More than this, as Maxine continues her acquaintance with DeepArcher she finds it "harder to tell 'real' NYC from translations like Zigotisopolis… as if she keeps getting caught in a vortex taking her farther each time into the virtual world" and there arises the "possibility that DeepArcher is about to overflow out into the perilous gulf between screen and face" (*BE* 429). That the separation is slowly dissolving, that

---

[85] Such concerns for the infantalization of the population via technological means, especially the television, are not unique to *Bleeding Edge*. In *Vineland* Pynchon discloses the coercive possibility of the Tube "proclaiming youth revolution against parents of all kind and most viewers were accepting the story" at the same time the palpable "need only to stay children forever, safe inside some extended national Family" (*VL* 269); and in the introduction to his short story collection *Slow Learner* articulates this perpetual American infantilism as a mere fact of life, writing that its "no secret nowadays, particularly to women, that man American males, even those of middle-age appearance, wearing suits and holding down jobs, are in fact, incredible as it sounds, still small boys inside" (*SL* 10).

there is increasingly becoming little difference between the worlds we are capable of manufacturing and the world(s) that we concretely inhabit (itself a virtual reality, no more inevitable than any other) remains among the notions that technology foregrounds.

Rather than the dominance of technology as a medium of distraction and mental coercion (*Vineland*), *Bleeding Edge* presents a growing indistinction between received notions of the real and the possibilities engineered by the imagination that the current epistemology might be unable to continue to resist or hide from. In proffering the alternative kinds of worlds virtual reality is capable of assembling, the notion of a standard reality comes into question. With the assistance of technology I have discussed, the structure of reality also reveals itself to be a construction susceptible to revision, renovation, or reinvention.

I have argued that Pynchon's critique of modernity highlights that it is generally encountered, because of the epistemological arrangements we find ourselves in, in an impoverished way. The examples presented here provide an array of responses to the deployment of technology, and my hope has been to show how binary notions surrounding the human being bleed into one another. Pynchon's fiction renders reality artefactual and gives us the opportunity to examine the stubborn trajectory of the human being as a concept steadily moving through history.

Pynchon's work on technology has been an exhibition of revealing the human being as what it always has been: not a divinely procured master-creature but as the bare form of life that it always already is. My contention is that the former view—the domineering view of humanism that persists—and the epistemological arrangement that sustains it remains the source of our most drastic problems in modernity when it comes to how we manage, marginalize, and mistreat one another; while I maintain that the latter claim that we persist as the same bare life as everything else opens up drastic possibilities for imagining and implementing a world within a shifted epistemology because under that assumption we can acknowledge all aspects of our current arrangement—including nature itself—as constructions, and so we can then be empowered to construct things differently.

§4: Toward Becoming Other: Navigation and Escape

The foregoing examination of Pynchon's narrative project has placed at its center three well-known and culturally critical institutions or apparatuses—the encyclopedia, the map, and the museum—and I would like briefly to repeat the function and importance of each as it relates to my overall claim, and to elaborate slightly more on the museum before entering into a final discussion of Pynchon's strategies for epistemological shifting as they relate to navigating and escaping modernity through the process of becoming something other from it.

As I have said, the encyclopedia symbolizes the repository of all possible knowledge with the goal of aggregating and making comprehensible all information. This is the encyclopedic project at large. While those early practitioners of the encyclopedia understood its futile though fun nature, this awareness has become lost in the technologically empowered period of modernity and its fanciful characteristics have been replaced by the cold earnestness of Cartesian precision. The encyclopedia's self-defeating nature also lends it its allure, and the possibility of accomplishing the impossible is specifically appealing to our culture of exceptionalism. Were the encyclopedia to end and the final entry marked as complete, this panacea of knowledge would vanish and become useless, becoming not a collection of all possible things from the world but the world itself (see again Borges, Baudrillard, and the

problems of binary separation above). As Pynchon writes in *Mason & Dixon*, this "Age seems a corruption and disabling of the ancient Magick," and were the encyclopedia to finalize its pages all those whose social and ideological functions support modernity—these "Projectors, Brokers of Capital, Insurancers, Peddlers upon the global Scale, Enterprisers and Quacks"—would find themselves the "last poor fallen and feckless inheritors of a knowledge they can never use, but in the service of Greed" (*MD* 487-8). It is a project whose end and aim is its own eradication, its absolute erasure and entry into oblivion.

The project of the map poses a similar, if not identical, problem. To generate a precise cartography of the world would require a map that became the world itself, or, more likely in our technologically advancing period, a virtual space equivalent to the physical space we inhabit. I have drawn the distinction between cartography (the disciplinary or occupational act of creating intricate models and maps) and what I have called cartographication (the consequence of pursuing and completing the cartographic project). Like the encyclopedia, cartographication leaves in its completed wake the uncharted nothing out of which it arose. As Dixon explains to Mason—both cartographers of various orders—once the "solar parallax is known" and once the "necessary Degrees are measur'd, and the size and weight and shape of the earth are calculated inescapably at last, all this will vanish" (*MD* 741).[86] Put in the most basic terms, the inner-outer division between model and material will evaporate under such conditions of completion and reveal that the supposed separation has not been overcome but was never authentic or even present in the first place.

However becomes obtuse in the contemporary climate, the museum remains an institution of importance and even reverence in the general imagination (though museums showcasing modern art will be understood differently than ones preserving prehistoric bones or historical artifacts). As Boris Groys puts it, the museum is a mnemonic repository where "everything is kept and shown that has gone out of fashion" and so serves as a site of "systematic historical comparison that enable[s] us to ascertain what really is different, new and contemporary" and what is not ("The Museum in the Age of Mass Media" 3). This is in contrast to the mass media which generates its own claims within its own increasingly colossal sphere apart from the contents and implications of what is stored in the museum. Indeed, for Groys, the "global media market lacks the historical memory which would enable it to compare the past with the present and thereby determine what is really new and genuinely contemporary about the present" ("The Museum in the Age of Mass Media" 2). For my own purposes the issue is not developing a criteria for what is new or old or even authentic (attempts at making this distinction and claims to newness represent their own important problems, as Groys, Bourdieu, and Jameson among others understand). Rather, I am interested here in what subtends this division and the implications issuing from it. As Groys says elsewhere, artist and theorists—and I would wager this is true as well for the public—"repeatedly describe [the museum] as a graveyard of art, and museum curators as gravediggers" ("On the New" 2). The museum preserves the dead, what has been killed by the contemporary. Once an object or artifact enters into the museum it dies in a sense.[87] Separate from the encyclopedia and the map whose self-defeating projects issue their

[86] With this, Dixon goes on, "We will have to seek a different space" and come to learn "an entirely different set of rules for how to behave" (*MD* 741). Whatever the new set of rules—"No one explain'd what that meant, however…?" (*MD* 741)—such a change must be epistemological in its characteristic since it implies not that the world comes to an end or that space closes in on itself, but that a new series of relationships to the world will be established, the appearance of which we are at this point unable to comprehend or anticipate.

[87] As Groys writes, the "artwork lives longer and keeps its original form longer in the museum than an ordinary object does in 'reality.' That is why an ordinary thing looks more 'alive' and more 'real' in the museum than in

own erasure, the museum is a preventative institution whose dynamics serve the epistemology of modernity. That is to say, as a graveyard that kills what it collects and collects what is (or was) new and innovative, the museum functions to kill and to confine: to make stagnate, however much one can peruse what is well-preserved. New ideas and their kinetic potential are sent and suspended. In this sense, it is a very peculiar agent of the modern world.[88]

According to Groys, then, "today's museums are in fact machines designed not merely to collect, but also to generate the present through their comparison between old and new, between identical and different" ("The Museum in the Age of Mass Media" 4). This is how the museum functions in cooperation with the epistemology of modernity: like capitalism, which cannot settle and can do nothing besides relentlessly pursue motion, the generation of the present via the movement of "new" ideas—ideas contrary to capitalism, modernity, and so forth—into the graveyard of the museum retains the constant motion of modernity. The inventory of the museum distances itself from "real life." And when "people today speak of 'real life,' what they generally mean is the global media market" (Groys, "The Museum in the Age of Mass Media" 1). Thus one sees clearly how in preserving what is "new" or innovative, the museum gives life and legitimacy to the epistemology of modernity whose claims are situated in "real life." Pynchon's position among all of this might be unique with respect to writers with whom he is frequently compared and the literary vocation in general. Pynchon is, among other things, part mass media, part museum, and all art.[89] Everything enters Pynchon: his area is the junkyard, the graveyard, the wasteland, and the world itself. As a cultural curator, Pynchon shows us the scope of the problem I have articulated, and because of this extensive display—both a direct address and a meta-analysis in Pynchon's work—we can safely file away the raised concerns, as though they have been addressed, and act as though they are solved at the same time they rampage about the world in other fields under the view of the mass media.

Pynchon says as much in his own writing. The size of his worlds and the content that directly articulates the difficulty of dealing with them are at once displayed, as though a total comprehension or interpretation of any one of his novels is too much to expect. This issue becomes, as I have just pointed out, part of the meta-commentary and meta-analysis (that is beyond the size and surface) contained within Pynchon's work. It is precisely the inclusion of this critique of modernity embedded within Pynchon—amid all the popular culture, the jokes, the

---

reality itself. If I see a certain ordinary thing in reality I immediately anticipate its death—as when it is broken and thrown away in the garbage. A short life expectancy is, actually, the definition of ordinary life. So if I change the life expectancy of an ordinary thing, I change everything without, in a way, changing anything" ("On the New" 8). Apropos, changing everything without changing anything represents much the same pursuit that I am occupied with in the current project as an epistemological shift is precisely the kind of alteration of relationships to the world that can occur without what we might call "action."

[88] I concur with Groys that in "stark contrast to the mass media, museums possess the means and possibilities to be sites of critical discourse" ("The Museum in the Age of Mass Media" 5). This is true despite also the museum's availability within modernity, which is not making visible attempts to erase it but only to neutralize it and the artifacts it enshrines as old, outdated, no longer useful, functional, or relevant. In this way, the museum serves modernity by killing—that is, suspending in exhibits—all that might threaten it and all that might function under different dynamics in the "real," legitimate, day-to-day world. Also arising from this are the dismissive notions of art (if this is the kind of museum we are dealing with) as mere entertainment or leisure activity that has no bearing on the rest of the world.

[89] By way of an example, Thomas Moore writes that it is "Pynchon's erudite range, his sense of responsibility to the real histories of facts and systems, that sets him far apart from Vonnegut's bestselling stance against science and its evil effects, or Donleavy's cheerful enshrinement of moral anarchy, or Brautigan's watermelon-sugar-spun escapism, or Ken Kesey's or Hunter Thompson's not altogether playful advocacies of hallucinogens as ends in themselves" (19).

junk, the hybridized Rabelaisian cannibalization of high and low and so forth (namely the fun)—that makes his work of the highest order. It both contains and critiques modernity, drawing attention to its own ironic appraisal (as Socrates and Kierkegaard) at the same time it issues from and inhabits the world it assists in dismantling. In many ways, Pynchon can be read as a roadmap for navigating modernity, which establishes as a central premise the impossibility of its own navigation. As though providing a concise statement of his own literary aesthetics, Pynchon writes the following in *Bleeding Edge*:

> These urban myths can be attractors, they pick up little fragments of strangeness from everywhere, after a while nobody can look at the whole thing and believe it all, it's too unstructured. But somehow we'll still cherry-pick for the intriguing pieces, God forbid we should be taken in of course, we're too hip for that, and yet there's no final proof that some of it *isn't* true. Pros and cons, and it all degenerates into arguments on the Internet, flaming, trolling, threads that only lead deeper into the labyrinth. (*BE* 197)

A description of our shared modernity itself, this is also a guide for reading Pynchon.[90] Following Groys, let us say that the world (quite distinct from any novelistic or literary world), the world of modernity, is the constitution of those reflexive conditions instituted and refined by the mass media. The matter is clearly more complex than this, but the mass media (and there is little that does not fall within its scope) and the information made available through its labyrinthine and long-reaching mechanisms are the very grounds upon which our epistemological assumptions are articulated and reinforced. So it is no wonder that, like so many of Pynchon's characters, we are able to so easily become lost within the world, find solace in the safety of its cage, or believe that what appears before us as modernity is the irreparable and sole articulation of the world itself. The mass media, the overwhelming quantity of information, and the postulation of conspiracy to explain it all (itself coopted into the other two) are part of the technology—whose essence, Heidegger reminds us, has yet to be properly interrogated—that encases the modern world. It is this kind of technology that encloses modernity and it is this enclosed modernity, reinforced at every turn by its own postulates, that generates what I have been calling the epistemology of modernity.

There are great expanses of junk in Pynchon and a number of questions are scattered across it. What is Pynchon up to in his novels (the vaguest but most essential question for any writer)? What prevents him from becoming a mere reinforcement of that epistemology which has been outlined? Arguing that his novels should be "recognized as important works of political philosophy," Joanna Freer writes that Pynchon is "profoundly concerned with exploring and making vivid the mechanisms and motivations of oppression" and that his "preferred political methodology" for "realizing positive change" is the written word which he uses as a "trigger for thought, fantasy, and debate towards increased understanding and awareness" (1, 163).[91] All else

---

[90] For an equally illustrative interpretive guide, see *The Crying of Lot 49* (61-3), quoted in §1 above.

[91] With respect to actual, authentic, positive change, Freer also places a firm emphasis on the family unit as a site of potential cultivation for just such an amendment to the status quo. Unlike the overarching and ideologically confined perimeters of a whole society, who function—and this is the operative word, since function has little to do with conviction—through a specified set of public codes, a family is a community small enough to establish their own codes of conduct beyond the reach of the social (though the latter will always have something to do with the former) and to generate small scale change, resistance, or actualization of an alternative worldview which, in generations to come, might take root in the larger realm of the social. This argument I find particularly interesting on its own for

aside, Freer understands Pynchon as attempting not only to make readers aware of the problematic position in which they find themselves as a result of living in modernity, but sees him also as seeking a means to alter the contemporary arrangement. Pynchon is, then, a writer who reveals (*à la* Heidegger) what and how the world already is, and he is also a writer who wants readers to make it something else. Richard Pearce puts it another way in *The Novel in Motion*, writing rightly that many (postmodern) critics (and rightly without them) assert that Pynchon is "quite conventional" in that we "focus on the story" (83) in his novels: that is, on plot. It is this monumentally massive plot on which we concentrate, Pearce says: "We are engaged by the plot" and by the "pervasive plotting of characters, organizations, and incalculable forces" so much that Pynchon "develops, or overdevelops, his plots to the point where they become almost unbearable" (83).[92] With the increasing proliferation of information (recall, as mentioned with the encyclopedia, that an attempt to explore and document the information in the world only adds additional information to it) and the mounting appearance of different things to understand, we easily witness that the world, like Pynchon's plots, has become unbearable. And if the world along with reality (mass media, information, technology) has become unbearable then inhabiting the world has become its own problem.

The institutional and ideological conglomeration composed of the mass media and the circulation of information gives rise in both Pynchon's readers and characters to the paranoia that is so frequently a central topic of conversation with respect to the writer's novels. Emily Apter has devised another way to articulate this constellation of factors that create the confines of modernity. She has coined the term *oneworldedness* to "refer to planetary paranoia marked by cyber-surveillance, cartographies of cartels, and webs of international relationality within and outside the nation and on the edge of legality" (70-1), which is doubtlessly evocative of Pynchon (indeed she understands Pynchon as the catalyst and inaugurator of this genre). Oneworldedness remains a "delirious aesthetic of systematicity" wherein all things are revealed to be connected and cooperative and where oppositional differences, recalling the complicity of binary distinctions I have discussed extensively above, coalesce in what Apter aptly refers to as a "bipolar system" that is "assimilated into one template" (72, 88)—for example, communism and capitalism, democracy and terrorism, totalitarianism and religion, cult practices and family values. Reminiscent of postmodernism and globalization and the anatomy of capitalism as an organizing force rather than an exclusively economic one, oneworldedness "imagines the planet

---

what it has to say about the authentic possibility of change. I find it interesting also because the family is typically the focus of political conservative ideology, wherein it (re)enforces the current epistemology. Along with the family, the support of positive violence (violence that leads to positive outcomes—such as the American Revolution, at least from one perspective) is also a point of emphasis for Freer. Placing the two together, she writes: "Pynchon's support for revolutionary suicide links, furthermore, to his increasing interest in the family as a unit of resistance; family members, when compared to friends or strangers, are typically moved to this kind of intense and selfless love which can motivate the willing sacrifice of the one for the other. This kind of love, which is not manipulative, not used as a hustle or as a means of withdrawal, or combined awkwardly with violence, is at the core of Pynchon's countercultural philosophy" (161).

[92] It is through this extensive plotting that Pearce finds Pynchon "evolves a novel of motion rather than of movement—a novel that abrogates direction, that focuses on the field of forces that governs contemporary life" (87). Concluding his discussion on Pynchon's most famous novel, Pearce writes that, apropos of my point here, we "may have also learned that our conventional ways of grasping history are inadequate and false because history cannot be grasped or contained as it moves forward from the known to the unknown. The experience of reading *Gravity's Rainbow* is like riding through modern history without the maps and seatbelts that have given us a false sense of security. And we can begin to feel the leading edges" (101)—and it may be appropriate to play on words with Pynchon's most recent novel and say bleeding edges too.

as subject to 'the system' and wants to disable plans of escape" (78) and in fulfillment of this enclosing of modernity can be understood as a "relatively intractable literary monoculture that travels through the world absorbing difference" (83). While this is certainly at work on the literary level (consider the proliferation of cliché in our bestsellers and popular television shows, where we can anticipate the entirety of a story arch), oneworldness's ability to sever lines of flight and openly absorb and subordinate difference (that is, to homogenize) is at work almost ubiquitously in our world and so should not be confined exclusively to a literary understanding. I bring up oneworldedness because it is useful in understanding what Pynchon reveals to us in his novel worlds, which are replicas of our own (which is not the case for all novels). That is not to say that Pynchon is participating in the oneworlded monoculture (which would make him part of the problem and thus a subject for critique), but rather that he is revealing its architecture to us, making its physiology visible and thus navigable. Apter's considerations of oneworldedness seem to extend into fields we do not readily consider mass media, which does not disqualify them from being such since the technology of its monocultural expansion relies on such intersections, but does situate the mass media as one mechanism among others. Indeed, its opening beyond what we understand (following Groys) as generative of our shared reality (mass media) helps give rise both to its effectiveness and to the aggregation of paranoia and the consideration of conspiracy as a means to map, explain, and understand it. In this way we can understand Pynchon's novels—ever mindful of their erudite scope—as works that can help us move beyond the border of fiction and into analysis of and action in reality.[93]

Ever inclusive and welcoming of its opposition as modernity is,[94] the prospect of action—or of praxis—becomes subject to its inclusive grasp. If being aware is not nearly enough, what does the actionable imperative of Pynchon's work encourage us to do? As Apter says, paranoia—this sensation so dismissible by normativity—"underwrites a one-worldist paradigm that differs from transnational or global ascriptions of world-systems theory in its full realization of the psychotic dimension of planetarity" (77). The blanket of paranoia does much to mitigate the consequences of this psychosis. That is to say, does the psychotic dimension rest in the readers who recognize modernity as such or in the system itself? Is it, in brief, the reader—the serious reader of Pynchon rather than the casual one—who is or becomes psychotic in the process of reading (becoming the conspiracy theorist, the paranoid revolutionary, the disquieted and dread-infused academic) or the difficult-to-recognize parameters of the epistemology of modernity that are psychotic? Indeed, reading Pynchon extensively and deeply is enough to make one "psychotic" in a serious way, but what does this mean? If it is the readers who are rendered psychotic, then the crux of the matter is recursive: it is interesting how being psychotic for reading something so critical of the conditions that permit you to become psychotic is regarded as, in this modernity, a feature worthy of marginalization and thus limited legitimate participation and subjected to its exclusionary power. Silenced in this way, these psychopaths—whoever they are and wherever they lurk—are prescribed like so many other marginalian subjects into a zone of illegitimacy and cannot issue feedback into the self-reinforcing system of modernity. If on the other more likely hand the system itself—the oneworldedness, globalization,

---

[93] In this sense Pynchon becomes praxis or outlines a field guide or, as he might appreciate, a cookbook for praxis.
[94] Writing of the commonalities between resistance movements in "The Subject and Power," Foucault identifies the local focus as one problem with such anti-authoritarian struggles that "look not for the 'chief enemy' but for the immediate enemy" (330) because "power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not a supplementary structure over and above 'society' whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of" (343). See also his "Governmentality" in the same collection for a parallel discussion of the family as a unit of resistance similar to the themes that run through *Vineland*.

modernity, and so forth—represents what is psychotic and paranoid-inspiring, then the problem is more fundamental than the decontextualized individual. As David Dickson puts it, Pynchon's work "signal[s] a rather more complex effort to find ways of representing the need to be at home in the world as combined with the experience of knowledge as something impossible" (200). Whatever defines that way to be at home in the world remains central in Pynchon's novels. Recognizing as psychotic the very premises of the world in which one lives is the evidentiary indicator that the world is something to be escaped from. Pynchon both identifies why (the epistemology of modernity) and provides strategies for doing so that will appear impossible or improbable (indeed psychotic) within the framework of modernity. And yet this is no reason to limit the reaches of thought.

I have identified throughout this project the need to become something other than what is in the world—which is to say, something other than the prescriptions of the mass media (Groys's reality), the circulating and circular ideological and informational network surrounding the contemporary, globalized world, in short: the epistemology of modernity. I have identified also the problem of thinking beyond these boundaries and the invitation it seems to issue to the bizarre, outlandish, and, indeed, insane (im)possibilities that might or must accompany these transformative considerations. Becoming other, then, will not be as easily comprehensible, and its full-scale articulation will not be as immediate (or immediately acceptable) as the examples that find themselves interpreted by the discourse of modernity. Pynchon's characters and readers might in this way become Ahabs "trying to find a secret order that looms somewhere beyond the visible world" (Raudaskoski 129), or we may witness in *Gravity's Rainbow,* for instance, men and material being transformed into missile—becoming missile—or being transformed out of what they are via missile. In the latter half of *The Crying of Lot 49* Oedipa's disk-jockey husband Mucho Maas undergoes a similar transformation in which the boundaries of the self dissolve to recognize the choir or community of interconnected human egos, a transformation propelled by music and LSD. Said to be "losing his identity" and having become a "walking assembly of man," Mucho reveals to Oedipa that he can now perform flawless spectrum analysis in his head and can "break down chords, and timbers, and words too into all the basic frequencies and harmonies, with all their different loudness, and listen to them, each pure tone, but all at once" (115-6). This leads him to the understanding that "everybody who says the same words is the same person if the spectra are the same only they happened differently in time" and with this heightened, widened perception informs Oedipa that "you're an antenna, sending your pattern out across a million lives a night, and they're your lives too" (116-8). This is not unreminiscent of Nabokov's ekphrastic aesthetic discussed above and especially located in the examples from *Pnin* in which the titular character nearly experiences the disillusion of the ego boundaries.[95] That is to say, Mucho's transformation is one in which the individuality which holds together the turbulent social dynamic of our collective arrangements is abolished for an alternative portrait of what the human community resembles. Interestingly and as we might anticipate, Oedpia herself is less interested and more dismissive about the dangers of Mucho's newfound lifeworld. More importantly, this reluctance—that is to say, her unwillingness to see beyond her own epistemological entrapment—to legitimate Mucho's claims are instructive in light of the unambiguous failure of her own quest. So, to say it again, it will be hard to recognize, legitimate,

---

[95] See my discussion of Nabokov's *Pnin* in Part II above: "Unless a film of the flesh envelops us, we die. Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is a space-traveler's helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego" (*Pnin* 20).

and understand what these transformative occurrences are in the light of modernity's social, legal, and moral confines: which is to say ultimately, modernity's normative modes of comprehension.

As an aid to our understanding of the epistemological strategies presented in Pynchon and the transformations they are capable of effecting, we might turn to Kafka and name him as one of Pynchon's colleagues. Kafka's worlds, like Pynchon's, are replicas of our own even though they are not typically recognized as such (being, as they are, consigned to realms so fantastically alien that they have achieved their own name—the Kafkaesque). The comparison with Kafka remains useful—not just in that both writers are chroniclers of the machinery of modernity in all of its articulations—because the strategies they adopt and the movements they make are similar, and similarly destabilizing on the epistemological level.

A brief mention of the core components of some of Kafka's stories should serve to enunciate connections between these writers. Kafka's tales are filled with movements toward otherness, toward transformations into something else. The most readily deployable example, of course, is *The Metamorphosis* wherein Gregor becomes other and is afforded the opportunity to advance toward a different understanding of the world in his transformation into a beetle.[96] Gregor's transformation is a failure, of course, because he continues to understand himself as the modernity-interpellated human being he has always been and so persists in wanting to be human, to work like a slave at the firm, and to endure and surmount the unreasonable and exploitive pressure of his family (themselves the results of the same set of assumptions). In "A Report to an Academy" we witness an ape imprisoned by a zoological expedition transform himself by means of imitation into a more humanoid creature, able to drink whisky, smoke a pipe, and speak sophisticatedly in front of vaudeville-like crowds for both the fascination and amusement of humans. The ape does not transform into a human—indeed, he repeatedly reports that "I was not attracted to the idea of imitating men: I imitated because I was looking for a way out" (82)—so much as he transforms out of apedom, toward or into something else which is that of becoming other: "I had no way out," he says, "so I stopped being an ape" (79). Finally, in the posthumously published "The Bridge," a story spanning only about a page, a bridge narrates its own collapse. This is unremarkable and even childish on the surface level, but considered in the context of Kafka's larger project the story is perhaps among the most pertinent explorations in search of *a way* for which Kafka is constantly in pursuit. It is only by recognizing that the bridge, the narrator of the story, must articulate itself in purely human language that readers are offered a way, a means of transformation, into a world that is completely other (the lifeworld of a bridge, considered by human beings to be inanimate, unintelligible, wholly lifeless, and bereft of both language and experience). That is to say, in entering our own epistemology and departing from its own the bridge can make itself, and its utter otherness, comprehensible in human language. Much like Pynchon, Kafka draws us toward a different understanding of the relationships of the world (if only we will take them seriously) at the same time he points us—because his stories and transformers frequently fail—toward the impossibility of doing so while holding fast to the assumptions of modernity. Drawing attention to the oppressive mechanism of modernity and out

---

[96] In his lectures on literature, Nabokov takes several pages to close-read Kafka's text in order to determine, in his endless thirst of detail, specificity, and accuracy, that Gregor is, rather than a cockroach or a dung beetle, "merely a big beetle"—adding that that Gregor never discovers his wings beneath his hard back which Nabokov says is a "very nice observation on my part to be treasured all your lives. Some Gregors, some Joes and Janes, do not know they have wings" (*LL* 258-60).

of the fantastical world—and here I do not mean the world or genre of fantasy—Pynchon more directly brings out the strange workings of a world that he and Kafka share.

Hailing him as a "prophet of the future world" (41), Deleuze and Guattari open their study of Kafka by claiming that interpretation itself and those who seek to interpret his work are the grand enemies of his project (3). We can see with little effort how this is also true for Pynchon (see §1 above), whose critics' efforts to settle—once and for all or not—the meaning of his work, rather than to follow the rich pathways he lays down, succeed more in suspending his effect and neutralizing his significance (then we just can ready the encyclopedia entry about him and avoid the hundreds of hours it would take to read his novels seriously). Drawing from his own diaries where he says as much in his own words, Deleuze and Guattri also find that Kafka "deliberately kills all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification" and claim that "metamorphosis is the contrary of metaphor" (22) since the former involves the ontological motion toward otherness while the latter entails a mere referential deferral that draws attention away from the thing itself under discussion. Again, this is also true of Pynchon so that his work especially does not engage in a playful what-if game like Dick's *Man on High Castle* but addresses itself to immediate and direct conditions of modernity.[97] Interpretation—by which we mean a particular set of legitimated reading practices and assumptions exercised publicly and academically across modernity[98]—remains the enemy because it seeks to situate what is ontological into a prefabricated and preordained framework. Frequently interpretation reveals these stories to be failures (and we can think of Oedipa's failure as well as Gregor's) and so Deleuze and Guattri can write that "each failure is a masterpiece" (39). To put it another way, these stories are failures because the interpretive frameworks are unable to recognize them properly with their own tools. These stories are failures because they do not fit into the epistemology. There they appear alien, foreign, and other. Their interpretation as failure emphasizes their epistemology as different, a difference ours cannot comprehend, and this is why we need them.

Before closing, I would like to illustrate my point here with one final example from Pynchon's first novel, *V.* As I have already mentioned, Benny Profane's employment with the Alligator Patrol represents an opportunity to turn away from the menacing inanimate world and recover something of the organic world through sewer stories set beneath the surface of the city. Aboveground, Profane is un-autonomously tossed about as though caught in a machine, frequently described as a kind of human yo-yo, an "amobealike boy" engaged, for instance, in repetitive, circular cycles "shuttling on the subway back and forth underneath Forty-second Street, from Time Square to Grand Central Station and vice versa" (*V.* 31). References to inanimacy and intimacy with inanimate objects is prolific throughout the novel. It is in the sewers that Profane temporarily recovers—for the reader at least—something of the sacred and mythological. It is Father Fairing's parish that is invested with life and meaning despite the comic nature of its background. In the midst of the Great Depression, Pynchon writes, in an "hour of apocalyptic well-being," Father Fairing "decided that the rats were going to take over after New York died," and thus "thought it best for the rats to be given a head start—which meant conversion to the Roman Church" (*V.* 122). To "eliminate the trouble of individual

---

[97] I am not attempting to dismiss any kind of what-if genre of the imagination, and would still argue that these kinds of works are the world themselves and that with a strong enough interpretation (with enough interpretive power) we can realize that whatever historical intervention the creative artist has made can be viewed, in fact, as the world itself (works as diverse as *The Hunger Games*, *The Handmaiden's Tale*, *The Giver*, *Fahrenheit 145*, *1984*, and so forth are potential examples).

[98] See the opening chapter of Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*.

baptisms," Father Fairing placed an eternal blessing on the sewer waters, and in exchange for the rats' "spiritual nourishment," consumed three a day for "physical sustenance" (123). Recorded in his journals are the difficulties of learning to communicate with rats, how delicious their livers are, how some failed to distinguish between the nature of indulgences and Marxist Communism, and his alleged relationship with a female rat, the "voluptuous Magdalen" (122-6). Father Fairing's journal, we are told, is "preserved in an inaccessible region of the Vatican library" as well as "in the minds of the few old timers in the New York Sewer Department who got to see it when it was discovered" (125).

While perhaps ridiculous in its literal content, the story of Father Fairing's parish is imbued with a number of features that uphold the sanctity of spiritual existence. The images surrounding the story compose the very fabric of religious traditions that have sought to extend transcendent well-being to individuals. An underground bastion of hope situated beneath the doomed city, mysterious religious manuscripts, anthropomorphic interactions (including sodomy with a rat)—all of these images and more erect a reverence around the underground parish, emphasized by the possession of valuable, esoteric knowledge that can be passed along: Father Fairing's religious knowledge, his ability to provide spiritual salvation for the rats that are to inherit the earth (the trope of the chosen people); but also, most importantly for Profane, the existence of the story itself in the minds of the old timers in the Sewer Department and its propagation to new generations of the Alligator Patrol. What it means for Profane in a wider sense is a more difficult question to answer. While some speculated that the rats were "studying the best way to leave a sinking ship" (an idea that has its own statements about the future of religion), Pynchon writes that no one to whom the story was passed over the past two decades questioned Father Fairing's sanity: "It is the way with sewer stories. They just are. Truth or falsity don't apply" (125). In other words, it is the novelty of the knowledge, the cultural significance it has to the community possessing it that is important—the reverence it signifies through a combination of signs that create a shared spirituality. That which the pursuit of empirical truth would seek to dismantle, separating into its constituent parts the verifiability and likelihood of potential events and subjecting it to a cold, distant examination.

Profane encounters the physical space of Father Fairing's parish itself while chasing down a particularly elusive alligator that drags him all the way across town. The alligator corners itself in the parish, and the story of Father Fairing is told as Profane prepares to kill his prey. As he moves through "twistings intricate as any early Christian catacomb," Profane tires and also contemplates the highly-charged subterranean world around him and what he is down there:

> And to hell with this alligator and this hunt, here between chalkwritten walls of legend. It was no place to kill. He felt the eyes of ghost-rats, kept his own eyes ahead for fear he might see the 36-inch pipe that was Father Fairing's sepulcher, tried to keep his ears closed to the sub-threshold squeakings of Veronica, the priest's old love. (127)

The space, its past history and continuing story, is invested with an air of the sacred, a geographical location representative of holy ground where certain acts are unspeakable. Profane fears coming too close to the actual remnants of Father Fairing, imagining the continuing presence of the past and attributing the area with organic meaning. All of his senses are assailed by the possibility of encountering the revered past, and Profane is afraid to behold the real too closely.

Despite this period of reverence and his own reasoning, Profane fails to fully embrace either, firing his shotgun and executing the alligator on holy ground. He soon after returns to the world aboveground, to the mechanical, inanimate world that he sought to escape by joining the Alligator Patrol. We witness, then, Profane's failure to undergo a change in his understanding of the world, and it is Father Fairing who has undergone the shift in epistemology in order to shuffle off the modern relationships that bind him to the world in favor of a different arrangement.

Although I have said that many enunciations of the kinds of shifts in epistemology that I am attempting to articulate will appear incomprehensible, strange, and even frightening (Father Faring's subterranean parish being an acute example that fits all of these descriptors), perhaps it will be helpful here to mention some practical examples whose initial thrust can be drawn out in their implications on a larger scale.

Writing in 2008 about the challenges faced by the museum—declining attendance, lack of interest and boring exhibits, unarticulated relevance, competition from theme parks, video games, and shopping centers, the denigration of lifelong learning as a leisure pursuit, all of which are plunging the history museum along its "nosedive to oblivion" (8)—Cary Carson outlines a different vision for the future of the museum in the modern world. For starters, Carson says, the history museum (and this is true for the museum in general) must "embrace the reality that storytelling is the powerful medium in which modern learning takes place" (19). This is also, of course, true of the novel, but more importantly here Carson writes that museumgoers increasingly "expect to become personally acquainted with the historical figures they meet there, sharing their joys and sorrows, and in effect join in the action of the story being told" (18). This latter claim deserves particular emphasis, since it supposes a transformation from the passive observer to the historical participant that we all are but only on small, scarcely recognizable scales. With the advent of television, Carson emphasizes, we are transformed from "vicarious learners, many times removed from events, into virtual eyewitnesses" who are brought into direct contact with events as they unfold (20). This proliferation of media and its impact on daily life—evident in *Vineland*, obvious today, and taken to greater lengths in *Bleeding Edge*—demands that we become "equal partners in our own education" since it becomes now a preference of programming that will attract viewers (Carson 21). This is why Carson writes that the "consortiums I have in mind would support the creation of a sprawling, long-running, historical television or Internet drama" that aggregates the "same public, private, and commercial partners that fund them now" so that the power and production value of the museum, to say nothing of the attractors and advertising marketed to gather participants, can compete with the entertainment industry whose motives are quite different but whose product is significantly more far-reaching (24, 26). One result is that what we consider entertainment becomes indistinct with what we consider education, or moves in that direction.[99] Another is that the museum becomes relevant to a wider public and overcomes the discourse of boring lifelessness with which is it associated.

With its technologically induced virtual worlds, *Bleeding Edge* is already working through this idea of enriching life or discovering alternative ways of experiencing it. If Plan B for the museum involves bringing people into the relevant scope of history and of generating a

[99] Though by no means unique in this regard, the History Channel, which used to consistently run documentary-style programming, has increasingly moved to the production of more story-driven shows reminiscent of television drama (the drama of Vikings and other more contemporary forms of reality television) in what appears an attempt to pursue the Plan B that Carson has theorized.

story-world for it that is publicly comprehensible and allows the wider public to participate, then we are perhaps looking at nothing less than actively involving the public in the production and participation in history itself. What if the narratives of our historical, cultural, and social histories were strongly coupled with the leisure outlets and narrative machines that we consume on a daily basis? I think this is the question Carson is posing. We know clearly that films and video games are extremely captivating, and that the culture industry has a vested interest in maintaining that spell. We know also that in such supposed fictional spaces any kind of storyline is possible. So, to simplify Carson, why not flood the market with historical videogames and films and virtual realities whose engagement is an experience in education as well as entertainment? This poses countless problems of legitimation and threats to critical rigor, lest entertainment be married to academics. But the point is more expansive: if people want to join and participate in the stories of history, as Carson says, is there a more effective way to achieve this than the disillusion of binary separations—history (museum) and non-history (entertainment, day-to-day life in modernity)—which I am claiming is the central epistemological strategy running through Pynchon's work? DeepArcher offers a space in which the world, virtually generated (but, again, how authentically is this distinct from the world we currently inhabit?), can place any living individual in contact with any other, real, historical, deceased, or otherwise, so that with enough programming, research, and rigor individuals, like museumgoers today, can actually experience—and I mean in a serious way—all the events of history, acquaint themselves with historical figures, and have all manner of experiences they do not have immediate access to, all possible articulations of all possible worlds. In a period in which people are encouraged to understand themselves as expendable and replaceable, taking into account the anonymous swath of history and industry, such a museum expanded to its most distant implications might offer a means by which the modern epistemology can be shifted and a different set of meanings, implications, and relationships to the world can be allowed to take hold. I think to some extent the digital humanities is already thinking in this direction, where the desire to offer open access information is also mixed with the generation of exhibits and experiential learning that resembles virtual reality, videogames, and the mass media. It will be a matter of how we are going to inhabit these realities, and for what larger purposes.

Another practical example of epistemological alteration—and here I will be as brief and as general as possible—arrives with the consideration of evolutionary biology and the history of *Homo sapiens*. From single-cellular life-forms to eukaryotic organisms, from the water to the land, we know that what would become the human being assumed forms alien to our understanding of such today. We know, in short, on a biological level that we became and came from something other than what we are today. It is possible, probable, and indeed inevitable that we will become something else over grand swaths of time, something different, something other, and there is no reason to think similar things cannot happen on the scale of our perceptions and on the conceptual level. I am not, of course, trying to say that we should evolve ourselves to a more enlightened state in a biologically accelerated fashion or anything of this nature. I am merely pointing out that we can see and clearly admit that we have been a species of becoming, an ontological entity, so that there is no reason why we cannot recognize this on a conceptual level and subsequently reconsider the parameter of our modernity as being susceptible to authentically large-scale change in the way we understand and organize our relationships to the world and to one another.

As I have repeatedly emphasized, my argument is that Pynchon's texts provide strategies for epistemological shifts in that his novels stage the problems associated with achieving such an

understanding and thus showcase the restrictive parameters of a modernity that seeks to prevent such changes in thinking. That is to say, Pynchon, as the chronicler of our contemporary cartography, issues a commentary on modernity and exposes its mechanism such that his characters and readers can comprehend our conceptual restrains. Another important implication of his writing is the capacity for connection that he creates in his readers. Aside from being a roadmap for greater comprehension, the connective potentials in Pynchon are often shadowed by the ambiguousness of their authenticity—which is to say, the question of whether or not they are character-generated (paranoia) or actually present in the world (conspiracy). As Debra A. Moddlemog puts it, Pynchon's use of myth and history (and I would add almost any other conceivable category) functions to "involve his readers in the creative process of producing the text" (300). This is both instructive and liberating for considering the epistemology of modernity because it implies that the world—in the cognitive manner that Gerald Edelman has pronounced—is created by those of us who read it in one way or another: that is, all of us. To accept the epistemology that precedes us in modernity wholesale as we inherit it is not to create or produce the world but to be produced by it. We require new foundations for this creation, and new insights and strategies for doing that which the literary offers, because not to do so is to accept and continuously reinforce what has led us to modernity and all of its problems in the first place: and so, we need to find ways to think differently on the level of epistemology.

PART IV: MORRISON AND THE ETHICAL IMPERATIVE FOR UNDERSTANDING

"The truth about the world, he said, is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a mudded field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning."

-Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* (256)

"The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by any latitude in its conception to repeat what exists in one part in any other part. Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others."

-Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* (256)

"In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships."

-Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* (285-6)

"Ethics are simplified when we throw 'radical evil' onto the side of the 'Absolute Other.' The aesthetic of the *unimaginable* is a trivial 'negative aesthetic'—born of the sublime as reinterpreted by Lyotard—in the sense that it characterizes radical evil by everything that it is not; in doing so, this aesthetic sets evil at a distance from us and legitimizes itself through this distancing, through this very abstraction."

-Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images In Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (154-5)

§1: Touched But Not Moved: Morrison's Ethical Aesthetic

Taking up a reflective self-criticism twenty-three years after the publication of her first novel, Toni Morrison writes in the foreword to *The Bluest Eye* that "it didn't work," that "many readers remained touched but not moved" (*BE* xii). The problems she diagnoses with the novel are several and include issues of how to hold the "despising glance while sabotaging it" and how to "shape a silence while breaking it" in a language already rife with inherent and hegemonic ideology (*BE* xii-xii). Another problem remains the anti-linear structural organization of the novel, which leads "readers into the comfort of pitying [Pecola Breedlove] rather than into an interrogation of themselves for [her] smashing," her "psychological murder" (*BE* x, xii). Yet another might be that in "trying to dramatize the devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause, [Morrison] chose a unique situation, not a representative one" (*BE* xi). Morrison does not directly cite this as one of the novel's problems, nor would I understand it as an issue emanating from the authorial side of the novel. Rather, the unique situation Morrison selects permit readers to relegate her novels into the pure realm of fiction or, because of its uncommonness, to treat it as dismissible entertainment or to laud it as something capable of evoking intense sentimentality. Indeed, the issues Morrison identifies as problems for her first novel are those of language, perspective, and the fulfillment of its purpose. The purpose is transparent enough and has been the consistent topic of critical discussion: to piercingly describe not the "resistance to the contempt of others, ways to deflect it, but the far more tragic and disabling consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate, as self-evident" by addressing the question of how to "enter the life of the one least likely to withstand such damaging forces because of youth, gender, and race" (*BE* ix-x). More difficult yet is that in describing the social, psychological, and existential deterioration and destruction of Pecola Breedlove, Morrison "did not want to dehumanize the characters who trashed [her] and contributed to her collapse" (*BE* xii) because, in the final analysis, this *is* the reader and to do so would dull this poignant message which is quite centrally the chief problem of modernity. As I have said, these issues—the problems, purposes, and effects of the novel and its central message concerning the internalization of self-hatred and the external ideological damage of standards of beauty—have been subject to intense and extensive examination. Rather than rehashing this analysis, I want to focus here on the capability of the novel from, on the potential and potency of art, and to ask what it means to be touched and what it means to be moved by a work of art and by a thing in the world.

We might take as an example the opening of Morrison's *Jazz*, where Violet Trace approaches the coffin of her husband's murdered lover (murdered by her husband) during the funeral to "see the girl and cut her dead face" (*J* 3). By its outward semblance Violet appears to be moved and her actions appear to be monstrous. The former remains true after the inward analysis as well while the latter action might become more comprehensible, but it seems certain that Violet is not merely touched by the infidelity of her husband but *moved* into action. Again, the efficacy of the action itself is not relevant for our purposes here, but it presents us with the initial thesis that to be moved to a form of radical action that is more than normal and greater than normativity would call for—since it is against normative and its pacifying effects that Morrison has directed her imagination. This remains what constitutes in a general sense what it means to be moved. Another more common example might come in the form of organized protests, where crowds assemble, touched by some common cause, and move through the public world enunciating their message. A protest certainly involves physical movement, but at the end of the day most protesters return to the comforts of their lives and homes, to the normal living of

normal life, so that protest (and this is not true in all cases, but I advance the claim that it is in many) becomes an ineffective form of advancing change because it takes place in a prescribed and permitted space? Does a protest or a march constitute a group touched or moved by some underlying life issue? To move into the different deployment of civil disobedience, must something be a radical movement or be accompanied by a form of violence in order to be deemed a movement? On the other hand—and this begins to hammer out the importance of the distinction—is the term *touched* merely a weak form of subterfuge for the unmoved? To what extent does the claim that one is *touched* by a work of art the very condition which allows that work, regardless of its ethical, political, or historical implications, to direct itself, unaddressed, to a place where it can be readily dismissed in its significance and alleviate the burdens of having to address it in the first place? Is this a bourgeois position that has become endemic to our culture? In what ways is this accomplished by a systematic and ideological arrangement that produces the illusion (in claiming that one was touched by this or that) of movement or progress or importance at the same time that it evacuates it and brushes it aside into greater ignorance and obscurity?

I want to argue in what follows that to be moved, in the context of this study, is an issue of reading and of the reader. This is true specifically for Morrison and also in the wider sense with respect to our ingrained reading practices. It also involves our susceptibility to the other, which we will arrive at soon. In any case, to be moved must involve an event that reaches outside or beyond normativity or which pierces through and punctures it. *Touched*, as you will have already guessed, probably has to precede *moved*. Touched can refer to mental retardation or be associated with a divine gift, and for our purposes we can safely say that many things are touching, or that there are many things that touch. Bad films and motivational speeches can be touching even to the most discerning audience, and they often register somewhere between complete cliché and well-meaning but ineffectual message because at their confused and convoluted core they contain the kernels of that which *could* move us. This unlisted host of ubiquitous and ephemeral examples, these poor artistic artifacts, can only touch (and frequently do less) because their strong potential is neutralized by our hegemonic reading practices, by the myopic epistemology of modernity, and by a system that has convinced us it is so large that we cannot do anything about it, and so we remain reservedly touched rather than aggressively moved. One can point to all of Pynchon's work as an attempt to deal with these massive neutralizing forces, chief among them the corporation and the administrative bureaucracy that has long ago infiltrated our ideological infrastructure. Touched can so easily slip into the bourgeois, the common, the stereotypical, and the clichéd with which our world is so thickly saturated.[100] These are forces few have the strength to endure, and we look to our artists to show us a way.

In other words, to be moved by something such as a novel is an issue of cultivating a susceptibility to a practice of reading that is at once more intensive and more reflective than our prevailing practices permit. Indeed, this susceptibility to being moved will prove to be wider than the mere activity of reading and aesthetics, and will extend into ethics, into ideology, and into issues pertaining to the self and the other and the relation of the self to the other in whatever form that other might take. To help situate this notion of movement—that is, of being

---

[100] None of this is meant to be entirely dismissive of all things that we might say have touched us, artistic or otherwise. Rather, my claim here is that it is not enough to be touched and, further, that being touched can function as a kind or trap or pathway to complacency (an illusion that creates the semblance of meaningful and authentic movement). Aesthetics may be only one way to reason about this distinction, but the distinction remains an important one to define.

moved[101]—I will first excavate its absence in three of the early reviewers of *The Bluest Eye* who, as Morrison says, remain merely touched (if that) before going on to discuss Morrison's narrative project with respect to practices of reading, to the doctrine of understanding, and the imperative of becoming other so pronounced in Morrison's craft.

With a brief examination of three early reviews of *The Bluest Eye*, we can clearly see the means by which traditional practices of reading—to say nothing of the weighty and prefabricated form of the book review genre—keep at bay the possibility of a radical form of reading that can reach beyond the standard expectations and generic interpretive confines that typically accompany fiction reading. Here, of course, I refer to its dismissible status as entertainment, its diminished capacity that in being labeled fiction separates its resonance in "reality," and widely ignored significance in the public sphere where its declarations and diagnoses are squelched. For our particular case, this is additionally compounded first because *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's inaugural novel and could not be read in the context of her future work (which we now have the luxury of allowing, re-contextualizing her narrative project as a whole); second by Morrison's position as an African American author, which places her in a position in which she will be asked to answer different questions and address different issues than her white contemporaries;[102] and third because Morrison's own efforts at self-criticism are informed by or can be read as direct responses to some of the material in these early reviews (the three below as well as others).[103]

Writing for the *New York Times Book Review* in November of 1970, Haskel Frankel says that Morrison has become "lost in her construction" and after lauding the novel's enunciation of the tragic consequences of racial prejudice—itself a too common, too hollowed statement—goes on to assert that the central scene "occurs late in the novel—far too late to achieve the impact it might have had in a different construction" (3). This criticism is crowned by a variety of other minor complaints: that the other girls who live alongside Pecola are mere distractions, that Pecola's breakdown, even though readers experience it directly as it unfolds over the entirety of the novel, has "only the impact of reportage" (3), that the book is not boring, and finally, in a kind of shimmering platitude and shining patronization, Frankel concludes with the statement that there are plenty of writers who depict the ugliness of the world but that a writer like Morrison who can do it with beauty and hope is a "writer to seek out and to encourage" (4). With a desire for more conventional restructuring of the novel and the accusation that its characters are, barring the central victim, unnecessary distractions, Frankel fails to register Morrison's

---

[101] The movement I mean—that of *being moved*—should be distinguished with modernity's obsession with movement and from its embodiment in the physiology of capitalism (consider reproduction, incorporation, innovation, and so forth). Movement in the sense that I mean might be considered as that which causes one to rise up and resist normativity and to strive to extend beyond it in an authentic fashion. A reading of Calvin Bedient's *The Yeats Brothers and Modernism's Love of Motion* (2009) might help to address this distinction.

[102] Michael Bérubé writes the following: "No one to my knowledge has ever asked that Pynchon speak for white Americans, or for New York suburbanites, or for descendants from the Puritans; Anglo-American writers are not commonly asked to shoulder the representation of Anglo-Americans in toto… If authorization—and, fiction, canonization—is accordingly a different affair for writers of different races, it is precisely because American writers of different races have historically been assigned radically different author functions" (61).

[103] The result of this is the lobby where, as Morrison writes in the foreword to *Sula*, the reader could be "situated before being introduced to the goings-on of the characters" (xv). Such a provision, imposed in some sense by the reactions to *The Bluest Eye*, seems to Morrison a mistake (it is the only of her novels to have this feature) because it represent a semi-resignation to hegemony in order to achieve greater audience rather than ask them to step outside their own world and into that of an other—and so issues of strong literacy and public access arise as major problems for the kind of intensified reading I am trying to make consideration of here.

representations of whole lives (which will be discussed at length as her central strategy for epistemological shifting in §2 below). It should be clear here that the reviewer—as I have mentioned with Bérubé—is asking for something else, something other than the novel he has. What is wanted here is a more conventional, an easier, a less work-intensive and effort-derived kind of writing to be comfortably and uncritically archived into the neatly fitting places that genre classification and conventionality have dictated.

Writing for *The New Yorker* a few months later, L. E. Sissman rightly emphasizes that *The Bluest Eye* is different in that it is a novel "dealing with people to whom no ultimate glory is possible" (4) which already asserts the novel form as being reserved for a particular population of subjects. Sissman goes on to miss the moving implications of the novel, most painfully deeming the "bland white words of a conventional" Dick and Jane primer that precedes and in fact founds the novel's context—and whose deliberate presence represents a direct enunciation of Morrison's epistemological intervention—as "surely an unnecessary and unsubtle irony" (5). Finally, after remarking on a number of surface flaws (which even the reviewer recognizes do not matter) Sissman concludes with a compliment of Morrison's achievement: to "write truly (and sometimes very beautifully) of every generation of blacks—the young, their parents, their rural grandparents—in this county thirty years ago, and, I'm afraid, today" (5). The assessment is tidy and too terse to achieve any kind of critical comprehension either of the novel's implications or the complicity with which the patronizing racial elements are celebrated at the same time they are dismissed.

Ruby Dee concludes on a note consistent with these previous two reviews. She writes that the novel and the world it reveals to us pushes readers to "think of remedies past and remedies in progress to apply somehow while the thrashing heart still beats" and so we "must think faster and work harder and hope that maybe a new breed of people, tight with God, in some dark privacy, has a plan ready to set it all—alright" (20). So frequent in the public and academic press, such calls for more ethics and more attention directed at issues seem to be an end in themselves. Here, we have both the assertion of a need and the pawning off of the responsibility to obtain it onto some indeterminate other. In short, we remain safely capable of closing the book and going about our lives unaltered.[104]

As these three reviews testify, the reception of the novel has been too bland for its exceptional power (and I am certain that these *are* representative examples that remain so to the present, despite the great deal of wonderfully erudite critical interpretations of *The Bluest Eye*). This perhaps testifies more to an established set of reading practices than any kind of mass ignorance. With these reviews, then, all readers are touched but I am not certain that any of them are moved.

The novel itself may have been an obstacle to this achievement, in terms of the resoundingly difficult task Morrison has set for herself[105] and more prominently in *how* it will be read. This is a task equally up to the reader as it is to the writer, and perhaps even more important for the former (since I have not yet, and may not, arrive at a communicable definition of what it means to be moved, we may bracket it as a kind of horizon toward which we readers must aspire

---

[104] In *Writing Prejudices*, Robert Samuels attempts to fuse critical reading and critical pedagogy for a more pregnant solution in arguing for a "form of literary criticism that is no longer content with finding examples of prejudice in cultural texts but rather seeks to explore ways to undermine diverse modes of oppression" (135).

[105] As Morrison writes in the foreword to *The Bluest Eye*: "Thinking back now on the problems expressive language presented to me, I am amazed by their currency, their tenacity. Hearing 'civilized' languages debase humans, watching cultural exorcisms debase literature, seeing oneself preserved in the amber of disqualifying metaphors—I can say that my narrative project is as difficult today as it was then" (xiii).

and also to emphasize this movement as residing within the interpretive power of a particular kind of reading that searches out the latent power literature reserves for epistemology).

Scholars often comment that Morrison's work, despite its obvious grounding in an African American context, remains accessible and widely renowned among both popular and critical audiences and as a result is frequently deemed universal. Despite this, Morrison herself finds the term hopelessly evacuated of any significant meaning (Smith 2). This is much like Nabokov's own discussion of commonsense, where all things collected under that seemingly positive banner are impoverished of their vibrancy and cheapened by the corroding touch of the common.[106] We equally might catalogue something classified as universal or common reading as an easy kind of reading whose implications do not resonate significantly because they are not there in the first place and whose damaging effect is to instill the conviction that everything—including the work of great and transformative artists (working on the level of what Nabokov might call the super high level of art)—can be reductively and uncritically read in this way. Universal reading is to pick up a novel and expect what of it? That it will be not just generic—that is, already read, pre-interpreted, and thus impotent—but wholly so. At this point I would simply forward the thesis, without embarking on an extensive defense of it, that Morrison's novels are not universal because they are not widely accessible in terms of their comprehensibility and in terms of the world they depict. This is why this art often touches people, but which is also why it must move people, because the strange and difficult world described therein (and this very strangeness and incomprehensibleness remains the reason for its popular and critical attention, its "universal" component), is, in the last analysis, the world itself. A universal reader is a passive and inattentive reader.[107] It is not difficult to see that the role of the reader for Morrison—and of course for any worthwhile artist—must be an active role and that in order for her fiction to be effective and accomplish the project she has set out for herself, readers must be willing to re-read her work (see Smith 2-5). In this kind of non-common, un-universal practice of reading, I am trying to say, we are urged to become a different kind of reader in order to be touched rather than merely moved: we must become susceptible to this movement.

One way to diagnose the reasons that this proposition—being a non-universal reader, being a non-common reader, being, as Nabokov might say, an artist-reader, or, in Morrison's terms, a hungry reader[108]—one of the reasons that this proposition of becoming susceptible to being moved by the work of art remains a difficult one to achieve is to contextualize our reading practices within the epistemology of modernity. Morrison, after all, said of her first novel that "it didn't work" (*BE* xii). Being a novel crafted in a specific historical period of economic and ideological circulation (to say nothing of the expectations that already accompany the work of an African American writer), *The Bluest Eye* is already informed by a kind of reading or an established reading practice, well rooted, that precedes it and threatens to result not only in a reduced comprehension of the most fundamental aspects of the novel itself but also a smoothly

---

[106] See Nabokov's "Art of Literature and Commonsense" in his *Lectures on Literature* (372).

[107] In the foreword to *The Bluest Eye*, as I have mentioned, Morrison says she "chose a unique situation, not a representative one" (xi) since, she implies, a universal one would be to diminish, and even to invite the very problematic stereotypical readings of African Americans, and thus to reinforce them (which is already a major issue for Morrison).

[108] In a discussion of Gayle Jones' *Corregidora*, Morrison touches on the rare rapture of reading: "Seldom have I been sucked into a piece of writing that stirs responses in me other than critical approval. In other words, a reading experience that creates delights, that strips away editorial expertise and goes straight to the jugular. Something that reduces me to a hungry reader and not a professional one" (*WMM* 109).

engineered dismissal of the most poignant epistemological interruptions it is intended to induce. To be perfectly clear, in other words: I am claiming that our reading practices predispose even the most effective—even the most moving—articulations of art to being reduced or interpreted at a level unsuited to their potential. The result is that the art object becomes dismissible because it has been forced into the interpretive area of conventionality, and in this way ceases to enunciate its effectiveness. In *The Bluest Eye*, characters (most obviously) but also readers and the novel as an exchange commodity, are captured in this conundrum: each risk being within a problematic interpretive orientation. Robert Samuels writes the following with respect to *The Bluest Eye*, and highlights (however unconsciously) the wider problems of interpreting the novel that I am gesturing at:

> By placing this family in an abandoned storefront, Morrison shows how they represent the opposite of the consumer culture's celebration of white beauty. Since they live in a window of capital exchange, the Breedloves become objects that are displayed for the public; however, they are not objects of consumption or idealization but objects of hatred and racist debasement. (107)

We easily witness how these oppressive signposts of capitalism—the (white) beauty and culture industry, consumer society and its ubiquity, and the ideological pressure of modernity—are the same issues that the characters confront. But they are also the same positions through which the reader encounters the texts, so that we must come to understand the novel as being steeped and situated in this same murky place: a product of consumer capitalism, so that the book itself becomes reducible to that and even displays its own coupling with the forces it authentically intended to interrupt. This occurs when it is approached through conventional reading practices (and hence Morrison's continuing concern for language itself). Viewed in this way, our interpretations are weakened when conducted under the epistemology of modernity and its conventional reading practices.

It is a manner of reading that is already informed by a dominant ideology—something stronger than (generic) expectation that signifies, in some cases, an almost involuntary arrival at prejudiced ideas of meaning. To put it in a base but brief way, it is much easier to read the novel as a set of types or a semblance of fiction and deny its implications than it is to deal with it as both a reality and a representation of real life. As Morrison puts it herself, there is a "horror of dealing with people one by one, each as he appears" (*WMM* 20)—that is, in dealing with them as a singularity and thus as a whole life (see §2 below). It should be clear by now that if this problem has penetrated our collective psyches as readers and as globalized citizens, then we need reading to become re-empowered and we need new ways of reading that are neither conventional nor traditional but that will offer us access to the moving insights artists are dedicated to communicating.

Much like readers, characters in Morrison's novels often fail to be moved by the evocation of events or occurrences that we might consider moving. In this sense, they can represent negative examples of readers (readers of the novel-world they inhabit) who are not susceptible to being moved or can point us, with their own pitfalls, to a wealthier comprehension of the stakes upon which a novel resides. One frequent example arises when characters are unable to recognize the dynamics that constrain them: that is, the social and ideological pressures that determine the limits of their vision and the parameters of their actions. We observe this readily in the mutual and co-dependent abuse that Pecola's parents visit upon one another. While

Mrs. Breedlove requires Cholly's alcoholism and abuse in order to bring consistent meaning into her life, albeit obviously toxic,[109] we read also that "no less did Cholly need her" since she was "one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt" (*BE 42*)—but he does not *move* her, since the co-dependent cycle of abuse and vindication can only remain in this case self-perpetuating.

On another hand, we can witness characters moved into authentic action. Claudia, as Christina Bieber Lake argues, is a character of "moral imagination" and a "person of character"—in possession of a greater support structure than her doomed friend—who is able, as the reader should be as well, to recognize that her "failure to love Pecola was born out of an essential selfishness that makes weak people dispensable" and "views them as tools for the refinement of one's own self-image" and becomes so impacted by Pecola's story that she, along with her sister, "go against the tide of their entire community by loving someone even more unwanted than Pecola herself: Pecola's unborn baby" (Lake 101).[110]

Even more so, we might also recognize the often strange and unsettling interactions between characters as the exchange or delivery—the giving—of gifts. But we must emphasize that these are strange gifts, and that we might not recognize them as such. We might consider Cholly and Pauline's mutual abuse and antagonism as the continuous though corrupted exchange of a meaning-making gift in the same way that Eve derives security from her hatred of BoyBoy in *Sula* (36). The pool of potential examples is extensive: the sexual jealousy that seems to issue from white men with respect to black ones (*Sula* and *Tar Baby*); the gift of death Eva provides Plum (*Sula*) or the gift of life Florens's mother offers in giving her over to Jacob Vaark (*A Mercy*); Sethe's gift to her child (*Beloved*) or the gift Frank Money offers in his disgust for both the world and himself to the Vietnamese child-prostitute in killing her (*Home*)—this list can continue, and we can claim that in these cases as well as in those unmentioned that characters are *moved* to impart these strange gifts to others. And yet we are not usually moved to understand these as gifts. To do so requires a different orientation, one that can be considered ethical but not within the confines of what we collectively consider dominant ethics.

Within our dominant ethical orientation, we are less inclined to such readings that would allow us to understand these strange actions as gifts. Rather we remain perplexed, horrified, or worse. What does a world look like wherein these acts are considered gifts? What condition and levels of comprehension must accompany our orientation in order that we come to understand these as gifts, and also to understand why we cannot normally do so and how we have brought about a world in which such gifts are necessary and articulate themselves—again, strange as they appear—as gifts? We must be moved to understand these actions as gifts, and this requires that our sense of ethics is evacuated of its normative role and comes to take on new and different meanings.

What is fundamental both for Morrison's narrative project and for our interpretive practices is to take seriously the possibilities for understanding that are contained in the literary

---

[109] Mrs. Breedlove and Cholly seem to be in a mutually constitutive relationship in which both are touched but neither are moved. In both of them we witness a problem of the self (see Nabokov above), a problem of the system that surrounds them (see Pynchon above), and a problem of the misrecognition of whole lives in both themselves and each other (continued with the discussion of Morrison below). As Morrison writes: "If Cholly had stopped drinking, she would never have forgiven Jesus. She needed Cholly's sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus" (*BE* 42).

[110] For a powerful interpretation of *The Bluest Eye*, especially with respect to Soaphead Church's role, see the entirety of Lake's fourth chapter—"The Scorned People of the Earth: Reprogenetics and *The Bluest Eye*"—in her *Prophets of the Posthuman* (85-105).

representation of human lives. Empathy is not to be discounted, representing as it so often does one of the means by which we discuss the significance and impact of imaginative fiction. But empathy is not enough for the simple fact that it is a close companion to being or becoming touched, but not by any means synonymous with being moved. It is in our reading practices and through the sharpened precision of the imaginative act that we might surpass mere empathy and cross the threshold into becoming other. Certainly, in respect to scholarship, instruction, and ordinary living, we need to build more imaginative capacity on the social and existential levels, since this will not only provide a richer lifeworld in a broad and generalized sense, but also because it will dampen our propensity to judge others and commit them into the oblivion of incomprehensible otherness where they are susceptible and exposed to unrestrained forces of oppression. This is at the heart of Morrison's narrative project, and as Philip Weinstein, taking up *The Bluest Eye* as an illustrative example that can work just the same in the context of Morrison's other novels, writes that "rather than judge [Cholly Breedlove], Morrison imaginatively enters him" and in doing so "grants him the unforeclosed energy she herself possessed as his creator" (8).[111] Morrison's aesthetic "business is to see what she can see—to *become* other and imagine as her own their ways of engaging their conditions" (Weinstein 12). This becoming other is the most essential step, a rung up on empathy, to becoming moved in the wake of a work of art, and it is toward this that we must direct our interpretive and imaginative intensities and efforts.

Refusing to engage in the "lamentation for lost originality" or to focus her efforts on the reclamation of a lost or destroyed subjectivity, Morrison's fiction, as Yvette Christiansë argues, "questions whether return can ever escape repetition or where it can be a way of disrupting repetition that forecloses though domination" (14). Return and repetition are immensely problematic occurrences that perpetuate our most fundamental problems and push us into a deadlock of circulatory and imaginative—to say nothing of praxis-oriented—poverty. If we continue to resort or return to the same mode of reading and interpretive practices that have allowed us to arrive at the conclusions and convictions we hold today, then we will have already begun to enter a period of stagnation in which innovative directions have been foreclosed upon at the fundamental level of conceptualization. With respect to the work of fiction, we understand this as the failures of imagination—so often the result of impoverished circumstances and dominant ideologies—that we can witness in characters and, more importantly, in ourselves as readers (see §3 below). A great risk inherent in writing an innovative novel that avoids or confronts or combats the repetitions that have preceded it and established the grounds for interpretation is that it will be prescribed within those very boundaries and its innovation will go undetected. *The Bluest Eye* posits quite an example, as we have seen in its early reviews and read in Morrison's own self-assessment. And yet we know that subsequent scholarship has uncovered wildly imaginative and poignant interpretations of the novel. *The Bluest Eye* is susceptible to this as much as any novel. To take the easy track and condemn Cholly Breedlove without qualification (even to place him at the center of the novel) and, as one can easily imagine, use the material of the novel to reflect on the abhorrent conditions and essential character of the African

[111] Although not the concern here, a thesis that the captivity narrative—or more accurately captivity itself—represents an abhorrent but empowering precondition for transcending the epistemology of modernity in that captives are so radically subject to its most extreme oppression can be fruitful for uncovering some of its strategic importance. For Weinstein's own part, he writes: "More broadly, Morrison seems to glimpse, at this crucial moment in *The Bluest Eye*, that the damage done to her people—damage rooted in their history of enslavement—is at the same time the condition of their radical freedom" (9).

American community is to return and repeat the racist and hegemonic discourse it so ardently strives to overcome (this, certainly, is not the only problematic interpretive return and repetition that can be asserted about the novel but it is an illustrative, fearful, and extreme one that demonstrates the gravity of prejudiced ideologies). This is why another horizon of interpretation is necessary, and why a more powerful and moving way to practice reading is imperative.

I have asserted here that to be touched by a literary or artistic work is not enough, that to be moved is both what is required of us and desired by Morrison as a creative thinker, and that in order to do so we must redefine our understanding both of ethics (and the conditions that define them) and of literary interpretation. I have claimed that Morrison's narrative project is an ethical aesthetic that contains that possibility of readerly movement. In what follows, I would like to explore how this is accomplished (§2), what problems impoverished imaginations pose for this endeavor (§3), and finally to articulate what a genuine understanding of the other might look like (§4).

Most centrally, I claim in the following section that the means by which Morrison accomplishes the task of becoming other and rendering that other comprehensible and enterable for the reader is through the depiction of whole lives: that is, the display of human lives, of fictional characters and real beings, as the unconventional and terribly complex constellations that they are. And this is not to say merely that Morrison creates complex characters or that she is in some way a "realist." Rather, this is to say that she shows the contours of whole lives in a manner that pushes us away from understanding either life or fiction within the conventional confines of a reading practice that encourages us not to take fiction seriously. In this endeavor, I fear that I am confronted with the same problem Morrison articulates for herself not only in the foreword to *The Bluest Eye*, but in the monologue that precedes the action of the novel: "There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how" (*BE* 6). Despite the efforts that will follow, I fear I may only be able to illuminate the *how*—the strategies, methods, and means Morrison employs—and not the *why*: that is, the utopian horizons that are yet to be actualized behind Morrison's narrative project.

§2: Whole Lives and Virile Maturity

In what follows I will set out the argument that Morrison is the novelist of virile maturity whose central strategy for epistemological shifting is the depiction of whole lives, rather than the truncated and conveniently confined character- and plot-packages readers are more used to encountering in fiction (the latter of which are, almost helplessly, imported into real life and understood as such). In pursuing this claim, I will set out three tasks in this section. First, with respect to the novel as a potent form, I will discuss the meaning and usefulness of virile maturity, a phrase used in George Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, as it pertains to Morrison's narrative project and her continuing artistic practice. Second, I will elaborate on the depiction of whole lives that is the central mark of Morrison's epistemological intervention into modernity and its cemented reading and meaning-making processes. Finally, I will close this section with a foray into the additional prospect—proceeding as it does from the depiction of whole lives in literary space—of enacting fundamental and noticeable change in the world through a reinterpretation of previous texts with a strength capable of changing our epistemological orientation to the past and, as a result, to the present and future. This final notion remains a wider social and ideological project that enunciates a recognizable praxis, but one which also is already underway.

The novel itself—as genre, as technology—remains an artistic choice and maintains its unique power to encapsulate an understanding of our most pressing social, political, and philosophical predicaments. A discussion of the novel form also announces the ways in which it might serve to enact larger, more transcendental purposes (aside from the mere mentioning of examples) in its imagining a new kind of world which, I argue, Morrison's fiction moves us toward. Though we may not know quite what it is in an adequate manner, this fact lends to the novel its status as a potent artistic form with which we can work. This is true for Bakhtin, whose hetroglossia and chrontope allows the novel to include all voices and invites all places and time periods to seep seamlessly into its chaotic and cacophonous expressiveness, and for Lukács as well, where the novel's essential incompleteness renders it an ontological art form. It is in this way that the novel remains ideal for the kind of epistemological opening, recognizing, amending, and shifting that this project is concerned with.

Indeed, the very potent power of the novel is easily turned to perpetuate the problems I have been in the process of identifying.[112] This is because our reading practices are constituted beneath the epistemology of modernity. With one perspective on the form, Joseph R. Slaughter writes that the novel is a "technology capable of being transferred" and is "regarded as a technology of transfer" that may act as an imaginative "passport to the world" and as a means by which one might "participate in the life of the modern world" (283). For Slaughter, the novel becomes capable of traveling to those who are unable to travel—the world coming to them—and of replacing oral traditions in order to solidify intercultural identities and social relationships. More than this, it is for Slaughter an invitation to participate beyond the local and in the wider world.

On its surface, this is a grand boon. For Morrison, however, the implications of such a view of the novel revolve around a patronizing, elitist, phallocentric, and exclusionary discourse. That is to say, the kind of worldly participation Slaughter finds advantageous in the novel might easily be the emissary of a hegemonic form of participation, citizenship, and social integration (replaying, to one extent or another, the colonial machinery of cultural domination). Nonetheless, Morrison's novels—included in the canons of world literature—are capable of movement beyond their grounded sociocultural location.

But if the novel is a technology of "incorporation whose historical social work was to patriate the once politically marginal bourgeois subject as national citizen" (Slaughter 114) or, more generally, to incorporate any group into the larger social environment via inclusion within literary canons and legitimating institutions, then the threat to the marginalized is that they do not become a group moved into the center and expressed throughout a common culture, but rather a group that is assimilated into the center, having to shed their own identities in a conforming fashion in order to gain the legitimacy promised by institutions of power. Morrison seeks to interrogate this assimilative element of society and, in bringing it into question, expose the destructive means by which this incorporative practice is driven. This, too, will be a technological possibility of the novel.

An example of the harm the novel's incorporative elements visit on the marginalized who are Morrison's subject can be pulled from the early pages of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. I have already elaborated on the task Morrison has set herself in this novel and turn briefly to the

[112] Consider the example in the previous section, above, about the commodification of poverty, its translating into entertainment via the display of the economically situated Breedlove family in the store window for display, and the means by which a literary depiction of the harmful effects of racism can be misinterpreted to reinforce the tenets of a racist ideology by itself becoming an expression of those very tenets.

well-discussed scene in which Claudia interacts with a white baby doll. The psychological tragedy that concludes this scene is the development of a harmful conformity: trying, as we have seen, to combat the self-alienating pressure of socially ingrained incorporating practices, Claudia's contempt for Shirley Temple—representing the white, bright-and-blue-eyed standard of beauty—transforms into acceptance as we read that she "learned much later to worship [Temple], just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement" (*BE* 23). We may very well relate this scene involving the pseudo-scientific investigation of the interior of a doll's body in search of the essential foundation of beauty that Claudia lacks—as her entire environment ceaselessly tells her—to the eugenics and gynecology scenes in Morrison's more recent novel *Home*, where the bodies of black females are literally penetrated, probed, and treated in an inversion of what Morrison has already inverted in *The Bluest Eye* (that is, as an accurate historical representation), as curious material to be investigated and understood.

What Morrison has done in this brief example is to lay bare this dangerous contradiction and its wildly destructive consequences. If we understand the novel in the way we have described above, it should be clear how Morrison has turned against what is possible with the technology of the novel: rather than allowing it to institute the incorporating practices that it is capable of, Morrison reveals the violence that results from such an acceptance. Importantly, the example given—Claudia and her doll—stands as inaugural instance in Morrison's first novel of what she will carry throughout the entire body of her work. Certainly, we may produce many examples, but the point is clear in this single instance: Morrison's aims are to expose the damaging consequences of accepting what are socially and mentally hegemonic values.

Read in these ways—in ways that are divergent and rupturing rather than epistemologically incorporative—against the trend of Slaughter's globalizing *Bildungsroman*, the novel can open the space to swerve our understanding in the direction of different epistemologies. Morrison is among the exemplary figures in contemporary literature whose narrative project sets itself upon this pathway. This is why I call Morrison the novelist of virile maturity. Luckács writes—so convinced that he says it twice in the same paragraph—that the "novel is the art-form of virile maturity," which, he continues "means that the completeness of the novel's world, if seen objectively, is an imperfection, and if subjectively experienced, it amounts to resignation" (71). He goes on:

> The danger by which the novel is determined is twofold: either the fragility of the world may manifest itself so crudely that it will cancel out the immanence of meaning which the form demands, or else the longing for the dissonance to be resolved, affirmed and absorbed into the work may be so great that it will lead to a premature closing of the circle of the novel's world, causing the form to disintegrate into disparate, heterogeneous parts. (71-2)

One way to read this passage—which also takes the novel form as the aspirational concept, as a preeminent ambition for art—is to diagnose this danger as residing within the reader along with the incorporative, homogenizing aspects of the novel in operation. That is to say, the incorporative elements of a novel invite readers into a world in which these disparate, heterogeneous parts have solidified into their own monadic reality (however much this separateness remains an obvious illusion): this is true across individual novels to be sure, but also more exemplified in the sub-forms or sub-genres that can classify a novel to stand for a certain

socio-political or temporal-social period, so that we witness the emergence of the modern novel, the Western novel, the colonial and postcolonial (and anticolonial) novel, and even the world novel, as smoothly subordinated to their parent cultures and all the ideological weight that accompanies them (especially relevant when encountering the other) rather than being part of a total world. This is why the "novel is the most hazardous genre," but also what allows it, in "contrast to other genres whose existence resides within the finished form, [to appear] as something in the process of becoming" (Lukács 73-4).

If every art form, as Lukcács writes, is "defined by the metaphysical dissonance of life which it accepts and organizes as the basis of a totality complete in itself" (71), it is the novel—this form of virile maturity—and the story that bring the world into being, that disclose the world to us. In "transforming itself into a normative being of becoming" the novel "surmounts itself" (Lukács 73), and in this fashion opens up a pathway that both brings the world into being and facilitates our ability to recognize it as such: that is, to recognize that the world is total, and not a subset of differentiated and distant mini-worlds (as genre classifications would encourage us to do, to say nothing of the intensity of incorporative practices that are fundamentally at work in modernity as a whole beyond the novel form itself).

The novel is most proper and potent when we let it *move* us, to put it in Morrison's terms, becoming so real we recognize it as our world, as the world itself. Its totality, as Lukács has it, will be that which is inseparable from the world because it is the world, that which makes legible the totality of a shared world we are so often content (and complacent) in allowing to become departmentalized and so to produce the most fundamental problems that assail the world—but the actualization of the novel form itself, and the praxis that will accompany it, may yet be a long way off.[113] It should not go unnoticed, either, that the novel—itself being a form of the work of art—is a form unfinished and overflowing into the world, because it creates the world itself.[114] Morrison is the novelist of virile maturity because she forces into perspective the ideologically desperate relations of the world—where individuals or communities understand themselves as separate in their very existential constitution or situated differently on a hierarchical scale of experience and reality—and reveals them to be conterminously existing in the same shared and total space.

Perhaps this is a place for a brief clarification of the term virility, which is so often attached to a specifically masculine form of power of which I would like here to disabuse it for a more denotative, or at least contextual, understanding that need not make the mistake of attempting to situate Morrison as a male novelist.[115] Though the dynamics of gender—itself in possession of a longer history than the present study is capable of covering—remain inalienably central for Morrison (and for modernity), I am at present more focused on the novel form as Morrison occupies it. That is to say, the form that in Lukács's terminology is both mature and virile: mature in that it boasts of a longer history, even a latent and silent history, capable of

---

[113] Despite Lukács's own repudiation of *The Theory of the Novel*—written in a "mood of permanent despair over the state of the world" (12)—as too fundamentally utopian, perhaps we are in a position today to redirect, in a different context, a serious utopian pursuit (considering the subsequent work of Jameson and others) helped along by the lessons of the last ninety or so years and the mounting catastrophes arranging the world today, from unstable political turns, to issues of climate, the global availability of sustenance, migration and refugee crises, and so forth.

[114] I am influenced here by Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art."

[115] I owe the need for this clarification to a question posed by Judith Butler during my presentation of a section of this project at the University of California, Merced's annual graduate student conference, "The Stories We Tell: Forceful Discourse and the Veracity of Narrative(s)" on April 22, 2017, so as to properly—or rather, less ambiguously and blindsightedly—situate the notion of virility, and define the parameters of its use.

subsuming other genres (Pynchon is a pertinent example), and is unfinished and so still growing and still on the horizon as a liberating possibility that continues to gather to itself prospects of expression and communication (which is to say that it is matur*ing* and reaching a pinnacle with Morrison); virile in that—when taken into the hands of a Morrison—it not only possesses but deploys the rigorous power of strength and force that I mean here to associate with the potential of the form itself and its ability to create and influence the world beyond itself. That this kind of terminology is not associated with female writers remains a problematic linguistic prejudice that, perhaps, we might begin to overcome here. Clearly, the novel is not male. For my current pursuits, issues of the female/male novel become another matter entirely (although their overlapping tensions are discussed with respect to Ralph Ellison below), but a matter whose importance and relevance I am in no way discounting or denying.

The novel is a place where languages—divergent ways of life, ideological and social differences, specifically encoded systems of thought—are brought into conversation with one another: conversations that, outside of the novel, are too often intentionally segregated and suppressed. It is Morrison's work to bring that oppression and separating into the light in order that all members of society can confront them. This is one function that Morrison's fiction is often credited with (and this is true, but is not, for me, the endpoint).

Two brief examples that trouble the seemingly exclusive and isolated separateness that Morrison forces together will serve to illustrate this point. In *Tar Baby*, the house-matriarch Margret Street and her pseudo-adopted servant's niece Jadine engage in a narrative altercation regarding the affections of the recently arrived burgling black man, to whom both of them seem attracted. Taking the perspective of Jadine, Morrison writes:

> Maybe she should just say it. He doesn't want you Margaret. He wants me. He's crazy and beautiful and black and poor and beautiful and he killed a woman but he doesn't want you. He wants me and I have the fingerprint to prove it… Jadine got into bed and discovered she was jealous of Margaret of all people. Just because he was in her closet, she thought his sole purpose in life was to seduce her. Naturally her. A white woman no matter how old, how flabby, how totally sexless, believed it and she could have shot him for choosing Margaret's closet and giving her reason to believe it was true… I am competing with her for rape! (*TB* 186)

Broaching a similarly complex conversation, the title character in *Sula* relates the following information to her friend Nel's husband, Jude, after he makes some conversational complaints about the conditions of his life, and with whom she will later engage in an affair:

> I mean, I don't know what the fuss is about. I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed… They think rape soon's they see you, and if they don't get the rape they looking for, they scream it anyway just so the search won't be in vain. (*S* 103)

Taken together, the themes broaching ideas that are difficult to confront and often seem contradictory, that evoke resentment, resistance, and denial, can be drawn out: sexual insecurity, fear of foreign masculinities and emasculation, the assumption of a rapist mentality in the black male on the part of white men and women (and perhaps black women as well, not to mention black men) and the bizarre assertion that the white woman desires rape, possession by the exotic body (here, too, the orientalist tropes apply), and thus an escape from the oppressive normative social confines she finds herself in—all reading of the kind of self-loathing articulated above in *The Bluest Eye* and at the same time promising a mysterious form of liberation. That these oppositional sensations are present *at the same time* speaks to the efficacy by which the novel in general—and Morrison in particular—is capable of bringing diverse, conflicting dialogues together and forcing her reader to engage with them.

It is this bringing into contact of seemingly exclusive miniature-worlds—the lifeworlds of ideologically interpolated communities of individuals—that prepares the way for Morrison's primary strategy of epistemological shifting. That is, the consistent depiction in her novels of whole lives. This depiction of whole lives is what permits us to witness the conditions of possibility—just as we can peer at the mechanisms that have wrought this or that major historical event or lasting trend with the proper scope of understanding—that surround and enclose our ongoing silences, the arenas of unspeakability which Morrison is so intent on giving voice. Rather than displaying the synchronic contours of a character as we are accustomed to in general in fiction, Morrison provides us a wider diachronic depiction that permits our perception of subtly and complexity and renders our tendency at reductive reading less persuasive.

We could begin with the notion of evil and modernity's comfortable estrangement from it. Morrison wants to take the notion of evil away from the reader, abducting such polarizing binaries and easy examinations. We all end up being characters to someone, but we all tend to be round in our own view.[116] Indeed, as Lucille P. Fultz puts it, Morrison's vivid depictions of otherwise unspeakable happenings function to "enable our understanding of the forces that cause certain individuals to engage in such heinous behavior" because, short of resorting to commonplace explanations or inauthentic heuristics, she "demands we see the whole picture—including the unspeakable" (13). Morrison herself has said that she regards the "whole world as my canvas" (Lester), which should help to see both the emphasis on whole lives I am placing here as well as—via the above discussion of Lukács—the scope and capability of the novel form.

Morrison's novels are filled with rich, complex characters. They are never flat, and in this way she engages in a profound act of commentary. By creating in her novels the entire lives—the whole lives—of characters, and not simply their defining moments, Morrison begins to open a space for understanding and for suspending preconceived judgments that readers—nestled in the wider epistemological context—are already embroiled in. Although she lauds the student who can sit in a room alone and read a "book on which there was no test" for hours and hours (*WMM* 188), appreciating the isolating requirements of the novel, Morrison also expresses a prodigious concern for the community voice, the voice that is too often silent and which she allows to speak in her novels. She writes that the

> treatment of artists by the people for whom they speak is also of some interest [concerning the novel]. That is to say, when the writer is one of them, when the

[116] Consider "Goodness: Altruism and the Literary Imagination," a talk Morrison gave at Harvard University for the annual Ingersoll Lecture on Immortality in 2012 (https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2012/12/11/goodness-altruism-and-literary-imagination).

> voice is not the separate, isolated ivory tower voice of a very different kind of person but an implied "we" in a narration. This is disturbing to people and critics who view the artist as the supreme individual. (*WMM* 62)

The disruption Morrison mentions comes when easy categories are complicated, when the supreme individual artist is understood as expressing the voice of the community: and it is because that writer, or her work, or the community she writes about, cannot be simplified or reduced to either the stereotypes that compose that community in the dominant social imagination or the isolated expressions of an individual person whose voice can be dismissed merely as a singularity that this disruption is able to find its articulation.[117]

Morrison, then, combines the capabilities of the novel and drives them in her own direction. By criticizing the socially and ideologically incorporating practices the novel often invites its readers into (Slaughter),[118] she places a critical eye on the accepted master narratives of Western society and seeks to expose the way in which they subjugate other possibilities; by bringing into her writing the multifaceted array of voices, allowing minority men and women to speak honestly and self-critically about their lives and the world around them, she merges many possible voices (Bakhtin) in order to reposition the legitimacy of those who can speak away from the white perspective; and by engaging in extensive commentary on and beyond the community she represents,[119] she releases the difficult material that is concealed by and within both. We can see why the novel is an optimal choice for Morrison.[120]

---

[117] The ancestral or community voice proposes a fashion of fiction writing that begins to transcend its own formal bounds. Leslie Marmon Silko, for instance, has said that stories she heard during her time in Bethel with the Yupik people found their way into her short stories (see the Preface to her novel *Ceremony*, xvii), which present a kind of anthropological-collecting form of storytelling and story writing. The same could easily be said for Zora Neale Hurston, whose own anthropological work has been well commented on, for Chuck Palahniuk, who says the stories he writes are basically non-fiction anyway (*Stranger Than Fiction*), and, of course, for Morrison—all of whom write stories whose origins are expressly not located in the individual artist/creator but arise from a community pregnant with stories already. All of this also supports Heidegger in his discrediting of the notion of the author as individual genius: "Modern subjectivism," he writes, "immediately misinterprets creation, taking it as the sovereign subject's performance of genius. The founding of truth is a founding not only in the sense of free bestowal, but at the same time foundation in the sense of this ground-laying grounding. Poetic projection comes from nothing in this respect, that it never takes its gift from the ordinary and traditional. Yet it never comes from nothing in that what is projected by it is only the withheld determination of historical Dasein itself" (200).

[118] Slaughter further articulates a central problem that requires addressing: that of marginalized literary work being subsumed into and conditioned by the dominant modes of production, those against which Morrison is attempting to work but which, by necessity, her fiction in some sense must be beholden to: "The commercialization of the traditional social work of the novel of incorporation converts the *Bildungsroman* into what I have called a *Clef à Roman*: an author's generic key to the lettered city that comes with a novel about a protagonist's attempts to gain admission into a society of readers. In an era when both human rights and literature have been commoditized, the historically marginalized author's access to the dominant literary public sphere is very often conditioned on a novel about the tribulations of an individual's social apprenticeship in the culture of the dominant literary public sphere—that is, on a novel about the conditions of its own existential necessity and artifactual improbability" (308).

[119] See Benjamin's "The Storyteller" in *Illuminations* (83-109).

[120] Interestingly, and as an aside, Morrison's oeuvre lacks the novel centered on the novelist, writer, or artist which is so common among twentieth and twenty-first century authors. The closest she comes is *Love*, in which Heed ostensibly hires Junior as her amanuensis and fact-checker in order to record her family history. However, this turns out to be a lie or a pretense at best, since the job called for "someone who could be coaxed into things or who already had a certain hunger" (*L* 26). Rather, Heed wants a forger, someone who can manufacture evidence that would shift the interpretation of her late husband Bill Coesy's will squarely in her own favor. For Morrison, the self-reflexive novel may be too self-indulgent, too marked by the solipsistic tradition away from which she is trying to move.

In what may be one of the closest and most concise expressions of her narrative project, Morrison has said that what she is "interested in are the strategies for maintaining the silence and the strategies for breaking it" (*PD* 51). In the American master narrative—and even the Western master narrative more broadly—there are in place codes that work to suspend voices from expressing themselves, closing off specific kinds of speech, an area that is open only to acceptable content, types of criticism, and narrative substance: it is against this silence—the exclusion and suspension of authentic African American voices—that Morrison struggles, divining strategies for dissolving these long-fortified borders. Morrison brings whole lives into her novels in order to combat this pernicious commonplace.

To take a particularly harsh example of Morrison's deployment of whole lives and her project of fighting against silences and forcing her readers to confront difficult and violent realities that many would prefer—for good reason but with drastic implications—to ignore, doubt, or distrust, the abusive relationship between Cholly Breedlove and his daughter Pecola complicates wildly what is typically a foreclosed and prefabricated topic of conversation. The complication, that is to say, is what is usually silenced, but Morrison does not allow for this. Perhaps the most central and graphic scene of the novel, the passage in which Cholly rapes his daughter in the kitchen on a Saturday afternoon, is emblematic of the silenced content that Morrison wants to address. Not that such content needs to be addressed for its own sake, but that its larger implications must be ruminated upon: that the multifaceted, complex instruments of society not only enable such actions but fail to protect individuals from it, and, more than anything, seek to conceal, shy away from, and relegate such content, because of the intensity of its material, into the darkness that we are afraid to deal with (what we might easily and alternatively call evil). And it is the complexity of this confrontation that we must be forced to deal with. This, of course, is neither an excuse for such action, a scapegoating of larger social forces, nor an alleviating of notions of responsibility, but it is an effort to widen the scope of comprehension so that more ambiguous judgment and understanding—not necessarily of a sympathetic or forgiving nature—become possible. That I am compelled to preface even the briefest discussion of the scene by these platitudes speaks to the point that a sincere confrontation with the material Morrison has put out for her readers' consideration remains a topic that prefers silences to discussion. Here is the passage:

> The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him, and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals, giving it length, and softening the lips of his anus. Surrounding all this lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her—tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear. His soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her... Removing himself from her was so painful to him he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of the dry harbor of her vagina… Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her. (163)

We can aptly apply easy labels—condemning and descriptive—to the situation, to Cholly the father: we can brand him a father, a drunk, a husband, a rapist, all of which are true. We may even call it, or him, evil—but, as we have said, Morrison is not interested in that, and for her readers to be so reductive is to miss her point. Indeed, these labels are too easy. In Donald Gibson's words, it would be "on the whole easier to judge Cholly if we knew less about him and

if we could isolate the kitchen floor episode from the social context in which it occurs and from Cholly's past" (Gibson 170). We read of the "godlike state" in which Cholly met his wife, his dangerous freedom just before this scene (*BE* 160-1), and we hear his own life—absent father, pathetic child, interrupted coitus which he is forced to continue under the jeering gaze of cruel white men in a field, his transference of hatred, his inability to raise children or know how—and most of all, however puzzling and repulsive, we hear of the tenderness and affection mixed into the act of rape, the reminiscence of a sexual love for his own wife shining through his daughter as his "discomfort [dissolved] into pleasure" and the "sequence of his emotions" moved from "revulsion, guilt, pity, then love" (*BE* 161), the "timid, tucked-in look of the scratching toe" that his wife "Pauline was doing the first time he saw her in Kentucky" (*BE* 162). Taking the entire novel into account, the application of easy labels is to bankrupt the work in which Morrison engages.

An initial effort at interpretation might naturally run thus: such a scene is raw to the degree one is unable to handle, so one retreats back to the master narrative, to the easy explanations, to condemnation, disgust, and revulsion (which are surely justified), rather than attempting to understand the complexity of what is happening—the full ramifications of which I have not dealt with here.[121] In writing about this novel some years later, as we have said, Morrison has said she encountered two problems: that of language and that of misdirecting or mishandling the reader's prefabricated interpretive disposition. Indeed, the master narrative conditions the reader's first reaction to such as a scene as the one discussed above to be confirmatory, discouraged from critical interrogation by the pressure of easy explanations and the burden of ethics and morality. As Morrison has said, fearful that her attempt to confront these problems in her first novel was unsuccessful, many of her readers "remain touched but not moved" (*BE* xi). If we fear being moved, we can shut the book, misread it, misunderstand it, and reduce it. Indeed, this is the risk of fiction.

Though this description is brief and could be elaborated upon at much greater length, it is extensive enough to reveal the means by which Morrison depicts whole lives in her novels. Central to this depiction across her novels the revelation of a character's life beyond the action of a novel's arbitrary space persists as a constellation of components that have shaped the available choice architecture of a particular individual. From here we might be able to address different problems in a fresh way.

If in her narrative project Morrison attempts to fight the suspension of certain voices from the dominant discourse, it causes another kind: readers are left to wonder what to do with her work, with the graveness of the content she focuses on. Moreover, they are left to wonder what to do in a world of completely round characters, a world in which each character (or most) are fully formed, tragically human beings. This more than troubles the notions by which we engage in day-to-day life, applying shorthand labels to things, people, and situations that allow us to conceptualize their existence in relation to our own without delving into their complexity. Morrison cautions that we can no longer conduct our lives on the basis of forgetting about the humanity and the roundness of other human beings. This is the other, greater, implication and effect of her work.

We might stop here, as we have already proposed whole lives as Morrison's central strategy for epistemological shifting. But I would prefer to conclude with a short discussion of revisionary reading and writing. In addition to the presentation of whole lives which we have just

---

[121] Again, Gibson's article—entitled "Text and Context in *The Bluest Eye*"—contains an excellent reading through these themes of unspeakability in Morrison's first novel.

demarcated—and for which there remains much to be said—I would like to add one more horizon of thought for the possibilities contained in the novel and in Morrison's work.

This horizon is what I will call for lack of a better term reading back, a kind of revisionary interpretive movement that casts its influence backward in time and establishes itself (or *works* to establish itself) as a positive normative interpretation in the present. A widespread and active effort in this practice might conceivably stand as an antidote for hegemonic discourse (one that, under certain conditions, seeps into the epistemological configuration): not just to break it open and expose it and what it has wrought, but to change it, to revise it, even in some cases to erase it. The potential to make the message of history change, to provide a new meaning to old words or replace them with a more suitable meaning—this contains potential for abuse and thus a degree of danger, and this is why it must be safeguarded by our experts and artists. Such a movement of interpretive power is what has ridden, say, the Supreme Court of pro-slavery justices, and the reason there seem to be no pro-hegemonic scholars writing in academia today: the conditions of possibility that have previously permitted such positions to assert themselves as legitimate and in an official capacity are no longer present in our social world (and for the better). Such movements are familiar enough to us—indeed, for all the utopian charges that might be leveled against such an idea, this is one we can observe in our historical and political discourses quite readily—and something like Baldwin's revision, or rejection, of Richard Wright represents a kind of example.[122] But I am trying to talk about more than the simple figurative, Freudian father-slaying with which this kind of movement is so often associated when it comes to artists. Rather, the far-reaching implications—for discourse, for society, for normative ethics—remain at stake here. Let us turn now to Morrison and Ellison in order to remark on the wider potential for revisionary interpretation this gestures toward.

Within the discourses of intertextuality—which are already confined to the archive of interacting works—we might understand Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* as one foundational way to conceptualize the tensions arising between artists. More specifically, we can look at Morrison's intertextual interaction with Ralph Ellison. The ultimate point here is that we locate a way in which these specialized dialogues (and, more important, their guiding interpretive anatomy) can be opened up for wider literary and social interpretive praxis. In the same fashion that Ellison's work can be said to haunt the early novels of Morrison, her own clashing with her predecessor can be said to irrevocably alter the interpretive framework of the text responded to. Examining its revisionary relation to the Trueblood episode in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Michael Awkward underscores the means by which Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* provides her—and by extension an entire community of African American women—the "means of giving authentication and voice to specific types of black and feminine experiences whose validity and significance these texts [by Ellison and others]—by overt and covert means—deny" (58). It is not only in her return to an earlier practice—the "white voice introducing the black text" in order to "demonstrate her refusal to allow white standards to arbitrate the success or failure of black experience" (59)—that allows her to dispute and revise hegemonic standards of art, but also, as Awkward goes on to say, her "taking Ellison to task for the phallocentric nature of his representation of incest" in *Invisible Man* that "marginalizes and renders as irrelevant the consequences of the act for the female victim in direct response to Ellison's refusal to consider them seriously" (66). The result, again in Awkward's words: to have changed "permanently the overwhelming male disposition of the Afro-American literary canon" (66).

---

[122] See Baldwin's essay "Alas, Poor Richard."

Following Awkward, John N. Duvall compellingly identifies Soaphead Church's letter to God in *The Bluest Eye* as a powerful letter addressed to Ellison which is "unmistakably signaled" in such a way that the "criticism of God becomes simultaneously a criticism of Ellison" (34). Duval follows this assertion with text from Soaphead's own letter—"I did what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her" (*BE* 182)—so that one can clearly see both the difficulty of surmounting a discursively fortified artistic barrier and the vast possibilities it opens for representation, de-marginalization, and for speaking the silences otherwise squelched by that very oppressive hegemony Morrison writes against. Here, then, we see how such revisionary writing calls into question the cultural authorities whose precedence dictates rules of form and expression (Duvall 42-3) and how such revisionary writing promotes revisionary reading that opens new avenues for understanding male texts (Awkward 62-3).

These examples present change that we can see, that we can witness and verify in our interpretive practices (and we might extend this inquiry to the historical, to the social, and to the arrangement of the present and use it to erode the epistemology of modernity). That we then no longer read Ellison in the same way represents a permanent interpretive alteration whose consequences reach far beyond the dialogue between two novels and the wider intertextuality they interact within. This is true at least for those in the know, and Morrison wants to bring more people into the know: enacting these changes, on a wider scale for a more complex social praxis, remains our task.

§3: Failures of Imagination

The difficulty of thinking and seeing historically, to say nothing of comprehending the prognostications whose consequences confront us clearly on the horizon, remains among modernity's most pressing problems. In this inevitable situation, our inquiry enters into the relationship between history, memory, and context. We know, of course, that history, which becomes a form of inexperiential memory, can be taught: that it is an intention that can be passed down, erased, or mitigated for a purpose. This available historical material gives rise to what we perceive, believe, and understand ourselves as being situated in: it is generative of our (limited and perceived) total reality. This creates at once the context of our individual lifeworld and is created by the wider epistemology of modernity under which that individual lifeworld is conditioned. For Ricoeur, history stands as the inability to witness, and so must have recourse to the foundation-establishing, assumption-building mechanisms it erects around itself and passes through the immediacy of an individual context. As he puts it, our common cultural and social memory—by which we are all preceded—becomes hereditary and institutionalized:

> History is first learned by memorizing dates, facts, names, striking events, important persons, holidays to celebrate. It is essentially a narrative taught within the framework of a nation. At this stage of discovery, itself remembered after the fact, history is perceived, mainly by the student, as "external" and dead. The negative mark placed on the facts mentioned consists in the student's not being able to witness them. It is the province of hearsay and of didactic reading. The feeling of externality is reinforced by the calendrical framework of the events taught: at this age one learns to read the calendar as one learns to read the clock. (394)

History's dead externality then offers us a present that no longer heeds the constituency by which it is predicated. History is, in a word, fable, narrative, story, sometimes more proximal in time and sometimes more distant. Of course, this is not the only way to read or understand history (it is an early, studently stage of discovery, as Ricoeur puts it), but such a qualification does not in any way amend the concern that it, indeed, represents the basis on which all subsequent historical understanding must be located. Even the most functional citizens struggle to ascend above the immediacy of their time in order to perceive the historical convergences which have incited their present—from our pro- and eukaryotic ancestors to our more recent convents and caves—and at best recalibrate these dead externalities as opaque and moribund vagaries, as though history were in line with the equally impoverished means by which we generally regard fiction: as distant, unrelated, and ultimately irrelevant to our immediate concerns. Thus we enter the epistemological trap of heritage, of memory, of historical narrative, and of the inherited self. Such weighty precedents create context. They predicate, also, the horizons of our imagination.

Because by this juncture in time historical narratives are embedded into our social and cultural institutions—from which we have no respite and cannot situate ourselves prior to—they are a means to learn and they are also what we learn: received world-structuring and meaning-making narratives that we inherit. These compose the discourse of modernity, and what we may call an archive, a collection, or the storehouse of the available, is the limited space from which our learning is able to draw. Needless to say, these reproduce themselves through apparatuses Althusser has famously detailed and sink into the fabric of the interpolated subject's reality. They come to appear unequivocally natural and already, in conformity to the agendas that produced them in the first place, contain their silences, blind spots, and obfuscating concealments without which modernity would not hold together.

Indeed, the storing of records and the circulation of print—which widen an individual's context at the same time they prescribe it into a confined system of values that come to be shared via this very reproduction—give rise to a wider common community, and yet can easily allow us to fail to think, act, or see historically.[123] More interesting and more authentically influential on the psychic life of individuals are the means by which the creation of an official world coalesces and gives rise to itself as a container that governs and reflects, recursively, what is available for our thoughts and actions.[124] In these cases too, such structures erect the context in which we reside and establish limits to the imagination as well because they already constrain the physical, ideological, and social world we presume our own context to be situated within.

The emergence of violence arises as a means to maintain the integrity of an inherited context or lifeworld, standing as a solution for confronting the unsettling, destabilizing, and uncomfortably haunting dead externalities of historical memory (which are in fact clearly living). As Ricoeur puts it, even in the beginning of one's historical interpellation into a particular national or epistemological context, a "certain violence coming from outside presses in on memory" and the "discovery of what is called historical memory consists in a genuine acculturation to externality" articulated in the "gradual familiarization with the unfamiliar, with the uncanniness of the historical past" (394). Envisioning a genuine historical memory—quite different from the various lines of "historical" memory imparted by the institutional and cultural apparatuses of a particular nation or group whose own identity and subsistence remain at stake in

[123] Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* articulates this process at length and stands as one of the foundational texts for such concerns, situating itself and its inquiry within the historical framework of modernity and its increasingly intense globalization.
[124] See Mark Seltzer's *The Official World* (2016) and *True Crime: Observations on Violence in Modernity* (2007).

maintaining the weight of its own recursive and self-described foundations—represents a preliminary stage for overcoming the epistemology of modernity. Memory itself becomes skewed and molded by the handiwork of violence. Ricoeur understands founding events[125] to be "acts of violence legitimated after the fact by a precarious state of right," which already enunciates the deliberate erasures and calibrations of both fact and memory that govern available discourses, and laments "how much violence in the world stands as acting out 'in place of' remembering" (79). Which is to say, when put simply, that rather than remembering and acting in accordance with the full light of that memory, our utilization of violence serves to retain rather than revise the status quo of a given context. We remember how we think it has been, and use violence to deflect any encroaching externalities that threaten that precept—those dead and haunting pieces of genuine historical memory which are indeed alive—as though memory were mercantile, an underlying psycho-geography to be fought over. Inductees into such contexts, those who inherit it along with all of its naturalizing mechanisms, are themselves limited to those horizons in both historical and individual memory, and so the material available to imagine beyond those confines.

The point I am emphasizing here is that imagination can be limited. If history and memory are attempts to order the chaos of the world, Morrison finds that there are two popular human responses in the confrontation with chaos, naming and violence, both of which serve to subordinate and incorporate under the banner of domination ("Peril" 3). A third response, Morrison proposes the stillness of art and those writers who themselves "construct meaning in the face of chaos," who must be protected, for she contemplates "with dread the erasure of other voices, of unwritten novels, poems whispered or swallowed for fear of being overheard by the wrong people, outlawed languages flourishing underground, essayists' questions challenging authority never being posed, unstaged plays, canceled films" as though a "whole universe is being described in invisible ink" ("Peril" 3-4). Morrison here describes the violence and mercantilism of modernity and its constitutive epistemology.

I would like next to situate Morrison's concern for our culturally impoverished imaginations and her attempt to break out of this context in her work, using her own reflections on the craft to guide our understanding of her artistic project. I will then demonstrate some of these instances of failed imagination in her work (*A Mercy* and *Beloved*) and the implications that are drawn from them. These failures of imagination, I will show, also find themselves in the critical discussion of Morrison's work (effectively expanding beyond the novel form). Finally, I would like to propose Morrison's project as one that provides understanding on a higher level as a strategy and solution for these problems of history, memory, and imagination that I have just outlined.

Morrison undercuts this imaginative poverty in ways that are at once subtle, using a form with longevity and history such as the novel, and at the same time confrontational, as she disrupts the limits defined by traditional novels and what they speak about. History, memory, and imagination orbit around and reinforce one another, observing the limited reach of their scope the more they gravitate toward and reproduce one another. Morrison's artistic aspiration is to both transgress and transcend a context—that of modernity and the litany of blood-soaked iniquities that constitute it—from within its very core. The very weight of modernity ceaselessly demarcates its self-reproducing and self-enclosing horizons. Well acquainted with this

---

[125] For more on the notion of positive violence—the violence that founds nations, wins revolutions, and ensures rights—see Richard Maxwell Brown's "Historical Patterns of Violence in America" in *The History of Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (1969).

imprisoning weight, Morrison reflects on the dominant criteria of legitimate representation in our own era and its increasingly entrenched anatomy of myopia:

> I sometimes think how glorious it must have been to have written drama in sixteenth-century England, or poetry in ancient Greece, or religious narrative in the Middle Ages, when literature was need and did not have a critical history to constrain or diminish the writer's imagination. How magnificent not to have to depend on the reader's literary associations—his literary experience—which can be as much an impoverishment of the reader's imagination as it is of a writer's. ("MCW" 387)

That we imagine these other contexts (Greek antiquity, Shakespeare's England, the religious age of the medieval world) as possessing greater freedom of expression might seem anathema in light of our contemporary understanding of expression, speech, and a free and unrestrained press that circulates widely. Indeed we recollect immediately an array of limitations that would accompany writers in all of these eras Morrison mentions: the ultimate subservience rendered to the state in *Antigone*, the need for Shakespeare's monarchical bloodbaths to sometimes be sensitively set outside of his native kingdom, in Denmark, Venice, or Rome, or the care with which a religious devotee must remain on canonical grounds so as not to be rendered heretical in the time that would soon give rise to the terrors of the Inquisition. These are only a few readily identifiable examples, but rather than lamenting the oppressive forces of bygone eras, Morrison's more important point revolves around precedent more than persecution, although the two often appear as conjoined twins, precedent established a steady narrowing and stripping away of divergent ways of thinking. It establishes, in short, an archive from which the cultural and community epistemology draws and, in doing so, reinforces and strengthens the gravity and influence it exerts while delegitimizing all outside of its boundaries. Hence, these issues of tradition, of associations and reproduction, imitations and repetitions. Precedent is the major issue here in Morrison's statement. With less of it, there is more room to think and fewer ready-mades, less imagination assaulted on all fronts by forms that need only to be filled with received ideas which, in an era of widespread technological communication, are evermore restricted by the apparatuses that spread them.

Writing in a period saturated with prefabricated containers waiting to ease and absorb the critical exercise of imaginative power makes Morrison's project all the more difficult for the simple reason that it might be understood improperly, falling into a preformed interpretive narrative rather than revealing the problems of precedent that it does in the first place. It is at its core, I claim, this prefabrication in thinking, imagining, and living, that her writing works so tenaciously to overcome. Her second novel, *Sula,* contains an introductory "lobby" where the "reader could be situated before being introduced to the goings-on of the characters," even though she prefers, as with her first and subsequent novels, the "demolition of that lobby altogether" (*Sula,* "Foreword" xv). To subvert comfort and expectation, and to revoke the ready-made, already-interpreted so as to make readers more starkly aware of the received, prefabricated world in which their thoughts reside, remains at the heart of her project. These few instances cited give an impression of how she has gone about this. As Morrison succinctly puts it—poignant in and beyond our contemporary political moment of post-truth discourse and the prospect of selecting the grand narrative one prefers—the received world, that which conceals the contexts which lull us into a specific trajectory of thinking, gives rise to what is perhaps the

most pressing problem of our time (sometimes anthropomorphized into the monolith of capitalism): a "comatose public" ("Peril" 2).

If the problem of precedence—which is also conjoined to the problems of history, memory, and context noted above—remains at the center of Morrison's work, and if her work aims to transgress the oppressive violence that results from the perpetuation of unrestrained precedence, then it is partly through understanding that received worlds exist in the first place that we recognize the authenticity of precedence as a problem.

As I will now show, Morrison enunciates this loudly, academically in her essays and imaginatively in her fiction. The very same theme finds its way into the critical discussions of her work, and I will end this section with a brief display of this because it indicates the degree to which the problems Morrison confronts saturate our shared reality on an epistemological level.

In "The Site of Memory" Morrison articulates the problems of a received world—of a received epistemology—with respect to the autobiographical subgenre of the slave narrative.[126] Aside from the great urge to assert a truth claim in accounts of former slaves, many of which, Morrison points out, are "loaded" with testaments to their authenticity, these narratives were written primarily to elucidate the circumstances of a single individual and for whites to learn the humanity of blacks (86). In this way, the slave narrative is already given over into the realm of a hegemonic, received world, the tools of which are capable of explicating only a vision of life framed beneath the machinery of a white society. This is why Morrison goes to lengths to discuss the means by which slave narratives fueled the abolitionist cause (and I would also point out these narratives might by necessity be required to borrow the style and sonority of the white voice so that reading a slave narrative can sound strikingly similar to reading Washington, Paine, or Jefferson). She emphasizes the pressures of needing to not dwell "too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experiences" for fear of offending certain audience sensibilities or too radically revealing a community of complicity; and the self-effacing side effect of being required—not by outward criteria so much as ideological restraint and market pressure—to complement the white audience by "assuming his nobility of heart and his high-mindedness" (87-90). The problem of the writing slave to assert himself as a certain type of human being, a need to become other than what he is by entering into and embracing a specific set of measures that can be understood as a fully legitimate human.[127] Indeed, the tripartite requisite of asserting authenticity, depicting the singular experience of an individual (which serves to undercut this very authenticity in availing itself to the dismissability of the "unique" or "exceptional" rule even when the extremities of the experience are commonplace), and of attentively appealing to an audience with certain values all serve to curtail the horizons of thought and expression (for both the writer of a slave narrative who has only the "literary history" of his enslavers to advance from and for the reader whose imaginative parameters are reinforced). The milieu, Morrison writes, "dictated the purpose and the style" of these writings (90), and the absence of an interior life arises as at the apex of her concern. We see clearly, then, how and why an interiority has vanished in this particular period, and Morrison's project is to ascertain it again, to "rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" (91). As she says, "infidelity to that milieu—the absence of the interior life, the deliberate excising of it from the records that the slaves themselves told—is precisely the problem in the discourse that proceeded without us" (92). If we

[126] Her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" also elaborates upon the frameworks of the slave narrative in an useful and analogous fashion.

[127] See Mark Greif's *The Age of the Crisis of Man* (2015) for a discussion of Man as a discursive concept and Alexander G. Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus* (2014) for a related discussion of the genres of the human.

assert this understanding of the slave narrative as one example of a wider epistemological machinery that forecloses upon certain possibilities of thought and therefore action, then this milieu, this discourse, what I have referred to above as the confinement of the received world—the constellation of history, memory, and context—continues without us today, that us being the anonymous masses thinking and acting within the epistemology of modernity, because we do not sufficiently understand or recognize the milieu that conditions our thoughts and imagination (the prohibition of slaves from becoming literate represents a damning testament to how the imagination can be intentionally confined). An improvised imagination is a very pernicious and symptomatic thing that in our modern world permits such questions as this: why didn't they (slaves) just write about what actually happened (truth)? The answer—certainly complex but nonetheless not overtly subtle—has already been supplied above, although abbreviated. This is the problem of an unrecognized context that has recourse only to itself: it becomes as though a received world does not exist and any given milieu is already total.

But received worlds do exist, and just as Morrison has expressed this in her academic work she does too in her fiction. Her depiction of the world of slavery is a wealthy ground for exploring the limitations of received contexts and the poverty of imagination that continues to reinforce itself today. I will here restrict my discussion to some preliminary words about *Beloved* and a single example from *A Mercy*, the two of Morrison's novels set (mnemonically and temporally) during the period of slavery in the Americas.

Though much has already been written on *Beloved*, it is worth reemphasizing the extremity of the central situation briefly to illustrate how Morrison escorts readers to the borderlines of the unspeakable. Not only do we glimpse the profoundly oppressive surroundings of slavery, but we are also brought to recognize the intense limitations it places on options and choices, wrought to the degree that would render infanticide not only acceptable but ethical—although to ascribe the ultimate agency of the infant's death to Sethe is to be misled. As Morrison says in her foreword to the novel, the "heroine would represent the unapologetic acceptance of shame and terror" resulting from her deed and "assume the consequences of choosing infanticide" to "claim her own freedom" (*Beloved*, "Foreword" xvii). Too confined by the historical Margaret Garner and because of the hitherto un-accessed interior discussed above, Morrison found "too little imaginative space there for [her] purposes" (*Beloved,* "Foreword" xvii).[128] The killing—the murder and the saving (at least from slavery)—and the world of slavery remain somewhat buried in the text itself, concealed as one event, one fact, among many others, as it is, in the fashion of Morrison's strategy of the depiction of whole lives. Still, as Marc C. Conner argues, *Beloved*—the novel and the character—"signifies the most ambitious attempt in Morrison's fiction to give representation to the unrepresentable" (67). Suggesting that Morrison's aesthetic concerns have always been the sublime, that domain of the "awesome and awful" that so captured the Romantics, Conner follows Lyotard, Bloom, Jameson, de Man, and others in differentiating a postmodern sublime whose register has shifted from contact with or experience of the divine and the possibility of transcendence in its original iteration, to contact with or experience of the diabolic and the probability of destruction in its postmodern rendition

---

[128] In this same foreword, Morrison also states her intentions for the reader: "I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book's population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense" (*Beloved,* "Foreword" xviii). Another failure of imagination enters the arena when one does not recognize the marriage of both content and theme: that is, that the reader is situated into a position similar to that of the captive slave in having his world dislocated.

(50-1). Clearly, as a "postmodern," Morrison's novels involve "experiences of terror, fragmentation, and apocalypse" that Conner has synthesized from the latter part of the twentieth century (51). Conner's ultimate argument is that Morrison's work entails an engagement between individual and community that has progressed from the sublime to the beautiful and that her goal in writing is to "seek a way in which the individual can survive, and even flourish, within the larger boundary of the life-world" (52). If we can only condemn, even sympathetically, the actions of Sethe and fail to recognize a context that has made the infanticide an ethical act, then we have also failed to recognize the context out of which we have arrived at the condemnation and so have also failed in our imaginative capacity to take one of the novel's central lessons seriously, namely that Sethe's transgression of dominant ethical principles reveals the foundations of those principles—Enlightenment reason, Kantian morality, and so forth—are the very factors that in addition to enslaving human beings have also bound imaginations into captivity as well. While readers of the novel can remain the outraged yet comatose public, there is nothing different for Sethe to do. And this is how we recognize these instances of the unspeakable in Morrison first, before we can come to understand them. *Beloved* pushes the imagination to the act of infanticide, but the problem entailed in the interpretive apparatus is focusing on the morality of the deed because it is a morality only for a certain kind of human which, in this case, outrageously seems to apply without the benefits of freedom, citizenship, recognition as a human, and so forth. Finally, a reading of *Beloved* threatens to befall the same interpretive problems of an individual's context-specific experiences just the same as a (mis)reading of slave narratives in which the subtleties Morrison underlines in "The Site of Memory" go unrecognized. It similarly gives rise to the I-would-do-this-differently-if-I-were-there injunction of a reader misrecognizing their own contextual and imaginative limitations: ignorance of context, illusions of choice, delusions of the availability of imaginative options, as though they reach indiscriminately across contexts.

A Mercy offers another way to conceptualize the contextual dislocation Morrison ushers us into as well as the resulting ethical dislocation that begins to illuminate the instability of our shared social and epistemological foundations. On the one hand, the mercy that the novel's title refers to, the giving away of the slave child to Jacob Vaark by the slave mother, represents another unspeakable act that nonetheless seems contextually appropriate within Morrison's project. In justifying the human mercy, careful not to elevate it to the realm of the divine, Florens's mother imparts the following statement to her daughter, although Florens will never be able to receive it, at the end of the novel: "to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing" (*M* 195). And while hard, wrong, and wicked do not offer us very much in terms of guidance or ethical elaboration, we can understand the narrative act that the unnamed mother performs throughout the novel in explicating her actions—itself an act of imaginative potency since the narrating voice is dislocated from any audience in its testimony—as means by and within which we can shift our understanding of contextual, and thus epistemological, grounds. To shift into a different mode of experience and expression underlines the imaginative strength contained within a Morrison novel. Otherwise, that power that should leave us moved when we are so often only touched by a work of art maintains its dormancy.

Perhaps a more important example, though, for the failures of a reader's imagination comes in the character of Jacob Vaark, the white mercy-giver of the novel's title whose character represents much to be admired in a period in which human flesh was a commodity but whose seemingly advanced ethical behaviors are compromised by the larger machinery (or context) in

which he can do nothing other than find himself. When we first encounter him in the opening of the novel, traveling, in his life of "confrontation, risk and placating" and of "hardship, adventure" that attracts and motivates him (*M* 13), to D'Ortega's where he will obtain the slave child, Jacob Vaark is consistently described in ethically wholesome terms. We learn that "few things angered Jacob more than the brutal handling of domesticated animals," that in one instance as he watches a man beat a horse we learn that his own "fury was not only because of the pain it inflicted on the horse, but because of the mute, unprotesting surrender glazing its eyes" (*M* 33) (where else might we find a better parallel to the abuse of human slaves, for which this scene prepares us?), and that on his way to D'Ortega's he pauses and dismounts his horse in order to "free the bloody hindleg of a young raccoon stuck in a tree break" (*M* 12);[129] we learn that that "flesh was not his commodity" as he winces at the idea of selling human beings to garner profit as one would lumber, tobacco, or potatoes (*M* 25); we learn that he is frugal and distains the wasteful luxuries D'Ortega surrounds himself with, the "overdressed wife, wasting candles in midday" and the "foolish, incomprehensible talk and inedible dishes," the prodigality and mismanagement of which are the sources of D'Ortega's debuts (*M* 22), and he "sneered at wealth dependent on a captive workforce that requires more force to maintain" (*M* 32); and of course we know that Florens's mother observes something distinct or different in him, that there was "no animal in his heart" (*M* 191), and so based upon this perception urges him to take her daughter away, the mercy of the novel's title, and we know too this is not the only occasion on which he has taken on a ward (*M* 38, 160). And though this would seem to set Jacob apart and provide the moral grounds for the novel, we know other things about him as well. We know that he grows envious upon beholding the size and splendor of D'Ortega's home, that he desires to construct three living structures on his own farm, and that, unlike his apparently enduring respect for animals, the trees he fells in order to accomplish this unnecessary feat of luxury "without asking their permission" would doubtlessly "stir up malfortune" (*M* 51); we know that while flesh is not his commodity and a captive workforce beyond his interests, he is still a capitalist; we know that he sends off for a wife as one might a slave, that Rebekka's "father would have shipped her off to anyone who would book her passage and relieve him of feeding her" and that her mother opposed the "sale," as she calls it "because the prospective groom had stressed 'reimbursement' for clothing, expenses and a few supplies—not for love or need of her daughter, but because the husband-to-be was a heathen living among savages" (*M* 86);[130] we know that he collects around him a network of women—Florens, Lina, Rebekka, Sorrow—with other men at a distance and in his death exposes them to all manner of uncertainty, for as long as he was alive it was "easy to veil the truth: that they were not a family" nor even a "like-minded group," being "orphans, each and all" (*M* 69) who are exposed before and thereafter to the "consequences of women in thrall to men," and who "once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation" (*M* 182-3); we also know that even in life when his wife "beat Sorrow, had Lina's hammock taken down, advertised the sale of Florens, he

---

[129] The gesture ultimately reveals itself to be the help that doesn't help: for "once he succeeded, the raccoon limped off, perhaps to the mother forced to abandon it or more likely into other claws" (*M* 12). The former case—aside from preparing us for the titular mercy, another mother forced to abandon her child—reeks of futility, while the latter acknowledges the pointlessness of the deed.

[130] Morrison elaborates: "Worth every day of the long search made necessary because taking over the patroonship required a wife, and because [Jacob] wanted a certain kind of mate: an unchurched woman of childbearing age, obedient but not groveling, literate but not proud, independent but nurturing" (*M* 23). Again, it is not difficult to imagine this very same form of discourse emerging from the mouth of a slaver at the market as he elucidates the various qualities of the human contraband he sells.

cringed inside but said nothing" because he was "determined to be quit of servitude forever, and for that, money was a guarantee" (*M* 182). This barrage of details serves to illustrate the point that for all his moralistic and appealing qualities, he is still a capitalist, has a captive wife and captive foundlings and servants, slaves even, and his farm runs to some extent not unlike a captive-labor plantation. The absence of a master remains an invitation for disorder, and the same principles of a slaver-owner, gentleman-farmer nonetheless apply to Jacob Vaark. He is not the compassionate counterpart to the cruel slaver-capitalist; he is merely the less empowered version. Indeed, in his encounter with D'Ortega he "for the first time had not tricked, not flattered, not manipulated" as he would typically need to do, but had "gone head to head with rich gentry" and, to underscore the point, "realized, not for the first time, that only things, not bloodlines or character, separated them" (*M* 31). This instance is a victory for him over D'Ortega (a rival businessman), an increase in his own power, a power to barging, to hold sway and authority over, to win and manipulate—"if your word is worthless, there is only the law" (*M* 27)—by means of that very power. What the mercy means for the mother may be quite different than what it means for the man. Only things separate him from D'Ortega; only things separate the wealthy and powerful from the less wealthy and powerful: one has more, one has less, and both ply the same trade.

It is important here to reemphasize the point made in the previous section about whole lives, for the narrative of *A Mercy* plunges into these with the same vigor as do Morrison's other novels—for each woman at the center of this centerless novel receives her due description and depth. It is also important, for our current purposes, to point out the interpretive limitations of elevating Jacob Vaark as the character of exceptional uprightness whose disposition represents much to be admired (though it does, but this is not a whole picture) in a period in which human beings—slaves and non-slaves—are commodities, in whom choice and imagination are oppressively impoverished, and whose legacy we continue to confront, however invisible or concealed it is, in our lives today. So if readers are to reassure themselves with the portrait of a good guy situated in bad times to placate the inheritance of that violent and foundational period, they have failed in their imaginations to recognize the subtle ways in which this pernicious perspective continues to erode the world today. Though situated in a superior moral position where normative ethics are concerned, the novel does nothing less than reveal to us that Jacob Vaark and D'Ortega are equivalent characters—endorsers of the same epistemology. Even if one lauds the compassion and morality of Jacob Vaark, he still represents the same sunkenness of an epistemology that transforms beings into things. If one wishes to recognize the presence of such a character in such a period as an antidote to the claim that history, memory, and context do anything less than generate the world today, or to claim that because such an exception to the rule (though he is not an exception) invalidates the significance of our contemporary world's inheritance of violence and institutionalized racism, and our culture of exploitation, then the imagination has failed to reach out of its own context, to say nothing of its ability to recognize its epistemological confinement. To take this away from the novel is precisely to oppose what the narrative itself relates to its reader, and thus my continuing emphasis on the importance of interpretive capacity and Morrison's concern for a comatose public.

I have given an account of the means by which Morrison relates the inclemencies and iniquities of accepting our received ideas without critical examination in both her academic writing and her fiction, to better make the case that this concern writhes at the center of her narrative project. I would like to close this section by showing how this concern—that of a

problematic kind of misreading that winds up endorsing the positions a narrative is intended to oppose or effectively neutralizes them—enters into the criticism of Morrison's work as well.

In critical discussions of *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is often associated with pejorative labels of insanity, as though this (her destabilized mental state) is the source of her ostracism and she is the responsible party for its emergence. Such a reading, of course, would be to completely abandon the subversive and epistemologically revealing thrust of the novel's narrative, whose focus is on the social, structural, and ideological factors that result from the one-dimensional and misleading comprehension of an individual as solely accountable for her own actions and the actions visited upon her. It represents, too, a failure of imagination and a misplaced emphasis on the significant aspect of the book (what I have called the depiction of whole lives above). There are plentiful examples, and we can read that Pecola "can only succeed in her insanity" (Otten 9), of how she "loses all sense of reality" (Byerman 101), of her katabastic-sounding "descent into madness" (Duvall 32), her "ensuing madness" (Gibson 166), and the way in which she possessed a "psychotic desire for blue eyes" (Samuels 110) and "goes quietly mad into the fantasy world of her newly acquired blue eyes" (Dee 19). In each case, so much emphasis is placed on Pecola as the agent, and thus responsible party. But whatever madness takes hold of her does not belong to or originate with her, however much it will consume her. There is a difference between stating that "we of course recall that Pecola's friend is hallucinated, the product of her madness" or that the "voice [arises] within her psyche when she becomes psychotic" (Gibson 162, 170) and stating that she "splits into two personalities" (Lake 89). I prefer, of course, the latter, because it does not brand Pecola crazy and does not render her the agent of her own destruction. The convoluted problem of love, also, remains among the most despair-inducing and insidious revelations the novel showcases.[131] Love is reckoned thus, at the onset of menstruation which is effectively the time that a female can now produce a child, although, in their child's understanding "somebody has to love you" as Frieda tells Pecola, which added to the predetermined notion that "my man" who "before leaving me, would love me" (*BE* 32), added to Cholly's raping of his daughter, results in the idea that this very act, as far as Pecola is concerned, rape, is the culmination of love itself.

Although I am not claiming that each of these critics endorses the interpretation that Pecola is by any means to blame for the actions visited upon her, I am claiming that the consideration I have just made points us toward the importance of language, something that Morrison is severely concerned about. As she writes in *Playing in the Dark*, "agendas in criticism have disguised themselves and, in so doing, impoverished the literature it studies," indeed becoming "capable of robbing literature not only of its own implicit and explicit ideology but of its ideas as well" (*PD* 8-9).

The means by which this linguistic and interpretive problem can be combatted has been addressed by Morrison in various places—and very strongly in *Playing in the Dark*—and yet these failures of imagination, the misconstruing of history, memory, and context, doubtless continue to plague the modern world in a myriad of arenas. Morrison's fiction labors to reveal the extent to which imagination is impoverished by its unconscious adherence to a confined context, and urges readers—whose very interpretive tools are often maligned by the limits of that context—to recognize the wider operations of an epistemology that constitutes them. One way to avoid the failures of imagination I have detailed above is to take such works of fiction—works that hold the potential to move us, rather than merely touch us—as realities rather than fictions,

---

[131] A useful comparison remains to be made between our understanding of and reaction to Pecola's split personality and its connection to the similarly divided Sorrow/Twin from *A Mercy*.

as imminently lived now, as they are, and as having shaped the very confines of imagination (which includes within it ideology, memory, received history, common knowledge, and individual and social contexts). Morrison's project offers us this level of perception by presenting understanding as the ultimate. It is to that understanding that we now turn.

§4: Space to Understand: *Love*, *Paradise*, and the Afterworld

The preceding sections have prepared us to arrive at the notion of understanding, the central concept of Morrison's narrative project. I have detailed the prerequisite necessitated in becoming susceptible to being *moved* by a work of art or an occurrence in the world (§1). I have offered Morrison's strategy of depicting whole lives, the representations of which are unburdened by hegemonic ethics and thus less likely to fuel their policing reproductive effect, as the effect that opens us to understanding (§2). And I have discussed some of the limitations and disabling tendencies in how we read, think, and respond to works of art that are obstacles to our ability to understand the other and the responses and remedies Morrison builds into her work (§3).

While understanding as a philosophical concept remains undertheorized in general, and while its denotative meaning gestures toward a sense of compassion, sympathy, tolerance, and tenderness that remains inadequate, understanding as a conceptual notion also indicates awareness and, what's more, absorption and assimilation. These latter meanings help to render understanding as an ontological endeavor. That is to say, understanding is a process—via assimilation and absorption—in which one takes onto and into oneself the complicated contours of something hitherto unknown and invisible, something that becomes more completely rendered and incorporated into one's repertoire for informed decision-making. A subject becomes less what they are (as a modern subject and the attachments it entails) and more of what they now understand. The awareness generated in this process permits one to more holistically perceive the constitutive structures that comprise themselves as subjects and the world around them and come to know how that arrangement has arisen (to come to stand beneath, to literally stand under and witness the situation of components, to see what is beneath the foundation). Understanding is to better witness the foundational structures comprising the world subjects occupy. Sustained understanding is the process of becoming other.

Although much could be said to extend and clarify this presentation of understanding, the concept itself seems a solution for shifting away from the epistemology of modernity. I have already insisted above on the need for cultivating a capability to imagine difference, to be able to be touched and not only moved, to recognize one's agency which threatens to be obscured by uncritical acceptance of modernity's postulates. The insistence on the primacy of the self, reiterated in almost every social apparatus, remains a major obstacle to the notion of becoming other. What is certain throughout Morrison's narrative project is the radical insistence on pursuing avenues of thinking that are different in scope and shape, in assumption and foundation, then are the dominant epistemological codes of modernity.

Understanding is the goal throughout Morrison's work and also the wider strategy (helped along by the depiction of whole lives) for which a shift away from the epistemology of modernity can conceivably be achieved. Morrison's narrative project as I have mapped it out here also represents a pathway through this process—from identifying the problem of becoming moved, to revealing the whole and understandable lives of others, to cataloging the obstacles to

imagination and empathy. We arrive at understanding and becoming other as the culmination of the process. Morrison insists on this.

There remains also an insistence in both the tenor of Morrison's fiction and the criticism that commentates upon it and its broad implications that some form of afterworld or deathworld or realm of non-life is the place for understanding and recognition to transpire between characters and concepts. The insistence continues to produce a paradox that we will ultimately resolve: at the same time this vague afterworld is understood to be the place of understanding, the texts (literary and critical) persistently indicate that this afterworld is more of the same, that it is an unbroken continuation of our lived reality, that it is in fact the selfsame present. To put it more reductively: (a) the place for understanding is in the afterworld, among characters and concepts; (b) the afterworld is just like life, merely an extension of it: it is, in fact, the present; (c) therefore our epistemological understanding of the afterworld must change: we need, in other words, to erode and kill our dominant idea of the afterworld as the place of understanding and recognize it as the world today, in the present. It is my argument that this three-step indication signals the aching need for an alternative epistemology, and that if death is the only locale in which understanding can take place we need to change our epistemological constructs concerning what constitutes life and subjectivity, since the aspiration for an afterworld to solve our contemporary problems reveals us to be living in a dead and immobile world.

I will focus on how both *Love* and *Paradise* advance understanding as an epistemologically imperative notion even while their plots evince yet additional examples of the kinds of interpretive and imaginative failures discussed above. The place of change, the place where understanding can occur, is always a deathworld—it is both a way and a way out: a way and a place to practice difference in thinking, being, and becoming that is otherwise relentlessly subverted by the epistemology of modernity. To think differently, to pursue critical thought unsubverted by the profligate frustrations of modernity, has long been a central concern in Morrison's work.

I have already mentioned that understanding and the process of becoming other are intensely interrelated (to understand something is to become other—and we might say more—than what you are). In *The Origin of Others*, published in 2017, Morrison writes that "narrative fiction provides a controlled wilderness, an opportunity to be and to become the Other" or the "stranger" (*OoO* 91). She writes that her most famous novel, *Beloved,* is "about the understandable versus the savage act of child murder" and that her "principle interest was in trying to fathom the mother-in-law's inability to condemn her daughter-in-law for murder" (*OoO* 82). In all cases her work encourages us not to be unspeakably horrified by the world she describes but to understand, to fathom, how such arrangements come to situate themselves. The major question in terms of revealing a literary strategy for such a project is to ask what is required to accomplish this. Morrison has made attempts to accomplish this communication of understanding both through de-racialized language and by revealing the structures that obfuscate oppression (both of which I will discuss below, and both of which are preparatory but insufficient), but I claim that it is through the afterworld, through the depiction of death, that Morrison most superlatively achieves this difference. I will focus on *Love* and *Paradise* to show this. It is this afterworld, this narration beyond life, that seeks the limit of our understanding and extends it.

The de-racialization of language represents one intervention in which Morrison has sought to prepare readers to understand the other, and is most pronounced in "Recitatif" and *Paradise* and to some extent *Love*. De-racialized language is also a powerful step in

understanding because race is epistemological in nature, in the sense that it is deeply embedded in how we understand what counts as human both in terms of identification based on appearance (which is the same as saying identification based on difference) and in terms of modern statecraft in which race has long dictated the available avenues toward political subjectivity and access to rights accompanied by a vast history of exclusionary violence. The prospect of de-racialized language, however, displays a duel potential. It is on one hand a promotion of the necessary and positive act of unlearning the codes of modernity and divesting oneself of the ingrained and immediate ideological dispositions that accompany it. On the other hand, the removal of racial signifiers can also promote a kind of colorblindness shown to be socially detrimental and elide the need for considering difference that such language hopes to promote (however much a misreading either of these would be). Such a language also threatens—as is the case in *Paradise*, where the all-black town of Ruby aspires to keep itself racially pure—to intensify the problems of difference Morrison is so intent on healing. The problem arrives, of course, in the naïve reading of a de-raced language as a utopian achievement rather than with attention to the process of obtaining mastery and ownership over such a language, which requires meticulous acts of unlearning and resistance to the readily available codes of modernity.

As Herman Beavers says, the strongest passages and themes in Morrison are those wherein she "creates instability within systems of meaning (race, gender, class, etc.) where we are most comfortable resting on well-established assumptions" as she reveals the problematic "kinds of thinking that emerge from moribund systems of thought" (219). Though Beavers does not discuss de-racialized language at length, consider the way in which its presence generates the productive instability he refers to here. Indeed, as Justine Baillie points out, Morrison seeks to decontaminate language of its violent ideological freight by de-racing it. It is the presence of that freighted language for which Baillie also implicitly understands Morrison as addressing the need for an epistemological shift, though she does not use the language of epistemology to explain it. Rather, Baillie writes that Morrison envisions some kind of end of race in which the notion of home "comes to mean a space from which it is recognized that the promises of twentieth-century discourse remain unrealized and that, as antinomies of modernity's rationalisms, they have evaporated along with the grand narratives themselves" (162). Leaving aside the prospect of the end of race—as capricious as the end of history—Baillie's indication that the promises of modernity (those of liberty, autonomy, and protection) are untenable and bankrupt should be sufficient sign that a different framework is vital. The prospect remains fraught with difficulty when one considers the deliberation necessary to evacuate language from its racial signifiers against the ease with which one can retain and use the raced language that is already readily available.

Morrison's own comments on the matter suffice to illustrate the necessary difficulty inherent in the task of de-racializing language. Writing "non-colorist literature about black people," Morrison says, "is a task I have found both liberating and hard" (*OoO* 51), echoing the same refrain twenty-four years earlier in her forward to *The Bluest Eye* where she writes that her narrative project is laced with difficulty because of the conceptual associations invested in language. Clarifying further, she writes:

> I became interested in the portrayal of blacks by culture rather than skin color: when color alone was their bête noire, when it was incidental, and when it was unknowable, or deliberately withheld. The latter offered me an interesting opportunity to ignore the fetish of color as well as a certain freedom accompanied

> by some very careful writing. In some novels I theatricalized the point by not only refusing to rest on racial signs but also alerting the reader to my strategy. (*OoO* 49)

Morrison's elevation of culture (that human interior she points out as being absent from slave narratives) over skin color (the ready-made exterior sign announcing inequality without reference to individuality) is telling, since the latter is coded in such a way that it obscures the former, helped along by generations of systemized violence and social reinforcement in the minds and in the bodies of those who were enslaved and those who were not. The opening sentence of *Paradise*—in which the all-black men of Ruby first murder the white woman before proceeding to the other multi-ethic Convent women—proffers the "ploy," as Morrison says, and her attempts in *Home* to "create a work in which color was erased but could easily be assumed if the reader paid close attention to the codes" was "so very successful in forcing the reader to ignore color that it made my editor nervous," whereupon Morrison reluctantly "layered in references that verified Frank Money, the main character's, race" which was a "mistake that defied my purpose" (*OoO* 50-1). We can add to Morrison's list of difficulties the "lobby" accompanying the opening of *Sula* in which the reader is to be invited into the world of Bottom so he can become "situated before being introduced to the goings-on of the characters" (*S* xv) in a way that is safely grounded in fiction and so assists in deflecting the work's real-world relevance.

Morrison first attempts this technique of de-racializing language in her 1983 short story "Recitatif" in which the "characters are divvied by race, but all racial codes have been deliberately removed," but instead of "relating to plot and character development, most readers insist on searching for what I have refused them" (*OoO* 52-3). "What more, really," Morrison asks, "do you know about these characters when you do know their race? Anything?" (*OoO* 66). To read along lines of race—those of color rather than culture—is to embrace universal, hegemonic, homogenizing codes that will certainly lead one into compromised interpretations. To read race as any kind of shortcut to comprehension can only be to strengthen a stereotype, to reinforce pervasive and quiet violence. That Morrison frequently alerts the reader to this strategy as she employs it, that it is a deliberate and difficult effort, only emphasizes its implications. It is equally as important for the reader to recognize and follow what the writer is doing as it is for the writer to do it. The point of this brief discussion concerning Morrison's employment of de-raced language—which should in no way be confused with writing about un-raced characters—is to argue that it is an essential component of her project but it is not enough to accomplish her goals. The effective employment of de-raced language, moreover, is a preparatory component in departing from the trajectories of received ideas and inherited prejudices. Writing with a de-raced language, to harken back to Nabokov, is also the risk of fiction, for at the same time it opens a ripe and critical world of possibilities for identifying and revising hegemonic assumptions it also threatens to neutralize its own efforts if it causes readers to find contentment with their own colorblindness or inspires celebrations of a post-racial environment whose advent has clearly not captured the contemporary period.

In an examination of women's communities in several of Morrison's novels, Sandra Cox traces how Morrison has given increasing attention to the "problem of creating community without colonization and respecting difference without creating hierarchy" (97). With one outcome of understanding how such communities can succeed, Cox explores *Beloved*, *Paradise*, and *A Mercy* and ultimately claims that in order to "build an intrafeminine community that

rejects the racism of dominant American culture, so, too, must Morrison's readers, who come to find their own vexed mechanisms for identifying with characters across identity-based differences as those differences are reflected in the text" (98). De-racializing language is one strategy for revealing a reader's vexed interior mechanisms for recognition and reaction, as assumptions about characters arise unprovoked by the texts but emanate rather from the reader's associations with normalized prejudice and repressed racism. That those mechanisms can also be projected back onto the texts, onto its conventional generic or sub-generic habitat, or onto the author is what does not allow the strategy to work in isolation.

While the calculated deployment of de-racialized language—one that necessarily marries aesthetics to active engagement with today's political, social, and ideological predicament—is not a strategy present throughout Morrison's novels, her relentless work to reveal the structures of oppression and the systematic obfuscations that conceal them is one of the most pervasive and illuminating interventions her novels offer. Deliberately foregrounding these oppressive and obfuscating structures is frequent throughout Morrison's work. However—much to the chagrin of a hope to shift epistemologies—revealing the ideological anatomy and practical mechanics of repressive structures, as we well know, is no guarantee that actions will be taken against them on a meaningful level. Indeed, Morrison's propensity for representing structures of oppression, along with the subtle complexities this requires, remains susceptible to the unsolved problem of being touched but not moved that I have discussed above. I will give a few brief examples to illustrate this point.

The much-discussed internalization of self-hatred which is the perpetuating structure of racism provided in *The Bluest Eye* displays for readers precisely *how* such effects can transpire and we can see also (via cause and reinforcement) the devastating effects it has on the individual psyche, to say nothing of the community: from Claudia's dismemberment of the white doll which establishes the hegemonic standard of (white) beauty; to the active othering represented by the novel's Dick and Jane primer; to the dysfunctional and mutually intensifying relationship of Cholly and Pauline Breedlove, who pass down to their children through their actions wrenched definitions of and models for love, relationships, and normativity, which helps obfuscate the larger problems of racism and inequality with the more local problems of intimacy, family, substance abuse, or, most reductively, individual psychology; to the dreadful prospect of being put outdoors which fuels a hunger for property and ownership for African Americans in the transition from being property to needing property to be, inviting African Americans into a system of inequality and forcing them to participate now as "willing" subjects of capitalism. This desire for property is also pronounced in *Song of Solomon*, *Love*, and elsewhere, and evinces the difficult constellation of obfuscations that can grow over deeper issues and announce themselves as though they are root causes themselves.

That *The Bluest Eye* is intended to reveal oppressive structures the author says herself. So, it is not as though belaboring the many examples is necessary here. The process of structural revelation extends beyond the world of the novel for Morrison, whose own reading of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* shows that we can search out the systems of oppression even when they do not make themselves immediately legible or when their announcement is not the express intention of the writer, whose disposition is more in line with enforcing rather than eradicating those systems. This is the case in *Playing in the Dark*, and I should also say that Morrison's reading of Defoe breaches the literary realm and bears direct political currency on the 1991 appointment to the Supreme Court of Clarence Thomas. Morrison characterizes *Robinson Crusoe* as a "success story, one in which a socially, culturally, and biologically handicapped black man is civilized

and Christianized—taught, in other words, to be like a white one" ("Friday on the Potomac" xxiii). While Friday incurs the internalization of witness to the detriment of his own identity and agency, Morrison points out that he also takes on the problem of the rescued, which is a debt to be repaid in full forever, the cost of being interpolated into the white, colonializing world ("Friday on the Potomac" xxv-xxvi).[132] For the colonizer, for Crusoe, comfort comes as this subdued other embraces the colonial worldview. It is this very acceptance, this thoroughly violent internalization, that obfuscates the viciousness of the colonial contraption as the "successful" conversion of Friday reinforces the primacy of the Western worldview: "The footprint in the sand that so worried Crusoe's nights, that compelled him to build a fortress, and then another to protect his new world order, disappears from his nightmares once Friday embraces, then internalizes, his master's voice and can follow the master's agenda with passion" ("Friday on the Potomac" xxix).

Morrison cites Camara Laye's 1971 *The Radiance of the King* as a novel in which the experience of becoming marginal—in this case, a white European becoming a black slave—is described and its structure lain bare. Morrison has also revealed that her next novel will be about the education of a racist, about how one *becomes* a racist (*OoO* 109, 15). Differently, though, from Defoe, Morrison is not sampling the colonial mindset but seeking to illustrate its technology and structure, its psychodynamics, and, more than anything, the violence that results from it. This is why I have placed so much emphasis on the reader, on susceptibility and perception. Since one can confidently read Crusoe without irony as the "success" story Morrison deems it to be—that is, as a victorious pronouncement of civilized culture and its benevolent missionary impulse—the revelation of structures, like the employment of de-racialized language, does not necessarily result in the erosion of those structures and indeed contains the potential to reinforce them, as earlier readers of Defoe's adventure novel very well have done. We again encounter the situation in which being touched does not guarantee being moved. We reencounter the problem of why the clear identification of social, political, and philosophical problems on the structural level in the contemporary world seems to do so little to solve them. One step in that direction, I have been proposing, is an increasingly susceptible readership that cannot read these structures only in the revelatory area of literature (as Morrison does as a reader and a writer) but also in the world itself, in our shared and mutually troubled reality.

Paradise and *Love* share in their major themes the revealing of oppressive structures and the mechanisms that obfuscate them. In these two novels, Morrison takes up the structural contrasts of community based on racial purity and that of difference which founds a community form unrecognizable along normative standards (*Paradise*), and of individual psychodynamics fractured by externally imposed trauma internalized into self-loathing (*Love*). *Paradise*'s all-black town of Ruby, founded on reactionary and religious grounds, reveals the structures of racial purity and the violence that results from its retention in a multi-racial world (in other words, *how* such instances and acts of violence come to occur and be justified in the hearts and minds of their perpetrators). The town was founded by several 8-Rock families, so named because the darkness of their skin resembled the deepest part of a coal mine. As one character listens to several of the town's men plan the murder of a small community of multi-ethnic women residing in the Convent near town (a microcosm of ethnic cleansing), we witness the

---

[132] See Nietzsche's second essay in *On the Genealogy of Morals* for a discussion of the violence and abuse perpetrated by the system of debt. For more recent elaborations on credit and debt, study, refusal, the increasing dominance of logistics, and the "riotous production of difference" they call the general antagonism (109), see Harney and Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013).

intensely reinforced resistance to difference emanating from the more invested factions of the town:

> But there was no pity here. Here, where the men spoke of the ruination that was upon them—how Ruby was changing in intolerable ways—they did not think to fix it by extending a hand in fellowship or love. They mapped defense instead and honed evidence for its need, till each piece fit an already polished groove. A few did most of the talking, some said little and two said nothing at all… (*P* 275)

An investment in defense that "nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain" (*P* 5) is a posture inherited from the historical circumstance of slavery, and indeed contains aspects of its programming, a trauma passed across generations because of constructed racial boundaries. As each instance of this heritage persists on the local level, it blurs and buries ever deeper the ability to witness it on the unobfuscated level of structure.

Love's structural revelations involve not only issues of self-worth and the internalization of shame as in *The Bluest Eye*, but also the splintering effect trauma inflicts on individuals who subsequently pass it onto future generations, highlighting the heritage of trauma and the way it reproduces in the lives of its victims and their decedents (what *Paradise* does at the level of the community in the town of Ruby). Centered on the virtually life-long feud between Christine (the granddaughter of Bill Cosey, the owner of an African American resort in the town of Up Beach) and Heed (Christine's best friend, whom Cosey marries when she is the age of eleven, transforming the friendship into a bitter feud until one of them is dead), *Love* showcases how internalized trauma visits ruination on lives and how the origins of that trauma are obfuscated. The crux of the trauma for both girls occurs in virtually the same incident: Heed and Christine are both young girls playing on the beach in 1940 and Heed runs into the hotel to get some jacks to play with during a picnic the two have planned when she runs into Cosey, her friend's grandfather, the "handsome giant who owns the hotel and who nobody sasses" (*L* 190). They exchange brief conversation before he "touches her chin, and then—casually, still smiling—her nipple, or rather the place under her swimsuit where a nipple will be if the circled dot on her chest ever changes" before she bolts down the stairs and back outside in search of her friend (*L* 191). She locates Christine, who has thrown up in her hand and on her own bathing suit, and this is when the "first lie of many to follow, is born because Heed thinks Christine knows what happened and it made her vomit" (*L* 191). Meanwhile, and unbeknownst to Heed, Christine observes her grandfather in the window of her room, his eyes closed, his "trousers open, his wrist moving with the same speed L used to beat egg whites into unbelievable creaminess" (*L* 192). Heed, laughing at first, regurgitates her breakfast into her hand, but "when Heed finds her, Christine doesn't explain the bathing suit, why she is wiping it, or why she can't look at Heed" because she is "ashamed of her grandfather and of herself" and when she goes to bed that night her grandfather's ominous "shadow had booked the room" (*L* 192), haunting, as it does the entire novel, the rest of her life. Similarly traumatized into silence after Cosey's sexual violation of her, Heed "can't speak, can't tell her friend what happened" because "she knows *she* has spoiled it all" (*L* 191, my emphasis). The entirety of *Love* deals with the life-long results of this duel incident where both girls are victims of another's perversity and how it is internalized so that the two girls are unable to perceive that the trauma they have incurred is indeed trauma and originates outside of themselves: Morrison, in the tragic crux of internalization, writes that they had "never been able to share a certain twin shame" because "each one thought the rot was hers

alone" rather than Cosey's, a disposition that distorts the frameworks within which they live out the remainder of their lives (*L* 190). All of this is compounded by the fact that Cosey soon after marries Heed, reinforcing a string of internalized feelings in the two girls that multiply into unabated resentment for each other and a competition for the affections of Cosey. It is only after one of the women has died, after we have entered the space of the afterworld, that an understanding of these structures, of these complicating and repressive instances, is achieved and the women are able to begin the process of healing their friendship. We will turn to the necessary space of the beyond soon.

Having cursorily discussed the means by which both of these novels reveal the structural dynamics of socio-psychological oppression, both of the novels fail in this regard to represent at length the differences that they should assist in bringing about. Both novels, in this view, are preliminary—that is, they introduce early stages of possibilities as yet undeveloped. At the same time, they successfully illustrate the problem that a gap remains to be closed between the laying bare of a structure of oppression (that is, we can see precisely how it operates in the world) and an attempt, widespread or individual, to interrupt and alter that structure. The next generation of the traumatized in *Love*—the young man Romen and the young woman Junior—diverge when it comes to reenacting the structural traps of Heed and Christine. While Romen, helped along by the moral compass of his grandfather Sadler, whose suspicion of Cosey's publicly lauded virtues is palpable throughout the novel, exhibits the prospect of hope and moral judgement (he refuses to participate in a gang rape and he rushes to assist Heed and Christine when Junior has abandoned them alone in the old hotel after effectively murdering one of them), Junior represents an obvious reenactment of two women's vitriolic, defensive, dysfunctional tendencies. Even after their reconciliation, helped along by death, Heed and Christine casually discuss what to do about Junior, fluctuating between letting the "little rudderless, homeless thing" go, allowing her to remain with them "under certain circumstances" or killing her (*L* 198), potentially transferring the structure of their decades-long feud into a cooperative endeavor that locates new objects for discharging the animosity that has damaged them.

As with the potential misreadings that reinforce the epistemology of modernity discussed above (*Robinson Crusoe* as a civilization success story; *The Bluest Eye* as a reinforcement of racial stereotypes), the trauma in *Love* threatens to be paid forward into subsequent generations rather than curtailed with a new understanding. In *Paradise,* the murders at the Convent at the center of the novel are almost immediately subject to narrative erasure as the community members and participants begin to craft and project their own self-interested perspectives of the incident's truth. It is also a miracle (though still only of diminishing gravity) because the bodies of the victims vanish and a second chance for the town seems to become possible. For what that chance is intended remains ambiguous, and the possibility that it will reinforce the unsustainable systems of racial purity for Ruby arises more prominently than we may be comfortable with:

> If there were no victims the story of the crime was play for anybody's tongue. Lone shut up and kept what she felt certain of folded in her brain: God had given Ruby a second chance. Had made Himself so visible and unarguably a presence that even the outrageously prideful (like Steward) and the uncorrectably stupid (like his lying nephew) ought to be able to see it. He had actually swept up and received His servants in broad daylight, for goodness' sake! right before their very eyes, for Christ's sake… Would they know they'd been spoken to? Or would they drift further from His ways? (*P* 297-8)

The problem—and this is precisely the question broached toward the end of the passage itself—is that of misreading, misrecognition, or, more probably, what we might consider a diminished susceptibility to difference. On a purely structural level, for the town of Ruby to recognize that they'd been "spoken to" is to move in a direction of difference while to "drift further from His ways" to utilize the miraculousness of the situation—the opportunity for thinking difference—to promote the justification for the event would be to reinforce the structures of violence that brought the situation about in the first place.

Of course, this is all intended in wide structural terms and is not to say that there are not characters who recognize these differences, or even that the interior position of those that carry on the conservation of xenophobic politics are completely one-dimensionally devoted to this perspective. Rather, those characters who have recognized difference—including Lone, the Convent as a whole, and many of the women of Ruby—are touched by this incident, but they remained touched and not moved. They do not yet act to insert a difference into the town at a discernable level. They do not insert alteration into the structure (which are mainly historical and social, as described, undergirding the need for investigating metaphysical ones as well). Many of the layered structures throughout *Love* and *Paradise* appear dialectical, containing antagonistic exchanges that generate mutually-reinforced self-assurance of their respective positions.[133] This is the reason addressing structural dynamics—just as de-racing language—results in more of the same. What Morrison's continued highlighting of this theme signifies is the need for pursuing difference: different questions, and different ways to understand. It is with that understanding we turn to Morrison's representation in a space beyond life, a space to understand.

By this point I have explained the reason we need more radical avenues for pursuing difference that resounds on the epistemological level. As already mentioned, this radical space for Morrison most often comes in a vague afterworld or a realm beyond life, a place of understanding and compassion rarely afforded in the lifeworld of characters. I call this Morrisonian impression of the afterlife vague simply because while it does not conform to a specifically Christianized realm it is nonetheless notionally recognizable on a cultural level. The most differentiated achievements of Morrison's narrative project occur in scenes that transpire in this space. It is also the space from which the omniscient-seeming and dead narrators across Morrison's novels are speaking: it is both an authentic space and a narrative position: it can also become a readerly position. It is a place in Morrison where the success of her narrative project is attained, the place toward which many of her novels build and wherein they climax.

All of the analysis I have delivered thus far—the problem of being touched and not moved, and more directly the problem of conventional modes of thinking being capable only of perpetuating themselves—directs us toward the need for radical difference in our conceptions. This is evidenced in the formal and thematic fabric of *Love*. The challenge of "breaking or dismissing conventional rules of composition to replace them with other, stricter ones" required for *Love* in Morrison's words an "embodied, participating voice" not "restricted by chronology or space—or the frontier between life and non-life" (*L* x-xi). Prefacing the novel proper, the

[133] This is what Gregory Bateson—opposing it structurally to complementary conflict—calls symmetrical conflict, where the behavior of A stimulates more of it in B, then B in A, and so on. Bateson writes: "Symmetrical struggles and armaments races may, in the current phrase, 'escalate'; and the normal pattern of succoring-dependency between parent and child may become monstrous. These potentially pathological developments are due to undamped or uncorrected positive feedback in the system, and may—as stated—occur in either complementary or symmetrical systems" (Bateson 324).

ghostly narrator L speaks of a place "where all is known and nothing understood" (*L* 4) and of a need similar to Morrison's for something different. "I know its trash," L confesses toward the end of her preface, echoing Morrison's concern for overcoming convention, "just another story made up to scare wicked females and correct unruly children. But it's all I have. I know I need something else. Something better" (*L* 8).[134] Morrison's narrative project thus confronts the problem of hegemonic ideology on the formal and thematic levels, that is, on the levels internal to fiction (in terms of what we think about) and on those constitutive to the form (in terms of how we think). In all cases, the claim that our current way of thinking and doing is not enough, that we need different frames by which to read, understand, and act in the world remains central.

By directing our attention to these formal and thematic limitations imposed by the dominance of conventional reading practices, Morrison calls clear attention to the need for an epistemological change (we have already diagnosed the problems of the current one, considering Nabokov's understanding of the self, Pynchon's critique of the encyclopedic endeavor, and now Morrison's own depictions of whole lives and the harmful structures that predicate them). What is perhaps most centrally at stake in this shift of epistemology is to alter the coordinates designating the concept of the human being.[135] For Morrison this involves aiming her aesthetic power toward the depiction of a space or a realm of understanding somehow beyond life and yet imminent. As discussed above, the tendency for the afterworld to be depicted as more of the same, as continuing the problems of earthly life, remains crucial. Morrison directs her narrative project at the realm of the unspeakable because it is here that we can witness an epistemological difference for which Morrison has also provided a framework for understanding. It is an understanding wrought by negative example, both by exposing the limitations of the epistemology of modernity and by explaining the origin of those limitations—that is, through the various literary strategies detailed above. With these, Morrison induces recognition of the limitations of current frames of thought and moves forward to witness new knowledge develop and new relationships arise in the germination of what might be considered a shifted epistemology. This is why the beyond figures so prominently in Morrison (and the entire Western zeitgeist): it is from the vantage of the afterworld that the current one is presumed to become comprehensible. It is also worth reemphasizing the paradox with which this claim osculates: this afterworld is consistently described as being more of the same, as bearing little distinction to the world surrounding us now (what dies, in the shift to a new epistemology, are not individual people, but the core tenants of the displaced epistemology).

Giorgio Agamben confirms this paradoxical position of the afterworld, writing in *The Coming Community* that

> There is nothing new about the thesis that the Absolute is identical to this world. It was stated in its extreme form by Indian logicians with the axiom, "Between Nirvana and the world there is not the slightest difference." What is new, instead, is the tiny displacement that the story introduces in the messianic world. And yet it is precisely this tiny displacement, this "everything will be as it is now, just a little different," that is difficult to explain. (53-4)

---

[134] Despite this, L almost immediately swerves away from this focus on difference—"a story that shows how brazen women can take a good man down" (*L* 9)—as though to miss the point she has been trying to communicate, since this trite aphoristic statement of a didactic theme is only germane to the novel in so far as it relates to L, who is not the center of the novel even if she remains its ultimate instrument.

[135] See again the thread running through Agamben, Weheliye, and Greif.

I hasten to add that while indeed difficult to explain, the tiny difference, the minute displacement Agamben mentions, is the shift in epistemology. Its implications are far-reaching: summoning forth the necessary equipment and disposition to regard it legibly is in fact the susceptibility I have been promoting throughout this study. Along similar lines, Žižek historicizes the ideological framework in which this has long been harbored in the core of Western thought:

> The shift from Judaism to Christianity with regard to the Event is best encapsulated in terms of the status of the Messiah: in contrast to Jewish messianic expectations, the basic Christian stance is that *the expected Messiah has already arrived*, that is, that we are already redeemed: the time of nervous expectation, of rushing precipitately toward the expected Arrival is over; *we live in the aftermath of the Event; everything—the Big Thing—has already happened*. (136-7)

The little difference Agamben makes reference to is the shift of epistemology, while the messianic aftermath Žižek points out we currently occupy is merely the indication that our contemporary world persists in residing within an epistemology that has become historically surpassed without adequately recognizing it, and I bring both up to relate the following point with respect to Morrison: that her inclusion of an afterworld which is also a space of understanding indicates both the need for an epistemological change (because current "living" ideas are inadequate in fully accounting for and making interventions in the oppressive arrangement of modern society) and that by positioning the afterworld as the same place as the present, she renders readers—at the epistemological and ideological level Agamben and Zizek are engaged with here—unable to avoid the endless deferral and dismissal of problems and emphasizes their position in the present. Rather than entering a realm beyond the earthly, Morrison posits that such a realm is already here: what will be necessary, then, is not entering the metaphysical walkways of an afterworld but to pass through the landscape of a posthumous epistemology. Such an apocalyptic vision—apocalypse being itself another way of envisioning epistemological change, a revelation of that which is present but only now revealed as comprehensible—helps to refigure anew the coordinates of modernity, the promises it has made in its long unfolding, and the interpolations it has issued into its subjects.

Love's ghostly narrator L at one point remarks that death "might be just more of the same" (*L* 135). As Yvette Christiansë says, the "madness of the vision revealed" is that "heaven does not descend but rests upon the earth, and that the view from below is not of gold" (156), and so Morrison directs us to understand the present in whatever terrible and complex ways it has unfolded.

I would like to conclude by addressing this afterworld horizon in *Love* and *Paradise*. Both novels breach the realm of the afterworld as the only viable space in which understanding—and this I mean on a epephanic, structural, and interpersonal sense—takes place. At the same time we require this other space, we are urged to comprehend it as more of the same: as the epistemological change.

Both novels center around spaces whose various descriptions present them as conceptual contradictions. In *Love* both Bill Cosey's drowned resort and the accompanying mansion at One Monarch Street are at various times labeled as a big church and a jailhouse, a paradise and a plantation, a playground and a haven, a school and a place of debate, a royal court with a priest, a prince and serving personnel vying for his blessing, and a fairy tale, besides both being haunted

(*L* 14, 18, 35, 37, 42). The Convent at the center of *Paradise* is similarly labeled as a series of multiple and contradictory—or counterintuitive—spaces: an embezzler's folly, a Mansion-turned-Convent, a Native American reeducation school for Arapaho girls, a monastery, a cult-harboring temple, a safe house for vagabond women, the site of a series of murders or a single sustained miracle, and so on (*P* 3, 10). These spaces cannot be adequately signified in the epistemic and conceptual space available to us without their incompatible overflow leading to confusion, historical and individual myopia, and violence endemic to what we might call the period of world globalization (the long reach of colonialism and capitalism). For Pynchon, the stratified interconnections and significations relating systems to one another lead to the self-generating heart of the socio-encyclopedic project and to the attempted management of the social world through total compartmentalization. But its human consequences are incommensurable with this process and so the entire epistemological outlook of modernity is revealed to be the central—or general—antagonism. For Morrison, this is of course also true, but her depictions of space in modernity strive to be transformative in addition to being informative. The point of this brief discussion about space and place in these two novels is to stack yet another level—fictional, critical, thematic, stylistic, and now spatial—on which Morrison's project allows the inadequacies of our conceptual dynamics to be indicated.

The afterworld occurrences in *Love* are primed by the abruptly interrupted final confrontation between Heed and Christine as the sum of their lives and feud reaches its dramatic climax: "The eyes of each are enslaved by the other's. Opening pangs of guilt, rage, fatigue, despair are replaced by a hatred so pure, so solemn, it feels beautiful, almost holy" (*L* 177). Everything they have built their lives and relationship upon, under which is buried the kernel of their childhood friendship, is present in full here. Before any such confrontation can take place, Junior murders Heed by pulling the carpet from beneath her in the decrepit hotel and causing her to fall into a room a floor below. Christine races to her as Junior departs, and the two women are "neither surprised nor interested" in the girl's actions because now the "holy feeling is still alive, as is its purity, but it is altered now, overwhelmed by desire" and there "in a little girl's bedroom an obstinate skeleton stirs, clacks, refreshes itself" (*L* 177).

In the transition to an afterspace, a deathworld of sorts indicated by the formal removal of quotation marks in dialogue to draw attention to the shifted state of the novel and its characters, Heed and Christine are in some measure relieved of the animosity and misunderstandings that marked their life together: they "avoid rehearsing accusations, a waste of breath now with one of them cracked to pieces and the other sweating like a laundress. Up here where the solitude is like the room of a dead child, the ocean has no scent or roar. The future is disintegrated along with the past" (*L* 184).[136] A kind of cosmic and conceptual separation, this disintegration of future and past where all things seem to be disentangled from one another and open to view creates a space—vast and comprehensible, where each thing can be taken in its turn but can be

---

[136] Lucille P. Flutz takes up this notion of disintegration in a different, more concrete, light and focuses instead on the historical consequences facing African Americans. For Flutz, "Heed's death scene captures one of Morrison's major themes in *Love*. If we read Heed's death as a meditation on the irrevocableness of the past and as the scene of forgiveness and reconciliation, then we must also read the disintegration of the Cosey Resort and, by extension, the splintering of the African American community as an inexorable loss. However, the scene also reminds us that memories of that once segregated but vital and vibrant community are worth keeping and sharing" (103). Readings such as this—while certainly necessary and legitimate—that focus on historicizing the novel backwardly only, rather than forwardly or laterally, rob it of its imminent power (its power to describe a new conceptual space or a epistemic alteration) by reinserting or situating it back into the dominant epistemology where it is dependent on those forms for inquiry and expression.

comprehended at once—resembles Nabokov's ekphrastic effects, and draws along with them the entire range of implications I have discussed throughout this project. It is at this point that Heed and Christine share an authentic understanding of their lives and miscommunications and victimizations and betrayals unbeknownst to them or beyond their control. The scenes I have analyzed above—the authentic revelatory and climatic point of the novel on all levels—take place at this juncture. It is here too that the love of the novel's title makes itself apprehensible to both women and reader alike.

Heed and Christine's scene in the afterworld concludes with an image of the profound and welcoming night and a loose simile: "Like stars free to make their own history and not care about another one; or like diamonds unburdened, released into handsome rock" (*L* 194). But the pair have no place to practice their newfound understanding upon the shifted world. It takes an afterworld—death or a deathspace—to elicit this insight from our characters. There is no continuance of this understanding reached between the two, of their shifted epistemological perspective, save that which is made available to the reader and which is the subject of this project. Pursued far enough, questions about how to narrow this conceptual gap—that between the irrevocable transition to an afterworld and the application of insight attained there in the present—become overwhelmingly practical if drawn out far enough, and this is rightfully so. If *Love* (and *Beloved* and others besides) situated this epistemological knowledge in the realm of the unattainable beyond life (and this is precisely the strategy of epistemological shifting: to make us aware of its imminence), then *Paradise* begins exploring in a preliminary fashion the foundations of a new epistemology. This takes place within the Convent, among the women there.

Unlike Bill Cosey's resort and mansion, which is presided over by both his framed portrait and his lingering poltergeist, the whole of the Convent in *Paradise* "felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too" (*P* 175). It is indeed the belligerence of maleness—of hypermasculine dispositions coupled with conservative ideological propensity for reactionary responses, the ultimate failure of a community unable to think and act historically—that brings an end to the women's work at the Convent. This is the work of not only thinking difference, but of attempting to embody it, to live it. It is, in short, movement toward a different epistemology. It is naturally central that the inhabitants of the Convent are all women and constitute a multiethnic community in contrast to the racially pure town of Ruby. It is indeed this difference (a functional community lacking male dominance), this lack, this growing presence of difference, that threatens to undermine the consistency of their worldview, which the tenants of modernity promote. Traversing the high points of misogyny and intolerance, the band of nine Ruby townsmen who will go on to gun down the Convent women in the early hours of the next morning, just as the sun is rising, plan their crimes and justify their insecurities with lamentations about women—bitches, sluts, witches—"kissing on themselves" who "don't need men and don't need God" and are therefore most appallingly not "women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose themselves for company, which is to say not a convent but a coven" (*P* 276). These trite and tired coordinates, the myopic hallmarks of hate and certainty, sound all too familiar in their alignment with the various regimes of oppression operating in modernity. They are also apprehensible about a lurking otherworldliness emanating from the Convent women. "You think they got powers? I *know* they got powers," one of the men remarks, and with the absolutist deduction that "everyone who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into *our* homes, *our* families"—a smaller-scale fascism or communitarianism with direct parallels to the contemporary political

moment of returning to and retaining nationalistic American values—the male posse conclude with an uncritical "We can't have it, you all. Can't have it at all" (*P* 276).[137]

The aversion to the unsettling presence of the mystical on the part of the men remains ironic since the foundation of their own town by the Moses-like Zechariah involved any number of supernatural or divine elements, the least of which is the apparition which leads them to the site where the town will be built. It is as though the mystical is reserved only for legend rather than the present and that it is mercantile, the exclusive area of men and the town's founders where it can be retold endlessly in a light aimed at reinforcing and repeating the town's founding mythology. Little room for amendment or addition is provided. But a different orientation to social and metaphysical relationships unfolds at the Convent, and it is in the process of founding itself as a new community when the posse of men arrive to murder its meager populous.

But what is such a community founded upon? The process seems to be necessarily long, and in the framework of *Paradise* stretches back through the Convent's history as a Native American school to Mary Magna the Reverend Mother Superior who, we are led to presume, used to run it. Now elderly and seemingly delirious, the Reverend Mother is cared for by Consolata, the most senior member of the Convent behind the Reverend Mother. The Reverend Mother seems to *know* things, and at one point Consolata cautions Mavis, the first women to arrive at the Convent in the novel, to "disregard her" because she "sees everything in the universe," indicating spiritual insight incommensurate with the practical concerns of Ruby and the rational dominance of modernity (*P* 48). "Next time you see Him," the Reverend Mother tells Consolata, "tell Him to let the girls in. They bunch around the door, but they don't come in" (*P* 48), which is a clear reference to the miraculous and mysterious door/window that appears on the Convent property toward the end of the novel and through which the Convent women may have vanished after or during their murders, since there are no bodies to evidence the killings. About this uncertain passageway, we read the following:

> Whether through a door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised, what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth? (*P* 305)

---

[137] This reaction on the part of the community towards its outcasts and fringe figures is similar to but more intense and aggressive than its earlier counterpart in *Sula*, when in the section set in 1939 the community obtains a greater unification, a sense of elevation, through their collective distain for the novel's title character and the events that gather themselves around her, rendering a sense of the supernatural and the superstitious that makes Sula into a sacrificial figure who shoulders the community's psychic and historical burdens. Much the same can be said to happen in *Paradise*, though the question of whether the reunification is one of reconciliation or stronger reproduction remains ambiguous. The threatening images the conspirers evoke are those heretical corruptions that undermine their religious values and gender constructions which seep into the popular imagination to be convoked in order to resist the kind of authentic investigations Morrison novelizes. For instance, the Convent—in its cultic-seeming appropriation of religious images—recalls such stories as that of María Felipa, a Oaxacan woman who in the eighteenth century claimed to have had "carnal relations with an image of Christ" and in a series of rantings "told of an idolatrous cult in which some natives participated at a Spaniard's house. The Indians wore the garb of Catholic priests, and swore at an *Ecce homo*, a crucifix, and a Virgin while they sacrificed very young children and Indian women whose blood they splashed over the tortillas that the native pontiff passed around as a communion" (Gruzinski 173). The fears of religious corruption and profanation, invasive practices from other cultures, sexual deviance, and grievous harm upon innocence present here are also present in *Paradise* and are expressed in equally catastrophic terms in the minds of the Ruby townspeople.

An already open, waiting window or a door still needing to be opened: while the image of a passageway to the beyond remains a familiar enough construction, it is the final question, doubly repeated, that reveals the central concern here to be a living, epistemological one. What *on earth*, in the realm of the living, in the world of the here-and-now, would it be? What does it look like for a realm of understanding—one that is only perceivable is the strange zone of not-living in *Love*—to move from the beyond (in other words, from a position that is conceptually closed in our current epistemology[138]) to the present? Such a question, locating the Morrisonian afterrealm of understanding in the here-and-now, marks both an ambition (a place to arrive at) and the central inquiry for modernity (how to shed or overcome its epistemological trappings).

The threshold between these two points and the passageway that allows the Convent women to become connected is Consolata. Having always been "gifted" (*P* 45), it is by means of what Consolata calls "seeing in" and what Lone DuPres, a woman from the town of Ruby that teaches her the way, calls "stepping in" that transference between these two realms takes place. In its very first instance in the novel, Consolata is "tricked into raising the dead" (*P* 242) by Lone. At the site of a fatal car crash, Lone bids Consolata "go inside" the body of Scout and "wake him up" (*P* 245). Here, Consolata

> focused on the trickles of red discoloring his hair. She stepped in. Saw the stretch of road he had dreamed through, felt the flip of the truck, the headache, the chest pressure, the unwillingness to breathe… Inside the boy she saw a pinpoint of light receding. Pulling up energy that felt like fear, she stared at it until it widened… Although it hurt like the devil to look at it, she concentrated as though the lungs in need were her own. (*P* 245).

Scout opens his eyes and returns to life, a resurrection accomplished by a form of possession. As the years go on, Consolata practices, entering the Reverend Mother without the latter's knowledge. It is Consolata who guides the Reverend Mother to the beyond through this process of stepping in:

> The light Consolata could not bear to approach with her own eyes, she endured for the Reverend Mother when she became ill. At first she tried it out of the weakness of devotion turned to panic—nothing seemed to relieve the sick woman—then, angered by helplessness, she assumed an attitude of command. Stepping in to find the pinpoint of light. Manipulating it, widening it, stretching it. Reviving, even raising her, from time to time. And so intense were the stepping's in, Mary Magna glowed like a lamp till her very last breath in Consolata's arms. (*P* 247)

Even so, knowing that the Reverend Mother would have "recoiled in disgust and fury knowing her life was prolonged by evil" associated with witchcraft, Consolota must reconcile her own

[138] Connecting the material world with our capacity for imagination, Jameson writes that it is easier to imagine the end of the world, to envision the death of the self, than it is to imagine the end of capitalism ("An American Utopia" 3), so that death for the subject arrives before the disillusion of our dominant social and economic constraints, an imaginative impossibility under current epistemological circumstances. Much the same is operating here in Morrison, on the level of imagination and the routines that have disabled our ability to consider these things seriously.

untraditional Catholic faith with this "pagan" activity (*P* 247). Consolota does not only undergo her own form of epistemological shift in this process, at first convincing herself through means of linguistic subtleties that such a gift of "in sight" God "made free to anyone who wanted to develop it" (*P* 247). She is also able to cultivate this ability, to practice and grow. It is a matter of learning that can be imparted, Morrison implies, to anyone. And so it can be taught.

As time progresses, "her colorless eyes saw nothing clearly except what took place in the minds of others" (*P* 248). To be equipped with the ability to enter another life and to know it: is this not precisely the process of becoming other discussed above? It is here we witness the aesthetic harmonization between the novel (what is happening in story's themes and the novel's style) and the wider strategy of Morrison's own project (the communicable aspects of literature that can intervene in the world beyond the novel). This very entering and explication of the other, of entering and becoming the other, permeates Morrison's depiction of whole life. Literalized here within the content of the novel, this movement is also strategically present in the texture and purpose of the wider narrative project. This is also the act of reading, of imagining. The insight from such a depiction of whole lives can allow us to be moved, and not just touched. And it can also heal the failures of our imaginations by permitting us to see beyond a particular epistemological framework to the expansive possibility of thinking and formulating our relations to the world and each other differently. Jill Matus argues that Consolata's clairvoyant ability to step in between death and dying exposes the reader to a "world beyond the ordinary realm of history" (155). While it is most certainly true that *Paradise* presents perspectives outside the ordinary—and by this we might also apply the synonymy hegemonic—realm of history, Morrison accomplishes more than the mere presentation of insight. This is important because insight is not equivalent with alteration. Consolota's major contribution to the novel—and by implication to the world beyond it—is the communication, the passing on, of this insight in what is nothing less than the foundation of a different way of living and being in community.

Resembling a monastic order or a cult—reiterating the conceptually collapsing spaces of the Convent—Consolata comes to initiate a new community of devotion and commitment and understanding between the Convent women. Having been called Connie throughout the novel, she now declares that "I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here you do what I say, eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for" (*P* 262). What ensues is a set of rituals in which the women lie nude on the scrubbed floor of the cellar and paint on each other's bodies, where they "begin to externalize what is internally unassimilable" (Matus 164): in other words, a gathering into closer proximity of what has been articulated as the life-death division and which I have claimed is also the fringes of epistemological change. It is a bringing through—into *this world*—of the insight that hitherto seems accessible only through the beyond, through the door or the window that makes its appearance again at the end of the novel. In this "loud dreaming" the women engage in "life, real and intense, shifted to down there in limited pools of light" and now with Consolata in command as a "new and revised Reverend Mother, feeding them bloodless food and water alone to quench their thirst, they altered," an indication of a change of epistemology as their relations to their selves, others, and the world come to be different (*P* 265). As with Žižek and Agamben, in the wake of this shift things will be as they are now but a little different. Morrison writes that a "customer stopping by [the Convent to purchase vegetables from their garden] would have noticed little change" (*P* 265).

This change is illegible to the townspeople of Ruby, and in fact it is the increasingly widening difference between the conservative values of Ruby—or of its ruling elites—that make such a dissimilar social formation illegible and threatening. Thus, the epistemologically shifted

community of Convent women are allowed very little time to develop their life habits, which remain necessarily vague and unexplored because nine men from Ruby soon come to murder them. This interruption is yet another indication on Morrison's part of the difficulty of thinking and becoming other, since the dominant epistemology—which privileges reproduction and continuation above all else—becomes undermined and its violence revealed in the process. As the entirety of *Paradise*'s narrative attests, however, we see in the process of Morrison's unfolding of many of the novel's characters and specifically the killers themselves complicated, often affectionately touching, understandable lives. While the seemingly New Age esotericism of the Convent women remains illegible and shocking to their would-be killers, the lives of the killers are highly legible to the reader. This is much the same as our ability to understand—without the need for clemency—the complexities that have rendered Cholly Breedlove. This is the legacy of Morrison's depiction of whole lives, the potential toward which it leads. Indeed, the reader participates much like Consolota and the Convent women, capable of reading through epistemological common places and easily reassuring binaries.

Paradise concludes with a scene of two black women on a beach. "Now they will rest," Morrison writes, "before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise" (*P* 318). With this we are again reminded of the presence, the continuing work of life that death does not forestall.

This is the work that Morrison's novels accomplish. But why must we come to it in terms of death and the beyond? Because these represent limits to our frameworks, places into which imagination in its current formulations cannot reach because of the weight of hegemonic restrictions set in place in the epistemology of modernity. What Morrison has accomplished—if we are open to reading it in this way—is a redefinition (or at the least a gesture toward the redefinition) of how human beings can relate to one another. If one has to be dead already to accomplish this, then humanity has a toilsome and laborious task ahead of it yet. But each building strategy—the depiction of whole lives, the diagnoses of imaginative incapacities and reliance upon ready-made thought, and the primacy of understanding without the gangue of ethics—allows Morrison to communicate the pathway toward epistemological alternation. Her project of hegemonic unmasking makes clear that it is in the living world, and for the sake of that world, that our thinking must confront the epistemology of modernity.

Part V: Conclusion

"If we continue to operate in terms of a Cartesian dualism of mind versus matter, we shall probably also continue to see the world in terms of God verses man; elite verses people; chosen race verses others; nations verses nation; and man verses environment. It is doubtful whether a species having *both* an advanced technology *and* this strange way of looking at the world can endure."

-Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (337)

I hope to have illustrated at least that epistemologies exist and are difficult to recognize, and to have suggested that they can undergo alteration in the form of shifts, revisions, and revolutions. These two facts are more or less corroborated across the range available to legitimated academic disciplines, from history to philosophy to science. I have suggested also that the dominant epistemology—what I have described in the introduction and call throughout this study the epistemology of modernity—presides as an interpolative environment whose perspectives and models its subjects inherit. However, this inheritance is not a destiny, but only one way of forming relationships to the word and making meaning from them. Propelled by the consequences of our collective thoughts and actions, the future is an unmappable ontological terrain in the process of unfolding, as William James would understand it. The future need not be determined in this or that way, but build upon ideas made true by events, which James upholds produce satisfactory relations. By any measure, satisfaction does not properly describe the modes of relationship ushered in by modernity. By this, I hope to have shown that epistemology is contingent, and that ours is unsustainable.

As I have illustrated, the strategies associated with each author are present on the level of both story and style and each author provides ways to recognize the existence of a modern epistemological predicament and makes recommendations as to how to respond. On the level of story, characters throughout each novelist's narrative project are offered as mostly negative examples of how to cope with modernity, whose repeated failures promise a diagnosis of the epistemological problem I have aligned with modernity. With respect to style, design, and theme, each novelist stages fictional landscapes conditioned by the epistemology of modernity and diagnoses it as a harmful, pernicious antagonist to human happiness.

Each also suggests the radical mutability of epistemology, its virtual, conditional, artificial characteristics. If Nabokov offers reality as artifice, as artificial and assembled as a fictionscape, then we may also infer from his emphasis on imagination and originality (and his disdain for the common) implores and empowers one to change it. Nabokov's understanding of the self as a thing to be gotten rid of before authenticity can emerge is directly in line with a diagnosis of the epistemology of modernity—as the machinery that assembles subjectivity—as the very field of interpolations that constitutes the modern self and so represents the antagonist of originality, imagination, and independent thought. If Pynchon's novels are populated by cartographers in various states of frenzy and trepidation attempting to chart the world around them, this is a map of modernity's expansion. While the gross multiplication of Pynchon's plotlines self-referentially mimics the encyclopedia endeavor, his grand theme concerns the movement and mediation of ideas by those modern institutions whose anatomy shares the encyclopedic emphasis on mastery. In all cases, Pynchon foregrounds that issues are more fundamentally human, more fundamentally existential and philosophical, before they are translated and confused into the social realm, the political area, or the public sphere where they disseminate more obfuscating avoidances of deeper reflection. Morrison's narrative project is more directly confrontational because it tightens the pressure on the already strained coordinates of race, history, and the grand interrelations of slavery and the rise of modernist capitalist epistemology. Describing the psychological human consequences wrought by modernity, Morrison asks that readers understand the complex interweavings that have given birth to the present and the people it in and resist the compartmentalizing simplifications that generate a neutralized and comatose public.

One underlying commonality among all three of these novelists is their emphasis on becoming other, which I have detailed above. Anathema for all three, shortsightedness seems to

be the general antagonist for failures of empathetic understanding. Literature propels us toward this fathom of otherness. Here we can foster an understanding of it or reaffirm the prefabricated interpretive structures to which we have thus far made reference and thus reject this alternative world: either way, it can function to expand or reinforce. In *How to Read and Why*,[139] Harold Bloom equates reading with the ultimate encounter with otherness. "Reading well is one of the great pleasures that solitude can afford you," he writes,

> because it is, at least in my experience, the most healing of pleasures. It returns you to otherness, whether in yourself or in friends, or in those who may become friends. Imaginative literature is otherness, and as such alleviates loneliness. We read not only because we cannot know enough people, but because friendship is so vulnerable, so likely to diminish or disappear, overcome by space, time, imperfect sympathies, and all the sorrows of familial and passional life. (19)

A return to otherness, as Bloom puts it, already implies an estrangement—whether from our capacity to formulate our own judgements and opinions, or our inability to approach situations without prefabricated ideological expectation, or our historic overdetermination, all factors of modernity that Bloom justifiably laments (21-3). This estrangement, he suggests, is to be remedied by the paradoxical reunion with both the self and the other at once, and, what's more, the other within the self. In Kristeva's words this "foreigner lives within us" as the "hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder" and only by "recognizing him within ourselves" are we "spared detesting him in himself" (1).[140] The isolation and loneliness and the vulnerability of friendship—friendship already being an encounter with otherness—about which Bloom speaks are among the factors which separate us from ourselves and our friends, all of them others. Space, time, and imperfect sympathies assist this estrangement as they creep between ourselves and others, wedging an abyss that widens and nurtures us to retreat into ourselves and our own echo chambers. We are strangers to ourselves (as Kristeva would have it), and at its core, in its very essence, in the fabric its spirit, as Bloom says, imaginative literature *is* otherness. Imaginative literature is an opportunity to return to and understand that strangeness within ourselves and others, and to see the strangeness that is the self.

If the solutions—the means of recognizing epistemology and becoming other—offered by Nabokov, Pynchon, and Morrison seem odd or restrictively metaphysical or contrary to practical implementation, this may in fact be a good sign. I say this because their consequences are revelatory. If Nabokov asks for an interrogation and abolition of the modern concept of the self, and Pynchon displays the ubiquity of its interpolative reach which is inclusive by consent or force, and Morrison untangles both of these with understanding in an epistemologically ulterior space—and if these retain their strangeness as solutions, then it is because we have not yet

---

[139] Bloom's movement from the strictly academic—*The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), for instance—to a more public project with works such as *The Western Canon* (1994) and *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998) indicates what is for him a sincere concern over the diminishment of reading as a qualitative and introspective activity whose erosion by a variety of other, *different* kinds of media is complicit with advancing modernity.

[140] See also Butler's *Precarious Life,* in which she uses notions of the "face," introduced by Levinas, to explain the structure of address whereby the face (or the word) "addresses moral demand to us, ones that we do not ask for, ones that we are not free to refuse" (131). A moral imperative to respond to moral demands becomes increasingly interesting and important when a case such as Humbert Humbert's is taken into account.

developed the concepts that would actualize them. Nabokov's metaphysics, Pynchon's cartographications, and Morrison's otherworld—if the question of significance is resolved by bringing them into satisfactory relationship to the world as James would insist—each reach a limit point and a place for development: a place where the potential suggested in this study is translated into a more widely legible praxis. Lending this final point a weighty pertinence, humanist scholars have long concurred that the consequences of modernity and globalization are impending and catastrophic.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adorno, Theodor W. and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans., Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.

Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

---. *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

Alexandrov, Vladimir. *Nabokov's Otherworld*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essay*, trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 2006.

Anderson, Melanie. *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013.

Appel, Alfred, Jr. *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

Appel, Alfred, Jr., ed. Annotated Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov,. New York: Vintage, 1991 (1955).

Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. New York: Verso, 2003.

Asimov, Isaac. *I, Robot*. New York: Bantam Books, 1950.

Awkward, Michael. "Roadblocks and Relatives: Critical Revision in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*." *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. Nellie Y. McKay. Boston: G. K. Hill & Co., 1988: 57-68.

Baillie, Justine. *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition: The Invention of an Aesthetic*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981.

Baldwin, James. "Alas, Poor Richard." *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison. New York: The Library of America, 1998: 247-268.

Barabtarlo, Gennady. "A Resolved Discourse (*Pnin*)." The International Vladimir Nabokov Society. https://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/barab21.htm#FOOT0. Accessed March 2018.

Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Beavers, Herman. "'There is the Power,' He Thought, 'Right There': Dramatizing Entropy in *Tar Baby* and *Paradise*." *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning*, ed. Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011: 218-230.

Bedient, Calvin. *The Yeats Brother and Modernism's Love of Motion*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

Bérubé, Michael. *Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon, and the Politics of the Canon*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.

Bérubé, Michael. *Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon, and the Politics of the Canon*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992. *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993:3-4.

Bloom, Harold. *How to Read and Why*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. New York: Colombia University Press, 1993.

Boyd, Brian. *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009.

---. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991.

---. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Brown, Richard Maxwell. "Historical Patterns of Violence in America." *The History of Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Grahm, Hugh Davis, and Ted Robert Gurr. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1969.

Buruma, Ian and Avishai Margalit. *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies*. London: Atlantic Books, 2004.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso, 2004.

Carson, Cary. "The End of History Museums: What's Plan B?" *The Public Historian* 30.4 (Fall 2008): 9-27.

Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. Debevoise. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004

Cavell, Stanley. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film, Enlarged Edition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971.

Cheah, Pheng. *What is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

Christiansë, Yvette. *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.

Conner, Marc C. "From the Sublime to the Beautiful: The Aesthetic Progression of Toni Morrison." *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. Marc C. Conner. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000: 49-76.

Cox, Sandra. "'Mother Hunger': Trauma, Intra-Feminine Identification, and Women's Communities in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *Paradise*, and *A Mercy*." *Contested Boundaries: New Critical Essays on the Fiction of Toni Morrison*, ed. Maxine L. Montgomery. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013: 96-123.

Dee, Ruby. "Black Faimly Search for Identity." *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. Nellie Y. McKay. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1988: 91-20.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

---. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975.

Deleuze, Gilles. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3-7.

Dempsey, David. "Shrinks and the Shrunken in Modern Fiction: The Psychotherapist as Villain." *The Antioch Review* 46.4 (1988): 514-521.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins. New York: Verso, 1994.

Dick, Philip K. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* New York: A Del Ray, 1968.

Dickson, David. "Reading Innovation in Pynchon's *Vineland*." *Blissful Bewilderment: Studies in the Fiction of Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Anne Mangen and Rolf Gaasland. Oslo: Novus Press, 2002: 182-205.

Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Drake, Scott. "Resisting Totalizing Structures: An Aesthetic Shift in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*." *Critique* 51 (2012): 223-240.

Durantaye, Leland De La. *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.

Duvall, John N. *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness*. New York: Palgrave, 2000.

Eco, Umberto. *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Esposito, Robert. *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Felman, Shoshana. "Turning the Screw of Interpretation." *Yale French Studies* 55-56 (1977): 94-207.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 1925.

Fitzpatrick, Kathleen. "The Clockwork Eye: Technology, Women, and the Decay of the Modern in Thomas Pynchon's *V.*" *Thomas Pynchon: Reading from the Margins*, ed. Niran Abas. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003: 91-107.

Flutz, Lucille P. "*Love*: An Elegy for the African American Community, or The Unintended Consequences of Desegregation/Intergration." *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning*, ed. Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011: 93-104.

Foucault, Michel. *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurely and others. New York: The New Press, 1994.

---. *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

Frankel, Haskel. "*The Bluest Eye* (Review)." *The New York Times Book Review*, November 1, 1970.

Freer, Joanna. *Thomas Pynchon and American Counter Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, ed. Philip Rieff. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963: 164-179.

Fultz, Lucille P. *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003.

Gibson, Donald B. "Text and Context in *The Bluest Eye*." *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993: 159-174.

Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

Gramsci, Antonio. *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, ed. David Forgacs. New York: New York University Press, 1988.

Grant, Kerry J. *A Companion to The Crying of Lot 49*. Athens: University of Georga, 2008.

Greif, Mark. *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Though and Fiction in America, 1933-1973*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Grewal, Inderpal. *Saving the Security State: Exceptional Citizens in Twenty-First-Century America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Groys, Boris. "On the New." *Я[á:r]* (2.2003): 16-23.

http://www.kanazawa21.jp/data_list.php?g=52&d=2&lng=e. Accessed March 2018.

Groys, Boris. "The Museum in the Age of Mass Media." *Manifesta Journal* 1 (2003): 32-42.

Gruzinski, Serge. *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to* Blade Runner *(1492-2019)*, trans. Heather MacLean. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.

Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Brooklyn, NY: Minor Composition, 2013.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Hayot, Eric. *On Literary Worlds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Heidegger, Martin. "Building Dwelling Thinking." *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper Perennial, 1977.

---. "The Origin of the Work of Art." *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell. London: Harper Perennial, 1993: 139-212.

---. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt. New York: Harper Perennial, 1977.

Hill, Logan. "Pynchon's Cameo, and Other Surrealities." *The New York Times*. September 26, 2014.

Hume, Tim. "Meet Elvis: The Virtual Border Official Who Knows If You're Lying." *CNN Business Traveler*. August 15, 2012. Web 10 October, 2012.

Hungerford, Amy. *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

James, William. *A Pluralistic Universe*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.

---. *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.

Jameson, Fredric. *A Singular Modernity*. New York: Verso, 2012.

---. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. New York: Verso, 2005.

---. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

---. *Representing* Capital*: A Reading of Volume One*. New York: Verso, 2011.

---. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981.

Joyce, James. "Lolita in Humberland." *Studies in the Novel* 6.3 (1974): 339-348.
Kafka, Franz. *Kafka's Selected Stories*, ed. Stanley Corngold. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007.
Karlinsky, Simon, ed. *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971* (Revised and Expanded Edition). Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1979.
Kesey, Ken. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. New York: Penguin, 1962.
Kristeva, Julia. *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.
Lake, Christina Bieber. *Prophets of the Posthuman: American Fiction, Biotechnology, and the Ethics of Personhood*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013.
Laye, Camara. *The Radiance of the King*, trans. James Kirkup. New York: the Macmillan Company, 1971.
Lester, Rosemarie K. "An Interview with Toni Morrison, Hessian Radio Network, Frankfurt, West Germany." *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. Nellie Y. McKay. Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1988.
Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1971 (1920).
Maddox, Lucy. *Nabokov's Novels in English*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1983.
Malley, Terence. "Thomas Pynchon: A Writer for the Seventies." Forward to *Thomas Pynchon* by Joseph W. Slade. New York: Warner Paperback Library, 1974.
Matus, Jill. *Toni Morrison*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998.
McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Vintage, 1985.
---. *Child of God*. New York: Vintage, 1973.
Mclaughlin, Robert L. "Surveying, Mapmaking and Representation in *Mason & Dixon*." *American Postmodernity: Essays on the Recent Fiction of Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Ian D. Copestake. New York: Peter Lang, 2003: 173-191.
Mendelson, Edward. "Gravity's Encyclopedia." *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976.
Mitchell, W. J. T. *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005.
Moore, Thomas. *The Style of Connectedness: Gravity's Rainbow and Thomas Pynchon*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987.
Morrison, Toni. "Goodness: Altruism and the Literary Imagination." https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2012/12/11/goodness-altruism-and-literary-imagination. Accessed May 2018.
---. "Home." *The House that Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano. New York: Pantheon Books, 1997: 3-12.
---. "Introduction: Friday on the Potomac." *Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essay on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992: vi-xxx.
---. "Peril." *Burn This Book: Pen Writers Speak Out on the Power of the Word*, ed. Toni Morrison. New York: HarperCollins, 2009: 1-4.

---. “The Site or Memory.” *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008: 65-80.

---. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

---. *Beloved*. New York: Vintage Books, 1987.

---. *Home*. New York: Vintage, 2012.

---. *Jazz*. New York: Plume, 1992.

---. *Love*. New York: Vintage, 2003.

---. *Paradise*. New York: Plume, 1997.

---. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage, 1992.

---. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

---. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage, 1993.

---. *Sula*. New York: Vintage, 1973.

---. *Tar Baby*. New York: Vintage, 1981.

---. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Vintage Books, 1970.

---. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

---. *The Origin of Others*. London: Harvard University Press, 2017.

---. *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008.

Nabokov, Dmitri. “On a Book Entitled *The Enchanter*,” in *The Enchanter*, by Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Dmitri Nabokov. New York: Vintage, 1986.

Nabokov, Vladimir. “Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible,” trans., Dmitri Nabokov. *The New York Review of Books*, March 31, 1988: 38-42.

---. *Bend Sinister*. New York: Vintage, 1947.

---. *Despair*. New York: Vintage, 1965.

---. *Invitation to a Beheading*, trans. Dimitri Nabokov and Vladimir Nabokov. New York: Vintage, 1959.

---. *Lectures on Don Quixote*, ed. Fredson Bowers. New York: Harvest,/HBJ Book, 1983.

---. *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1980.

---. *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1981.

---. *Look at the Harlequins!* New York: Vintage, 1974.

---. *Mary*, trans. Vladimir Nabokov and Michael Glenny. New York: Vintage, 1970.

---. *Nikolai Gogol*. New York: New Directions, 1959.

---. *Pale Fire*. New York: Vintage, 1962.

---. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. New York: Vintage, 1967.

---. *Strong Opinions*. Vintage International: New York, 1973.

---. *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. New York: Vintage, 1991 (1955).

---. *The Defense*, trans. Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author. New York: Vintage, 1964.

---. *The Enchanter*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov. New York: Vintage, 1986.

---. *The Original of Laura*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

---. *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. Vintage International: New York, 1995.

---. *Transparent Things*. New York: Vintage, 1972.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: The Modern Library, 2000.

Palahniuk, Chuck. *Stranger Than Fiction: True Stories*. New York: Anchor Books, 2004.

Pearce, Richard. *The Novel in Motion: An Approach to Modern Fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983.

Píchová, Hana. *The Art of Memory in Exile: Vladimir Nabokov and Milan Kundera*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Sothern Illinois University Press, 2002.

Pippin, Robert B. *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Poirier, Richard. "The Importance of Thomas Pynchon." *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976: 15-29.

Postone, Moishe. *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Pushkin, Aleksandr. *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse, Volume 1*, trans. with commentary by Vladimir Nabokov. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964.

Pynchon, Thomas. *Against the Day*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.

---. "Is It O.K. To Be A Luddite?" *The New York Times*. October 28, 1984.

---. "The End of History? Thomas Pynchon and the Uses of the Past." *Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Richard Pearce. Boston: G.K. Hall & Company, 1981: 140-156.

---. *Bleeding Edge*. New York: Penguin Books, 2013.

---. *Gravity's Rainbow*. New York: Penguin Books, 1973.

---. *Inherent Vice*. New York: Penguin Books, 2009.

---. *Mason & Dixon*. New York: Picador, 1997.

---. *Slow Learner: Early Stories*. New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1984.

---. *The Crying of Lot 49*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1965.

---. *V.* New York: Harper Perennial, 1961.

---. *Vineland*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990.

Raudaskoski, Heikki. "Pynchon, Melville, and the Fulcrum of America." *Blissful Bewilderment: Studies in the Fiction of Thomas Pynchon*. Ed. Anne Mangen and Rolf Gaasland. Oslo: Novus Press, 2002.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Robinson, Arthur H. *Elements of Geography*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1953.

Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Rowe, William Woodin. *Nabokov's Deceptive World*. New York: New York University Press, 1971.

---. *Nabokov's Spectral Dimension*. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981.

Samuels, Robert. *Writing Prejudices: The Psychoanalysis and Pedagogy of Discrimination from Shakespeare to Toni Morrison*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2001.

Seltzer, Mark. *The Official World*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

---. *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Severs, Jeffery and Christopher Leise. *Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011.

Shaprio, Gavriel. *The Tender Friendship and the Charm of Perfect Accord: Nabokov and His Father*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

Shelly, Mary. *Frankenstein*. New York: Signet Classic, 1963.

Silko, Lesli Marmon. *Ceremony*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.

Sissman. L. E. Review of *The Bluest Eye*. *The New Yorker*, Janury 23, 1970. *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993: 4-5.

Slade, Joseph W. *Thomas Pynchon*. New York: Warner Paperback Library, 1974.

Slaughter, Joseph R. *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007.

Smith, Valerie. *Toni Morrison: Writing the Moral Imagination*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

St. Clair, Justin. “Borrowed Time: Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day* and the Victorian Fourth Dimension.” *Science Fictions Studies* (38.1) 2011: 46-66.

Taylor, Charles. “Two Theories of Modernity.” *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar. Durhan: Duke University Press, 2001: 172-196.

Thomsen, Mads Rosendahl. *The New Human in Literature: Posthuman Visions of Changes in Body, Mind and Society after 1900*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Thoreen, David. “The Forth Amendment and Other Modern Inconveniences: Undeclared War, Organized Labor, and the Abrogation of Civil Rights in *Vineland*.” *Thomas Pynchon: Reading from the Margins*, ed. Nirna Abbas. Madison: Feirleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003: 215-233.

Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblges, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Weinstein, Philip. “‘Dangerously Free’: Morrison’s Unspekable Territory.” *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning*, ed. Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014: 7-18.

Weisenburger, Steven. *A Gravity’s Rainbow Companion: Sources and Context for Pynchon’s Novel*. Athens: The University of George Press, 2006.

West, William N. *Theaters and Encyclopedias in Early Modern Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays*. New York: Verso, 1980.

Winston, Mathew. “Appendix: The Quest for Pynchon.” *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976: 251-263.

Wood, Michael. “Sensations of Loss.” *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. Marc C. Conner. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000: 113-124.

---. *The Magician’s Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003.

---. *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. London: Verso, 2012.