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**Apposition, Displacement:  
An Ethics of Abstraction in Postwar American Fiction**

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An Ethics of Abstraction in Postwar American Fiction**

**by**

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## **Dedication**

To S.M.B.

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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The decades following two world wars, the European Holocaust and the threat of nuclear annihilation presented American authors with an occupational dilemma: catastrophic histories call out for recognition, but any representation of them risks adding violence to violence by falsifying the account or conflating historical acts of violence with their artificial doubles. This project reimagines the political aesthetics of postmodern American fiction through two major interventions. First, I identify an aesthetic structure of apposition—a parallel relationship between abstract works of art and the everyday world that I take from William Carlos Williams—that allows me to productively resolve a tension in the aesthetics of Hannah Arendt: because representation takes mimesis as a particular end, Arendt disqualifies representational art from politics, which she defines as open-ended action between human beings and not as end-centered state-craft. At the same time, Arendt claims that art is a product of thought, the cognitive activity she associates with political action over and against fabrication. My heterodox reading of Arendt shows that appositional narratives, like political actors, perform their own self-disclosure, beginning the open-ended chain of actions and reactions that Arendt identifies

as the substantial form of politics and ethics. Second, I use my revision of Arendt to demonstrate that appositional narratives act politically through the very same metafictional tropes that critics often label as escapist or solipsistic. Rather than copy historical experience, appositional narratives reject illusionary representation and present themselves as actors, inciting their readers to respond with pluralistic, provisional judgment. Taking Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth and Toni Morrison—three central but rarely-juxtaposed postmodern novelists—as case studies, I show that we cannot properly assess the political implications of postmodern fiction without understanding the specific mechanisms of narrative apposition. Appositional works stand temporarily and self-consciously in the place of the world, displacing it in the experience of their readers. This *narrative* strategy provides a *political* alternative for novelists facing the ethical crises of postmodernity. Appositional narratives displace their readers' settled beliefs and press them to exercise their human capacity for judgment. They embrace their responsibility for the world by refusing to represent it.

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## **Introduction: An American Ethics of Abstract Art**

Broadly speaking, this dissertation makes two critical moves. First, I show how the aesthetic posture of apposition—a parallel relationship between the work of art and the world of historical experience that I glean from the poetics of William Carlos Williams—helps resolve a contradiction in Hannah Arendt’s description of the arts. Arendt describes art works, along with all other worldly objects, as products of the human activity of fabricating, but, because she insists that art is also a product of thought, a cognitive activity she otherwise associates with political action over and against fabrication, works of art breach the line between making and acting that she otherwise presents as inviolable. Second, I use my revision of Arendt’s aesthetics with her phenomenology of human action as a tool for disclosing the ethical and political actions performed by appositional narrative experimentation in postwar American fiction. Read together, Williams and Arendt define a species of abstract art that embraces its responsibility for the world by refusing to represent it. Apposition is abstract because it operates through displacement: rather than representing historical experience, appositional works stand temporarily and self-consciously in the place of the world, displacing it in the experience of their readers. Williams’ formulation of apposition distinguishes abstract art from the easily conflated alternatives of non-figurative art and abstract concepts. First, William’s argues that a work’s relationship to the world, rather than the absence of recognizable figures, makes a work abstract. Second, because he argues that works of art establish an abstract *relationship* to the world by reflexively insisting on their own particularity, Williams argues that the work-world relationship of abstract art prioritizes worldly particulars over abstract universals. By avoiding objective

representations and self-consciously highlighting the conditions of their own appearance, oppositional works address their readers' subjective capacities for judgment and action, the faculties that, for Arendt, form the *sine qua non* of human responsibility. As a critical category, narrative opposition discloses a set of specific mechanisms through which the self-conscious play and metafictional tropes that characterize postmodern American fiction can serve as serious ethical and political interventions. The novelists I investigate in my case studies—Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth and Toni Morrison—use narrative opposition to respond to the same break with political, moral and epistemological traditions that Arendt addresses in her work from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) through *The Life of the Mind* (1971).

While it would be anachronistic to describe Williams's poetics as "postmodern" in the context of literary movements, opposition offered postwar novelists an aesthetic strategy that is particularly well-suited for engaging postmodernity. While the insistent nominalism and perspectivalism that characterize philosophic and cultural movements generally regarded as postmodern make it more appropriate to speak of postmodernisms in the plural than of a monolithic postmodernism, certain features do serve to distinguish postmodernity from the modernity it both follows and extends. As W. Lawrence Hogue points out in *Postmodern American Literature and Its Other* (2009), most cultural critics share a "general understanding of postmodernity as a new sociocultural and socioeconomic era. In many ways, postmodernity can be interpreted as an *epistemological* break with modernity. It plays with the universality of instrumental reason and it rejects those social, sexual, psychological, philosophical, and historical postulates that are totalizing, metaphysical, and essentialist" (Hogue x, italics added). Hogue's emphasis on an epistemological break with modernity is key to his definition of the postmodern, and it ties postmodernity to what Arendt describes as a fundamental

break with the Western tradition. Without using the term “postmodern,” Arendt describes the postwar zeitgeist as a broad, conscious awareness of the effects of modernity itself: the fully realized break with tradition as a grounding authority for human knowledge and action. As Arendt argues throughout her oeuvre, the historical presence of totalitarianism as an accomplished fact demonstrated the impotence of the Western tradition either to prevent the horrors of the Shoah and the Gulag or to understand, explain or adjudicate such crimes after the fact. Our juridical tradition, facing something unprecedented and therefore beyond its scope, reached for the concept of “crimes against humanity” to describe actions that our moral tradition, in what amounts to an explicit admission of its own inadequacy, refers to obliquely as “radical evil.” At the same moment in the middle of the twentieth century, Western science developed atomic weapons that stripped away the futures of both the Thomistic “world without end” and the Enlightenment ideal of secular, historical progress.

Williams’ poetics of apposition, developed originally as a rejection of T. S. Eliot’s commitment to European aesthetic traditions, presents the second half of the twentieth century with a mechanism for living in a challenging here and now unaided by the authority of political and ethical traditions. Williams presents apposition as an alternative to Eliot’s vision of modern art as the leading edge of a great tradition. While Eliot, most famously in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1920), describes the relationship of the poet to the Western tradition as a progressive monadology on the model of Leibniz, Whitehead or Hegel—the new work encompasses the tradition at the moment of its creation and, through its creation, expands the accumulated order by one—Williams’ *Spring and All* (1923) explicitly rejects the “horrid unity” of this “great consummation” (CP 180). For Williams, an American modernism—and therefore any effective modernism in America—must grow out of American locations and American

languages and cannot be imported from England, France, Italy or anywhere else. In a thinly veiled attack on Eliot's *Wasteland*, Williams claims, "If I could say what is in my mind in Sanscrit or even Latin I would do so. But I cannot" (CP 179). The present time and place cannot rely on traditions borrowed from other times and other places. Williams connects Eliot's traditionalism to the practice of representation by linking them both unfavorably to copying: representation makes a "beautiful illusion" in its attempt to copy nature, and Eliot copies the past as one of "THE TRADITIONALISTS OF PLAGIARISM" (CP 178, 185). In Williams' estimation, neither of these practices can create art work that is actually new, and only a legitimately new poetry can address itself to people facing the specific challenges of their particular time and place. While Williams turns to apposition for the primarily aesthetic aim of nurturing a species of art that is undeniably modern and unmistakably American, my project demonstrates how Williams' aesthetically-motivated strategy of apposition—developed as a local resistance to the "great consummation" of the Western tradition espoused by Eliot and Pound—became an important tool for novelists facing the challenges of postmodernity, that is, the challenges of living after Western moral and political traditions lost both the power and the appearance of authority.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, I argue that aesthetic strategies of apposition

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt's thought is characterized by her use of careful distinctions, and among the most important distinctions she makes are between different types of power. With regard to politics and public life, she uses the term "power" to indicate the political potential for action and change that exists whenever human beings appear together in public. "Authority," for Arendt, is always structural and hierarchical: parents have authority over children, officers over soldiers, teachers over students, etc. A person's authority is a function of their position in a hierarchy, and the moment a parent (or officer) begins offering reasons to a child (or soldier), she has surrendered her authority and is relying on persuasion (or force, violence, etc.). "Tradition" is a subspecies of authority in which the past, and often a particular founding moment, holds authority. Claiming that Catholics should follow the teachings of the pope because he is the last in a succession of Roman bishops stretching back to St. Peter (and not because of the theological or humanistic insight of his encyclicals) or claiming that American law should defer to the Constitution simply because it is the Constitution (and not because of the value of its ideas and ideals) are assertions of the authority of tradition. Arendt also differentiates power, authority and tradition from other means of affecting people such as persuasion, violence and force, but her distinction between power and tradition is the most important definitional divide for the purposes of my dissertation.

address themselves to judgment, the human capacity for thinking in the place of everyone else that Arendt takes from Kant's third critique. Incidentally, by borrowing from Williams' aesthetics to inform a postmodern ethics and politics, I am following Arendt's example: Arendt explicitly borrows her concept of judgment from Kant's aesthetic philosophy and builds her phenomenology of politics around this originally aesthetic concept.

### **AESTHETIC STRUCTURES OF APPOSITION**

I adopt "apposition" as an aesthetic term from Williams' *Spring and All* (1923), an experimental long poem that both theorizes and embodies his argument that caring for the world and representing it in poetry are contradictory aims. Williams develops a two-world theory of art and experience similar to those espoused by artists like Vladimir Nabokov and W. H. Auden that relies on a psychology of experience indebted to the phenomenological tradition of Continental philosophy. For Williams, art and nature are two spheres of possible experience—two distinct worlds encountered by the individual—and the link between those two worlds is not mimesis but the subjective activity of the mind: "Nature is the hint to composition...because it possesses the quality of *independent existence*, of reality *which we feel in ourselves*. It is not opposed to art but *apposed* to it" (CP 207-8, italics added). The artist, according to Williams, should not present a picture *of* the world but should, instead, present a picture that *is* a world. Williams contends that "Shakespeare's familiar aphorism about holding the mirror up to nature has done more harm in stabilizing the copyist tendency of the arts among us... He [Shakespeare] holds no mirror up to nature but with his imagination rivals nature's composition with his own" (CP 208). Williams elaborates this distinction using the figure of a grammatical

appositive. Grammatically, an appositive is neither a descriptor nor a modifier; it is a replacement, a coequal rival of the subject of a sentence. At the same time, an appositive exists within the subject: it is both independent and contained. While it presents the subject again, it is never reducible to the subject, and they do not share an identity. The appositive offers an alternative, a separate subject for the predicate, an alternative sentence within the sentence, structurally identical to (yet irreducible to) the sentence governed by the subject. It does not modify the subject; it forces us to read the subject again (and otherwise). Similarly, the work of art exists as an alternative world within the world of experience. It does not describe the world. It does not reflect the world. It does not present or represent the world. It exists. The work of art is a world existing in apposition to the world of experience, an alternative that forces us to reexamine our everyday world.

Taking my direction from Williams, I use “apposition” to describe narratives that embody four relationships between the work and the world: 1) the work privileges the local and particular over the general or universal, 2) the work actively discloses its own material thing-ness, 3) the work uses its material thing-ness to directly address its readers’ faculties of imagination and judgment, and 4) the work’s open-ended insistence on particular judgments undermines any pretense of comprehension, finality or completion.

First, appositional poetics emphasize the primacy of the local and the particular over the universal and abstract. Williams’ devotion to particular details of time and place is a definitive feature of his entire oeuvre. Williams argues in a 1932 essay on Kenneth Burke that “good writing” is the direct result of “the shapes of men’s lives imparted by the places where they have experience...One has to learn what the meaning of the local is, for universal purposes. The local is the only thing that is universal” (“Burke” 132).

Williams begins by staking out a stridently nominalist position regarding universals—there are no universal things, only universal names—but he also lists the subjective limitations of perspective as the condition necessary for the possibility of universal experience. In other words, human subjects universally experience the world through the local particulars of their own time and place. In his “Comment” accompanying the first issue of *Contact* (1921), Williams insists that American artists should avoid copying the content or style of European modernists and, instead, follow their practice of responding to local conditions: “Americans are still too prone to admire and to copy the very thing which should not be copied, the thing which is French or Irish alone, the result of special local conditions of thought and circumstance” (“Comment” 28). Williams repeats this sentiment in a 1934 essay on Alfred Stieglitz: “The thing that Americans never seem to see is that French painting, as an example of what is meant, is related to its own definite tradition, in its own environment and general history” (“Stieglitz” 29). The universal appeal or utility of a work, according to Williams, does not come from an appeal to universal humanity or to human nature but from the artist engaging with the particular circumstances of her own experience in the world. In an essay written to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of *Leaves of Grass*, Williams argues that the same logic applies to time as place: “you can see why it is impossible to imitate Shakespeare; he was part of a historic process which cannot repeat itself...if anything now is to be created, it must be in a new form” (“Leaves” 29). Williams repeats his claim that the particular provides the only path to the universal—that contact with what he calls the “soil” or the “weather” of a particular locality provides the only universal value in a work of art—and he insists that such contact is registered in the *form*, rather than the thematic *content*, of the work.

Second, this commitment to the particular leads appositional works to emphasize their own material thing-ness, insisting that their audiences see them as *poems*, not poems *about*, or as *pictures*, not pictures *of*. This emphasis on materiality shifts the significance of the art work from its represented content to the forms that structure its appearance as a worldly object. In his essay on Burke, Williams insists that “Writing is made of words, of nothing else” (SE 132), and *Spring and All* connects the explicit materiality of language with writing’s appositional relationship to the everyday world: “The word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole” (CP 189). The work of art, Williams argues, is a part of the world that, by disclosing its own independent existence within and beside the world, signals an awareness of the world as such. To borrow Heidegger’s terminology, a work of art reveals the worldliness of the world, and it reveals the structure of worldly experience by directing its reader’s attention to the structure of its own composition. *Spring and All* argues that poetry must reject the “illusion” of holding a mirror up to nature, and the turn away *from* representation is, for Williams, a turn *towards* the materiality of the work of art: “the illusion once dispensed with, painting has this problem before it: to replace not the *forms* but the *reality* of experience with its own...they must give not the sense of frustration but a sense of completion, of actuality—It is not a matter of ‘representation’—much may be represented actually, but of *separate existence*” (CP 204 italics added). An appositional work does not copy the forms of nature, which is another way of saying it does not represent nature; an appositional, abstract work stands in for the *existence* of the everyday world. If it copies anything, it copies the world’s being *qua being*.<sup>2</sup> Williams argues that the abstract character of art is not primarily a matter of figuration (of having or not having

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<sup>2</sup> We might think of this connection through existence *as such* as operating analogously to Aristotle’s “prime matter” or Plato’s “khora” so long as we understand “being” in phenomenological rather than metaphysical terms.

recognizable figures in the composition) but of the work's explicit awareness and disclosure of its own independent existence. In other words, a work is abstract when it displaces rather than depicts the world, and material self-disclosure is the mechanism of that displacement. An appositional work is purposefully opaque, and it places its intentionally obstructive structure in a position parallel to the reader's experience of the everyday world.

Third, appositional works use their own status as objects to privilege subjectivity over objectivity. An appositional narrative's self-disclosure addresses its readers' subjective faculties of judgment and imagination rather than attempting to objectively represent the world. A work that attempts to represent the world places itself in an immediate, objective relationship to the world of historical experience and implicitly claims to explain or demystify that reality. By displacing rather than representing the world, an appositional work of art places itself in an immediate relationship to the reader's subjectivity and in an indirect, parallel relationship to historical experience. Rather than taking over the tasks of perception and understanding by attempting to represent or explain the world, an appositional work throws a reader back on his or her own subjective capacities for perception and judgment and invites active, open-ended engagement with both the work and the world. In the second paragraph of *Spring and All*, Williams claims, "There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world. If there is an ocean it is here. Or rather, the whole world is between: Yesterday, tomorrow, Europe, Asia, Africa—all things removed and impossible, the tower of the church as Seville, the Parthenon" (*CP* 177).<sup>3</sup> This opening salvo seems at first paradoxical: the object standing between the poem's reader and his or

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<sup>3</sup> The ocean that stands between a person and her experience of the world are, for Williams, all variations on times and places other than the particular here and now: the past, the future, other continents, past traditions both religious (the church at Seville) and secular (the Parthenon).

her experience of the world *is* the world. How, after all, can the world stand between itself and the reader? Williams is playing with the general conception of art as standing between its audience and the world as a kind of intermediary, a mirror held up to nature or a window into the world. We must notice, however, that Williams' focus is not actually on the reader's relationship to the world but on the reader's relationship to *his own consciousness* and, particularly, *his consciousness of being in the world* or of being in contact with the world. Williams is concerned with his reader's attunement, a reciprocal self-knowledge akin to Heidegger's authenticity or Sartre's good faith. Appositional works address the question of *how* we think *in* the world rather than *what* we think *about* it.

Finally, because they emphasize the particular and the local and address their readers' as individual subjects, appositional works must be structurally open and unfinished; they can neither sum up the past nor predict the future. In his essay "Against the Weather" (1939), Williams argues that "without the imagination life cannot go on, for we are left staring at the empty casings where truth lived yesterday while the creature itself has escaped behind us. It is the power of mutation which the mind possesses to rediscover the truth" ("Weather" 213). The truth, Williams argues, cannot be locked up and must be continually rediscovered. The value of art to understanding cannot be found in a content which accurately represents the truth of life, of politics, of ethics because the truth itself will change and turn even a perfect representation of yesterday's truth—if such a thing were possible—into a distortion of *today's* reality. The only aid art can offer our understanding in the long run is to train the imagination to change in response to the changing world, and that training, for which representation is not only useless but actively counterproductive, must take place through the *forms* of poetry and the other arts. Paraphrasing Thomas Jefferson's claim that we "should have a revolution of some

sort in American every ten years,” Williams insists that, for the artist, this revolution must be in the structure of the work: “The truth has to be redressed, re-examined, re-affirmed in a new mode. There has to be new poetry. But the thing is that the change, the greater material, the altered structure of the inevitable revolution must be *in* the poem, in it. Made of it. It must shine in the structural body of it” (“Weather” 217 italics original). In Williams’ appositional poetics, a commitment to form indicates the need for openness, for attentiveness, for judgment: we don’t prepare for the future by knowing everything about the objective present; we prepare for the future by training our subjective capacities for judgment.

These four features characterize an appositional relationship to the world of historical experience. An appositional work stands beside the world as a temporary, self-disclosing substitute for the world within the horizon of its reader’s present experience. By temporarily and instrumentally displacing the appearance of the common world, appositional works also displace their reader’s everyday relationship to the world and call attention to the subjective conditions that make worldly experience possible. In other words, appositional narratives abandon the task of explaining the world to us—a task that requires represented content and propositional logic—and demand, instead, that we actively re-conceive of the world and our positions in it. Appositional works frequently have thematic content that directs us towards particular worldly problems, but their structures deny the mimetic illusion of that content and appeal to our capacity for acting rather than our desire for understanding.

## ARENDR AND THE POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF APPOSITION

The first chapter of this project presents an extended argument about apposition, judgment and the end of tradition in Arendt's political thought. Before turning to that discussion, I want to offer four quick indications of Arendt's importance to this project as a whole. First, Arendt's distinction between thinking and knowing marks the crucial difference between the questions "How can literature help us think" and "What can literature help us know?" The distinction between thinking and knowing comes from Kant's discussion of *Vernunft* and *Verstand*, terms that Arendt translates as "reason" and "intellect," and this distinction "coincides with a distinction between two altogether different mental activities, thinking and knowing" (*LM* 14). As a mental activity, knowing addresses the data that we have collected about the world as an object while thinking denotes the operations of the mind apart from any specific content or objective knowledge. Knowledge collects and masters information (who lost the battle of Waterloo, what is the speed of light in a vacuum, how do neurotransmitters carry signals across synapses) and the objects of knowledge define various disciplines and areas of expertise (history, physics, neurobiology, etc.). While it can and often does popularize certain historical or scientific facts, literature is not a particularly efficient medium for transmitting knowledge, and individual works of literature can even be counterproductive from the standpoint of knowledge: the bare existence of the term "artistic license" indicates the danger of facts being misrepresented in poems, novels and other narrative forms. Evaluations of "historical accuracy" or other critiques based on the knowledge a work transmits necessarily focus on the content represented in the work. By contrast, thinking is concerned with the structure of being-in-the-world rather than with objects of knowledge. What we know and how we think are related, of course, but they are not identical and neither can be reduced to the terms of the other faculty. We may know a lot

about the biological operations of the brain or the statistically significant actions of aggregate populations, but neither object of knowledge tells us how we should or even how we do think about human action. As thinking creatures, we have access to the structures of thought, but we cannot approach them as objects. Our access to thought is subjective, which is not to say that it is arbitrary or otherwise “soft.” Rigorous thinking, like rigorously compiled knowledge, requires consistent, careful, difficult work. While knowledge is naturally related to representation and thematic content, thinking (the structure of experience) is intimately connected to the structure and form of literary works.

Second, Arendt insists on the distinction between making and acting as modes of human activity. In *The Human Condition* (1958) in particular, Arendt separates the fabricating activities of *homo faber* (men and women as craftspeople who create worldly objects) from the political activities of speech and action (appearing publically with the potential of political power). Part of her distinction rests on the prior division between knowledge and thought: the means-to-an-end process of fabrication relies on knowing what you are making and how to make it, but the open-ended uncertainty of political action requires judgment, a particular variety of thought. Within this context, Arendt describes art works as unique among worldly objects because, while they are fabricated objects, they are the products of thinking rather than knowing. I argue, in a heterodox reading of Arendt’s aesthetics, that apposition takes advantage of art’s alignment with thinking and allow works of art to act politically without reducing politics to a dangerous, end-focused fabrication in which individuals become raw materials for the state. While this reading stands in opposition to Arendt’s frequently repeated description of art as a mere record of action, I am exploiting what Michael Warner calls “opportunities for reading her against the grain” (Warner 60). I am also following the current trend in

Arendt studies that, according to Seyla Benhabib, meets “an urgent need, an intellectual hunger, ‘to think with Arendt, against Arendt’” and extending that practice into her often-overlooked philosophy of the arts (Benhabib 2).

Third, Arendt joins Williams in insisting on the primacy of the particular over the universal. In her discussion of Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) in *Regions of Sorrow: Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W. H. Auden* (2003), Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb describes Arendt’s preference for discussing particular human beings over abstract conceptions of humanity “in general” such as those found in the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (1948). Arendt argues that we must ground our understanding of human beings and human rights in the individual rather than abstract humanity because only particular human beings are conditioned (positioned and contextualized) to speak a language meant for other particular human beings. That is, only individuals can speak to other individuals in the commonly held world and expect to receive a response. Gottlieb calls this type of speaking “language in the eminent sense—language, that is, in which utterances are not only meaningful according to grammatical and logical criteria but, above all, significant to other speakers who are able to speak meaningfully in return” (Gottlieb 32). Eminent language is speech that meets Arendt’s open, self-disclosing criteria for political action. As Gottlieb points out, meaningful, eminent language is only possible “on the condition that human beings are conditioned, which means, at the very least, spatially conditioned—that is, that they can claim an identifiable place from which to speak” (Gottlieb 30). Universal declarations foreclose on eminent language by removing the conditioned individual from the “accidents” of position and perspective that make it possible for one person to address others who also exist within the particular conditions of their being-in-the-world: “Arendt is struggling to protect the ability to speak meaningfully, such that meaning—in contrast to the long

philosophical tradition that seeks to overcome ‘opinion’ and arrive at knowledge—is correlated to *doxa*” (Gottlieb 32). Arendt follows Kant in championing the phenomenal appearance of the world, what Gottlieb calls “the ‘it appears to me’ of *doxa*,” in opposition to any “supposedly ‘higher’ instances of rationality or systematicity” that force individuals to abandon their conditioned place in the world and leave them isolated with unworldly universals (Gottlieb 33). While philosophy since Plato has tended to privilege *episteme* (knowledge) over *doxa* (opinion), Arendt rejects the search for detached universals in favor of plural, situated perspectives that require the public exercise of judgment. Democratic politics, as Plato was aware, require rhetorical rather than metaphysical methods, which is why *The Republic* embraces despotism and banishes democracy from the polis along with sophistry and poetry. This concern with the particular and with the situated perspectivalism of *doxa* connects Arendt’s work equally to Williams’ poetics and the postmodern metafiction of postwar American novelists.

Finally, Arendt is a singularly important theorist of the common world whose insistence on public appearance and self-disclosure as the *sine qua non* of political action has not been adequately developed in literary studies. One prominent example of the potential value of Arendt’s political writing for literary studies is found in Warner’s work on publics. Warner’s public sphere theory, developed as an alternative to Jurgen Habermas’ rational-critical bourgeois public sphere, draws deeply and explicitly on Arendt’s phenomenology of public action. As Warner argues in *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), the “public that Arendt values so much is the scene of world making and self-disclosure; it is therefore to be distinguished both from the prevailing system of politics and from any universalist notion of rational debate” (Warner 59). A public, for Warner, is not the universal aggregate of literate citizens or any other universalized notion of humanity. A public comes into being in and through the

circulation of texts—through Gottlieb’s “eminent” language—as speech addresses itself to strangers (a necessarily open-ended address) who respond with their own speech and actions. In Warner’s words, “Publicness is just this space of coming together that discloses itself in interaction” (Warner 122). My project, by directly engaging with Arendt’s commitment to judgment and self-disclosure and by reading Nabokov’s, Roth’s and Morrison’s appositional tropes as instances of public-oriented self-disclosure, responds to what Warner calls the “need for both concrete and theoretical understandings of the conditions that currently mediate the transformative and creative work of counterpublics” (Warner 62). The political potential of appositional narratives, like Warner’s address to strangers, operates through a public self-disclosure that creates a space of possibility for other actors to appear and change the shared, public world.

In order to avoid the ethical abstraction of representative examples, a work of art must break the illusion of representation and act in the particular mode that Arendt argues is inseparable from political possibility: self-disclosure.<sup>4</sup> Public appearance that reveals the speaker or actor to others forms the central pillar of Arendt’s politics for the same

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<sup>4</sup> Arendt’s commitment to *doxa*, opinion or situated perspective, over abstract declarations and universal truths would seem to align her against abstraction in the arts as well. As Gottlieb notes, through the example of Arendt’s friend W. H. Auden, a commitment *doxa* actually takes its stand against representation, particularly with regard to the unimaginable and yet present realities of totalitarianism. In a passage from *Secondary Worlds* (1968) quoted by Gottlieb, Auden claims that, while it is “necessary that we know about evil in the world, about past evil that we may know what man is capable of, and be on watch for it in ourselves, and about present evil so we may take political action to eradicate it,” literary representation of that evil risks corrupting both the poet and his readers: “To write a play, that is to construct a secondary world, about Auschwitz, for example, is wicked; author and audience may try to pretend they are morally horrified, but in fact they are passing an entertaining evening together, in the aesthetic enjoyment of horrors” (Auden 84). Gottlieb notes that Auden’s choice of “wicked” contrasts with Adorno’s condemnation of such poetic ventures as “barbaric”: while barbarism implies a cultural failing or lack of refinement, “for Auden, Adorno’s concern with culture is beside the point; poetry becomes not barbaric but, rather, wicked whenever it fails to acknowledge its limits” (Gottlieb 19). One of those limits is the impossibility of representing the unfathomable or the diverse plurality of human experience, yet the very particularity of artistic representation becomes a universalizing abstraction the moment a work of art purports to represent or be a representative of the individual human beings whose lives it records or reports. The poem’s particular representation slides almost inevitably into the ethically disastrous universality of a representative example.

reason that abstract declarations have no place in it: self-disclosure—*ethos*, in the language of classical rhetoric—is a necessary condition of what Gottlieb calls eminent language or *doxa*. Without self-disclosure, there can be no response and no responsibility. Somewhat paradoxically, a work of art that abjures representation and acts, instead, to disclose its own presence and its own particular construction is, in the language of the arts, abstract. Despite the elision of terminology, in order to avoid abstract political or ethical declarations, a work of art must embrace the formally abstract qualities of non-representative self-disclosure. While these formal qualities frequently lead critics to describe narrative literature as postmodern, metafictional and even coldly detached or ironic, Williams' apposition provides a key that allows us read the postwar turn towards metafiction—arguably the most significant formal movement in American literature since the Second World War—as the politically necessary appearance described in Arendt's phenomenology of human action. The formal experimentations and metafictional tropes of appositional narratives are not evasions of or flights from the world: they are acts of self-disclosure that hold open the political possibility of response and responsibility.

## CHAPTERS

In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt frames the modern condition of living after the end of tradition as the task of navigating the gap between the past, which we inherit from others, and the future, which we pass on to others. Following Arendt's chronological structuring of the present moment, my case studies explore how Nabokov, Roth and Morrison use appositional narratives to remember without creating totalizing histories, to imagine sharing a common world that has been fragmented by the catastrophic, and to look towards an unseen and unknowable future that is marked, but

not determined, by the experience of catastrophic pasts. Arendt's description of the essays that make up her collection *Between Past and Future* applies equally well to the novels I take up in the second part of the dissertation: "their only aim is to gain experience in *how* to think; they do not contain prescriptions on what to think or which truths to hold. Least of all do they intend to retie the broken thread of tradition or to invent some newfangled surrogates with which to fill the gap between past and future" (*BPF* 14). The appositional works of Nabokov—from *Bend Sinister* (1947) through *Lolita* (1955) and *Pnin* (1957) to *Invitation to a Beheading* (1974)—Roth—from his early essays and first stories in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) to *The Counterlife* (1986)—and Morrison—especially "Recitatif" (1983), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998) and her "Nobel Lecture" (1993)—embody practices judgment and refuse to represent the past or envision a future. The arc of this dissertation also progresses chronologically as its focus shifts from past to present to future. Nabokov, the earliest novelist in my study, turns his appositional narratives towards the recent history of totalitarianism in his native Europe. Roth, whose work straddles the careers of Nabokov and Morrison, addresses both the past and the future, but his narratives are primarily concerned with living after the catastrophic in the unmoored present. Morrison returns insistently to the history of displaced African Americans, but her appositional experiments in language and narrative structure strive to find a way forward to a non-catastrophic future. Together, they describe a formal response to the challenge of living in what Arendt terms the gap between past and future.

In "The Crisis in Representation: The Aesthetic Philosophy of Hannah Arendt and the Act of Apposition," I present Arendt's rich theoretical description of the twentieth century's break with tradition, and I argue that reading Arendt's aesthetic philosophy in the context of her distinction between work and action reveals how appositional

narratives can rise to the level of political and ethical action. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Arendt reports that Adolf Eichmann suffered from a type of aphasia in which he could neither think nor speak in words other than clichés or “officialese.” She argues that his inability to speak was directly related to an inability to think from the position of anyone but himself. Arendt follows Kant in calling this ability to evaluate our words and actions from the vantage point of our fellow creatures “judgment.” Arendt places judgment, the central tenet of Kant’s aesthetic philosophy, at the center of her political thought because twentieth-century totalitarianism had demonstrated that the traditional moral and political concepts of Western culture were incapable either of preventing or afterward explaining the actions of men like Eichmann. Arendt notes that the authority of traditional concepts had been eroding at least since Descartes, but totalitarianism as an accomplished fact revealed the full extent of the tradition’s impotence and left contemporary human beings the herculean task of facing a catastrophic past and an uncertain future without the aid of traditional authority. The various crises she interrogates in *Between Past and Future* (1961) resulted directly from this break with tradition, and those essays along with *The Human Condition* (1958) present her pragmatic response to the general crisis: a reimagining of politics as open-ended action between human beings and not as end-centered statecraft. While Arendt often attempts to place an impassable gulf between art and politics, her adoption of Kantian judgment and its importance to action hints at the deep structural connections between her aesthetic and political thought. Treating politics as an art of nation-making ends in catastrophe, but the work of art (both the art-object and what it performs) can appear in the world as open-ended, legitimately-political action. While this is an intentionally heterodox reading of Arendt’s aesthetic philosophy, it revises Arendt’s aesthetics by privileging her claims about how works of art behave in the world over her more conservative definition of art

as representation. In my reading of Arendt against Arendt—in taking advantage of what Warner calls “opportunities for reading her against the grain” (Warner 60)—I am following the example she sets in her own writing: Arendt always tests her claims about what art *is* by referring those claims back to her criteria for what art *does* or must be capable of doing. While representational works may (like fabrication) necessarily aim at a set goal, oppositional works (like political actors) primarily disclose themselves and begin the open-ended chain of actions and reactions which Arendt argues is the true nature of both politics and ethics.

Having, like Arendt, lived in stateless exile in Western Europe before fleeing Nazi expansion and ending up, finally, in the United States, Nabokov was intimately aware of the Western tradition’s failure to prevent the horrors of totalitarianism. *Pnin* (1957) reminds its readers that an oak dedicated to Goethe stood within the gates of Buchenwald, and the rest of Nabokov’s American oeuvre struggles with the complicity of the arts in obscuring the history of totalitarianism. Nabokov is concerned about the malicious lies of people like Dr. Shoe, the Holocaust-denying lecturer of “Conversation Piece, 1945” (1945), but he struggles more with the aesthetic equivocations of well-meaning writers whose narratives nonetheless falsify the historical record and frequently fall prey to the perversity of “human interest.” In “Left-handed Fictions: Space, Time and the Ethical Gulf between Worlds in Vladimir Nabokov’s American Fiction,” I argue that, by addressing the immediate-yet-unrecoverable past of the twentieth century, Nabokov’s American novels wrestle with the challenge of remembering the horrors of totalitarianism without becoming bits of sensational entertainment or sublime pleasure. The narrative experiments that proliferate in his novels from *Bend Sinister* (1947) to *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974) explicitly disavow representation in their approach to that which is not only unrepresentable but also unthinkable. Nabokov insists that, rather than treating

these novels as reflections of historical experience, readers must first understand the ontology of fictional worlds and only then look for the relationships between those worlds and the world of historical experience. Nabokov's fictions reveal that narrative worlds use spatial approximations for the passage of time in historical existence, and, as a result, fiction cannot represent political and ethical actions because actions and events occur in time as causes and effects. Unlike historical consequences, the ending of a novel already exists when a reader begins its first page, and, while a person can always reread a passage in a book, she cannot relive one single hour of her life. Narratives cannot truthfully reflect the world, but they can remind us that, though our imaginings of the catastrophic will never be true, we still bear the burden of imagining.

While Nabokov insists that his readers constantly return to and readdress the past, Roth reminds us that the present we inhabit also eludes our grasp. In "The Shared Present: Philip Roth, Nathan Zuckerman and Narrative Structures of Hospitality," I argue that the metafictional triumphs of Roth's Zuckerman novels are appositional responses to the conflicting demands of individual and collective identity that permeate his entire career. Roth, like Nabokov, is a master of literary doubles and self-conscious fiction. Roth's fiction is also inseparably tied to the same wave of European immigration that brought both Nabokov and Arendt to the United States. The plight of European refugees in America, the strained relationships between gentile America, assimilated Jews and newly arrived Displaced Persons, and the task of both remembering and *living after* the Holocaust are always present in Roth's fiction from *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) onward. This presence—the need to present the effects of the Shoah—powerfully influences both the experimentally metafictional and the relentlessly neurotic character of Roth's oeuvre. This connection is more than incidental: the inseparable danger and responsibility of representing the unrepresentable generates the narrative neurosis and pushes Roth to push

the limits of fiction. His novel *The Counterlife* (1986), widely regarded as his metafictional masterpiece, presents on the level of plot and theme a series of conflicts that demonstrate the need for radical hospitality, but only at the level of structure does the novel provide any hope for a genuine welcome (and even that is only a hope). Rather than representing the possibility of genuine hospitality (a presentation that is beyond the scope of fiction), Roth structures the novel so that successfully reading it would be an act parallel to welcoming the stranger.

The European Holocaust significantly altered American perception and narrative practice in the 20th century, but American history has been more directly and profoundly shaped by catastrophic racial oppression on our own soil. Morrison returns to that history and invites her readers participate as co-creators of narratives that attempt to reshape not only the “whitemale” literary canon but also the American vernacular which grew out of and still supports systematic racism. In “Unsettling Language: The Unsatisfying Future of Toni Morrison’s Oppositional Fiction,” I argue that Morrison’s insistence that her readers participate as co-creators of her fiction constitutes both aesthetic and political action in the context of our thoroughly racialized American culture. All of Morrison’s texts present themselves as invitations, but, in the fifteen years between “Recitatif” (1983) and *Paradise* (1998), including *Jazz* (1992) and her Nobel Prize (1993), Morrison’s experimentation with language and narrative structure develops two distinct if sometimes intertwined strategies for inviting readers to wrest a useful language away from racist ideology. Morrison’s choice of subjects, characters and stories depart significantly from the traditional canon she refers to as “whitemale” literature, but her two oppositional strategies perform a much more radical revision of American letters. One strategy, a type of narrative gestalt, appears most clearly in “Recitatif” and *Paradise*: by over-saturating her language with the racial codes of American vernacular while concealing physical

markers of race, Morrison displaces her readers from the safety of “objective observation” and places the raced desires of their own language at the center of her stories. Her second strategy, used most effectively in her metafictional masterpiece *Jazz*, uses overt self-disclosure of narrative *as* narrative to confront the desire for or belief in statistical or stereotypical stories: rather than showing her readers what life is “really like” for African Americans and predicting a future (either hopeful or catastrophic), *Jazz* discloses its own construction and demands a parallel self-disclosure and action from its readers. Those public, self-conscious acts of revelation through participation—and not any artistic prescience or prediction—ground Morrison’s hope for an unwritten, unknowable future that exceeds the known facts of the catastrophic past.

My methodology throughout the project is informed by Williams’ insistence on the peculiar value of details and Arendt’s commitment to precise distinctions. I offer a phenomenology of appositional narratives that takes seriously both the reader’s encounter with the textual worlds of postmodern fiction and the perspectives of the authors who invite us to create those worlds with them. As Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), our perception of literary texts changes when we imagine ourselves in the act of creating the worlds they comprise, and, as Nabokov argues in “Good Readers and Good Writers,” reading fiction is always already participation, a “sharing in the joys and difficulties of creation” with the author (Nabokov 382).<sup>5</sup> Morrison indicates the ethical responsibility and political potential of author-reader collaboration in language that

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<sup>5</sup> Morrison argues that “Writing and reading are not all that distinct for a writer. Both exercises require being alert and ready for unaccountable beauty, for the intricateness or simple elegance of the writer’s imagination, for the world that imagination evokes. Both require being mindful of the places where the imagination sabotages itself, locks its own gates, pollutes its vision. Writing and reading mean being aware of the writer’s notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and response-ability” (PITD xi). Along with indicating the shared work of authors and readers, Morrison also links aesthetic achievements—beauty, elegance, world-creation—with ethical responsibility—figured in her hyphenated “response-ability” as a capacity to respond.

echoes both Nabokov's assertion that all serious reading is re-reading and Arendt's concern for the shared, public world: "The imagination that produces work which bears and invites rereadings, which motions to future readings as well as contemporary ones, implies a shareable world and an endlessly flexible language. Readers and writers both struggle to interpret and perform within that common language shareable imaginative worlds" (PITD xii). We share both the imaginative worlds of novels and the always-being-imagined world of historical experience with others who, like us, are responsible and response-able precisely because these worlds are shared. Interpreting and performing in a common language requires both a particular, embodied perspective—a situatedness—and an openness to other perspectives that are as local and provisional as our own. The devil, of course, is in the details. Both literary criticism and ethical action fall prey, too frequently, to the platitudes of wishful thinking, so, while the broad moves of my project describe a general relationship between late modernity and postmodern American fiction, I am equally interested in how particular narrative devices operate within individual texts and how those operations effect the appearance of those narratives in the everyday world. As Williams insists, "The local is the only thing that is universal" ("Burke" 132).

## **The Crisis in Representation: The Aesthetic Philosophy of Hannah Arendt and the Act of Apposition**

The situation, however, became desperate when the old metaphysical questions were shown to be meaningless; that is, when it began to dawn upon modern man that he had come to live in a world in which his mind and his tradition of thought were not even capable of asking adequate, meaningful questions, let alone of giving answers to its own perplexities.

– Hannah Arendt, “The Gap Between Past and Future” (1961)

In her “Postscript” to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,<sup>6</sup> Arendt explains the book’s much-abused subtitle. The “banality of evil” she reports on was not the banality or mundaneness of the crimes committed by Eichmann or any of his fellow Nazi officers; rather, the banality attaches to Eichmann himself (he was no demonic agent set on doing evil for evil’s own sake) and to what Arendt calls his “lack of imagination” (*EJ* 287), a lack that caused by extension his inability to judge (because judgment requires the imagined presence of others and other points of view). While she points out that “Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth” (*EJ* 287), her most significant claim about Eichmann and his banality focuses on the lack of imagination she terms “thoughtlessness”:

He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is ‘banal’ and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace... That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man—that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem. But it was a lesson, neither an explanation of the phenomenon nor a theory about it. (*EJ* 288)

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<sup>6</sup> *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* was published in 1963. Arendt’s “Postscript” was added in a revised and extended edition in 1964. I cite the 1964 edition throughout this chapter.

The point of this description is emphatically not that “we all share the guilt” or that “each of us could become an Eichmann” or, what Arendt explicitly denounced, that there is “an ‘Eichmann in every one of us’” (*EJ* 286); her point is that Eichmann’s lack of imagination and corresponding inability to exercise judgment—the very things that made him banal—were at least as dangerous as a malicious will.

Arendt elegantly explains this danger of banality when describing what she calls “Eichmann’s heroic fight with the German language” (*EJ* 48). This “fight,” which she insists is genuinely funny, consisted mainly of Eichmann’s attempt to provide all his testimony, whether written or oral, in preformed stock phrases. When those well-worn or worn-out expressions failed, he had no recourse to another, more original mode of expression: “Dimly aware of a defect that must have plagued him even in school—it amounted to a mild case of aphasia—he apologized, saying, ‘Officialese [*Amtssprache*] is my only language.’ But the point here is that officialese became his language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché” (*ibid*). Even when testifying at his own capital trial at which he was accused of crimes against the human status, Eichmann could only communicate in the kind of bureaucratic jargon that we now see lampooned in comic strips like *Dilbert* or movies like *Office Space*.<sup>7</sup> Rather than interpreting the banality of his language as a sign that he had become accustomed or desensitized to the horror of his crimes—an interpretation that both the content and language of his testimony argue against—Arendt sees Eichmann’s reliance on clichés as

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<sup>7</sup> Eichmann’s carried his attachment to clichés all the way to his own gallows. Arendt notes his attachment to stock phrases when she records the moments just prior to his execution: “He was in complete command of himself, nay, he was more: he was completely himself. Nothing could have demonstrated this more convincingly than the grotesque silliness of his last words. He began by stating emphatically that he was a *Gottgläubiger*, to express in common Nazi fashion that he was no Christian and did not believe in life after death. He then proceeded, ‘After a short while, gentlemen, *we shall all meet again*. Such is the fate of all men. Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. *I shall not forget them*.’ In the face of death, he had found the cliché used in the funeral oratory. Under the gallows, his memory had played him the last trick; he was ‘elated’ and he forgot that he was at his own funeral” (*EJ* 252).

a symptom of the thoughtlessness that made it possible for him to commit those crimes in the first place: “The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else” (*EJ* 49). The ability to think from someone else’s position, what rhetoricians call an awareness of audience, provides the necessary foundation for effective communication, and the inability to imagine how words will sound to a particular audience is what makes corporate-speak or “officialese” a rewarding target for satire (and also what makes it infuriating when we face it in daily life). The fundamental flaw of “officialese,” its failure to consider an audience, also accounts, rather perversely, for its widespread use: imagining a specific audience and responding to their thoughts and concerns is difficult work, and official jargon, slogans and clichés relieve you of the burden of having to “think from the standpoint of somebody else” (*ibid*). Stock phrases relieve us of the burden of other people; they save us from having to place ourselves in the position of our fellow creatures and imaginatively view the world from their perspectives. They save us, in short, from exercising the faculty that Arendt, following Kant, calls judgment.<sup>8</sup>

In this chapter, I am interested in Arendt’s elevation of judgment, a Kantian aesthetic category, to the very heart of politics and how the elevation of that faculty affects her descriptions of language, in general, and of narrative art in particular. While Arendt often attempts to place an impassable gulf between art and politics, her aesthetic

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<sup>8</sup> In *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative* (2001), Julia Kristeva convincingly claims that Arendt’s turn to Kantian judgment also performs a return to Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis* in favor of Heidegger’s emphasis on *sophia* (22). Kristeva notes that while *sophia*, Aristotle’s theoretical wisdom, is directed towards Being as such, *phronesis* is directed towards particular beings and events and is accordingly well-suited to judge human action. This turn resembles similar reconfigurations of Heidegger by Levinas and Derrida; all three thinkers shift the fundamental ground of existential ontology from the freely-chosen projections of the individual Dasein to the ethical and political responsibilities that collectively form the inescapable precondition of existing in a world with other human beings.

source for the concept of judgment and its centrality to her political thought imply a deeper connection between the aesthetic and the political. The fault lines that form around her aesthetic philosophy imply that, while politics must not be treated as fabrication, there may be some justification for thinking about the work of art (in both senses of that phrase) as political action. This is, admittedly and intentionally, a heterodox reading of Arendt's aesthetic philosophy, and it challenges Arendt's explicit claims about the nature and function of art works by privileging her claims about what art works are capable of doing.<sup>9</sup> While it means that I am often reading Arendt against Arendt, I am following the example she sets when writing about works of art: Arendt always grounds her claims about the nature of art works by holding a particular definition of art up against her description of what an object must be capable of doing in order for

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<sup>9</sup> For a more orthodox interpretation of Arendt's aesthetic theory and its connection to ethics and politics, see Kimberly Curtis's *Our Sense of the Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics* (1999 Cornell UP). Writing from the field of political science, Curtis argues for the centrality of aesthetic experience to Arendt's political and ethical writing. Curtis describes her project as primarily arguing "that aesthetic experience is central to Arendt's pursuit of this question [the nature of worldly reality], and in doing so, I focus on the relationship between plurality and our sense of reality as it is illuminated by aesthetic experience" (20). While I share her emphasis on aesthetics for understanding Arendt's ethical and political thought and even her focus on the central role of plurality in Arendt's aesthetic philosophy, Curtis adheres more closely than I to Arendt's explicit claims about the nature of art and beauty, and, as a result, she offers a much more traditionally humanist description of the arts. Intriguingly, Curtis claims that beauty may be able to provide a common phenomenological horizon, "nonfoundational, nonmetaphysical 'pillars'" of common experience, that does not rely on universal propositions or truths (12). But, rather than locating the possibility of a common horizon in judgment (an subjective quality of human existence), she locates it in the external, objective durability of the world: "Beautiful things can perdure not because they are the same to all of us, timeless and true in that universalist way, but because they are powerful but specific time-bound responses to universal dilemmas embedded in the human condition...their durability, as their beauty, derives from their capacity to illuminate both the historically specific and universal shape of our human dilemmas" (13). My turn towards judgment is an explicit attempt to avoid this type of claim about universal human experiences/dilemmas because universalizing human experience has the unfortunate side-effect of stripping particularity, and what Curtis might call reality, away from individual events and persons. Like Curtis, I am skeptical of universal and timeless truths, but I am also wary of universalizing the "shape" of historical events or "dilemmas." The common ground of a phenomenological horizon makes it possible to discuss shared aspects of human experience (apperception, perception, cognition, judgment, etc.) as quasi-universals, but it cannot guarantee any similarity among unique historical events or actions.

us to accept it *as a work of art*.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Arendt tests various claims about what a work of art *is* by referring them to her criteria for what a work of art *does*. Because representational works fail to meet those criteria, Arendt's aesthetic philosophy implicitly favors abstract art and appositional narratives for human beings living in the gap between past and future.

### THE FUNDAMENTALLY HUMAN FACULTY OF JUDGMENT

Following Kant, Arendt defines judgment as the ability “to think in the place of everybody else,”<sup>11</sup> and, in *The Human Condition* (1958), her extensive phenomenological inquiry into the *vita activa*, Arendt associates this faculty with the fundamental human condition of plurality, “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (HC 7).<sup>12</sup> Judgment relies on “an anticipated communion with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement” and “needs the presence of others ‘in whose place’ it must think, whose perspectives it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has an opportunity to operate at all” (“Culture” 217).<sup>13</sup> Judgment

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<sup>10</sup> My heterodox approach adds a literary-critical facet to the current trend of Arendt scholarship in political science. As Seyla Benhabib argues in the introduction to *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt* (2010 Cambridge UP), the proliferation of Arendt scholarship following her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2006 “not only marked her worldwide recognition and reputation, they also revealed an urgent need, an intellectual hunger, ‘to think with Arendt, against Arendt’” (2). This scholarly tendency towards revisionist readings reflects Arendt's own commitment to a perspectivalism and human plurality. As Benhabib notes later in the same collection, Arendt argues that “it is because we inhabit the world with others who are *like* us and yet always different *from* us that the world is perspectival and can only manifest itself to us from a particular vantage point” (224). Arendt's insistent pluralism commits scholars who study her political and aesthetic thought to reexamine her positions rather than solidify a system of thought. That same commitment to subjective ways of knowing the world precludes attempts like Curtis' to find universal human experience in or through aesthetic objects—individual, subjective experience takes priority over the supposed objectivity of “universal dilemmas.”

<sup>11</sup> “The Crisis in Culture” (217). See footnote 8 below.

<sup>12</sup> *The Human Condition* was first published in 1958.

<sup>13</sup> *Between Past and Future*, a collection of essays written between 1954 and 1968, was first published in 1961 with the subtitle *Six Exercises in Political Thought*. A revised edition was published with two

relies on exactly that ability “to think from the standpoint of somebody else” that Eichmann did not or could not practice. His “battle with the German language” was a symptom of a much deeper problem: Eichmann used stock phrases because they did not require him to exercise judgment—that is, they did not require him to think with and about the presence of others—and this, in turn, allowed him to ignore the plurality of human existence.

According to Arendt, Eichmann’s most heinous crime—the greatest evil of which he was guilty—was not mass murder nor facilitating mass murder but a crime against the fundamental condition of human plurality.<sup>14</sup> She claims that “None of the participants [at the trial] ever arrived at a clear understanding of the actual horror of Auschwitz, which is of a different nature from all the atrocities of the past” (*EJ* 267). Arendt insists that the Shoah was more than history’s largest and most devastating pogrom and constituted a crime unprecedented in kind as well as degree; nations had mass expulsions and even mass murders in the past, but the novelty of the final solution lay in the Nazi attempt to totally eradicate the Jewish people: “It was when the Nazi regime declared that the German people not only were unwilling to have any Jews in Germany but wished to make the entire Jewish people disappear from the face of the earth that the new crime, the crime against humanity—in the sense of a crime ‘against the human status,’ or against the very nature of mankind—appeared” (*EJ* 268). Arendt draws a distinction between a nation trying to rid its national borders of a particular group and the same nation trying to

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additional essays and the updated subtitle *Eight Exercises in Political Thought* in 1968. I refer to the latter edition throughout this chapter.

<sup>14</sup> In the “Epilogue” to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt points out that the judges at Nuremberg, while preferring to convict on war crimes charges, saved the death penalty for those convicted of committing crimes against humanity: “when it came to pronouncing sentence, they revealed their true sentiment by meting out their most severe punishment, the death penalty, only to those who had been found guilty of those quite uncommon atrocities that actually constituted a ‘crime against humanity,’ or, as the French prosecutor François de Menthon called it, with greater accuracy, a ‘crime against the human status’” (257). The specific “human status” with which Arendt is concerned is none other than human plurality.

remove that group from the surface of the earth.<sup>15</sup> While this distinction might appear to be an irrelevant academic quibble in comparison with the severity and repugnancy of either crime, in Arendt's view, the attempt to eradicate a people from the surface of the earth constitutes, in addition to the crime against that particular group, a crime against all of humanity because it directly attacks the human condition of plurality. Borrowing the language of "human status" from François de Menthon, one of the Nuremberg prosecutors, she describes genocide as "an attack upon human diversity as such, that is, upon a characteristic of the 'human status' without which the very words 'mankind' or 'humanity' would be devoid of meaning" (*EJ* 268-9). Genocide is a crime against specific human beings, and it is also a crime against what it is to be a human being.

In making the latter point, Arendt does not minimize the crime against the individual victim; rather, she insists on gauging the full scope of that crime. For Arendt, "human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings" (*HC* 176). Human beings are not only separate entities in the way that one rock is not another, and we are not only distinct in the way that oaks are not pines or dogs are not cats. Every human being possesses a unique existence as more than a member of the species *homo sapiens*; we exist as *someone*, not only as *something*. In other words, "we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live" (*HC* 8). This plurality of persons forms a fundamental condition of human life, the fact that we share the common world with other people, each of whom, in Arendt's words, "can communicate himself and not merely something" (*HC* 176). Human beings are radically unique—and are even capable of expressing their uniqueness through speech and action and appearing as individuals in the common world—but we do

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<sup>15</sup> This is another Kantian concept that is important to Arendt; politics, for Kant, begin with the foundational principal (his equivalent to a "state of nature") that the surface of the earth belongs equally to every human being.

not exist in isolation from each other; according to Arendt, our very ability to appear as individuals depends on the presence of others to whom we can appear: “Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes through which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua men*” (HC 176). Without plurality, the condition necessary for speech and action, human beings cannot appear in the world *as human beings*.

By assuming the power to decide who has a right to exist on the common earth and by attempting to homogenize the species, the Nazi genocide performed a direct assault on human plurality, and, because it attacks the plurality of human existence, genocide (but not necessarily murder) attempts to strip its victims of their humanity along with their lives. Arendt ends her “Epilogue” to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* with the counterfactual writ of execution she wishes the judges had handed down. Her condemnation of Eichmann ends,

just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations—as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and should not inhabit the world—we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. That is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang. (279)

Eichmann lacked judgment—he was unwilling or unable to think in the place of other people—and his practical disengagement from the fact of human plurality characterized both his own actions in furtherance of the European Holocaust and the very nature of the Holocaust itself. The radical evil of the Shoah shared its contempt for human plurality with the banality of Eichmann’s clichéd speech and thoughtlessness. The connection

between speech, judgment and plurality runs like a thread throughout Arendt's Eichmann book, and it appears as the core of her final judgment on both his crime and his trial.

Arendt's often-referenced anecdote about Eichmann and *Lolita*—"the young police officer in charge of his mental and psychological well-being handed him *Lolita* for relaxation."<sup>16</sup> After two days Eichmann returned it, visibly indignant; 'Quite an unwholesome book'—'*Das is aber ein sehr unerfreuliches Buch*'—he told his guard" (*EJ* 49)—appears as a parenthetical aside in the center of the paragraph that begins with her observation about Eichmann's "battle with the German language" and ends with the conclusion that he could not speak because he could not think from anyone else's point of view. By inserting the *Lolita* anecdote as an interlude in this central argument, Arendt associates Eichmann's fatal lack of political and ethical judgment with his inability to judge a work of art. What, precisely, this incident says about Eichmann is open to debate,<sup>17</sup> but the placement indicates that, for Arendt, the judgment we exercise in

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<sup>16</sup> One noteworthy example is found at the beginning of Leland de la Durantaye's *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (2007). de la Durantaye points out the irony of claiming the book was given to Eichmann for relaxation: "The tale of a homicidal madman writing under observation and awaiting a trial that will consign him either to death or prolonged imprisonment...could hardly have been very relaxing for someone at that moment writing his own memoirs and himself awaiting a trial" (1). de la Durantaye speculates persuasively that the book may have been more experiment than relaxation-aid—would the real-life villain sympathize with the fictional sociopath?—but he too quickly dismisses Arendt's inclusion of the guard's literary test. Because he focuses on the content of the novel rather than its form and, more importantly, because he fails to note where the anecdote occurs in Arendt's text, de la Durantaye imagines Eichmann passing the test: "After congratulating Eichmann on his indignation, she [Arendt] moves on to other matters" (2). As I demonstrate below, the paragraph containing the anecdote indicates that Eichmann failed the implicit ethical test and that Arendt's description is in no way laudatory.

<sup>17</sup> From my perspective, the incident does indicate that Eichmann was not devoid of moral principles—Arendt ironically refers to the incident as "Eichmann's best opportunity to show this positive side of his character" (49)—but he was incapable of reading the novel by Nabokov (whose linguistic virtuosity stands in stark contrast to Eichmann's quasi-aphasia) as anything but offensive pornography. He could identify socially-unacceptable mores as easily as he employed clichés, but he could not judge *Lolita* as a novel any more successfully than he could judge the ethical import of his actions as an SS officer. The point here is definitively not that the prohibition on pedophilia is only a "socially constructed more" but that Eichmann could only recognize it as such; if it were socially acceptable—as was the industrialized extermination of entire classes of people—then he would find nothing objectionable in Humbert sexually abusing his juvenile step-daughter.

thinking from the viewpoint of our fellow creatures is closely related to the judgment we exercise when evaluating a work of art. She argues in “The Crisis in Culture” that the “common element connecting art and politics is that they both are phenomena of the public world” (“Culture” 215), and, as phenomena that appear in the world we share with other people, they require us to think about them in the presence of and along with others.

Arendt derives her theory of judgment largely from Kant’s third critique, his *Critique of Judgment*. While Kant presents this critique primarily as a work of aesthetics, Arendt insists that it “contains perhaps the greatest and most original aspect of Kant’s political philosophy” (“Culture” 216). The aspect of Kant’s book that she finds so original and promising for politics centers on his description of how we exercise aesthetic judgment. Kant differentiates judgments on what is or is not beautiful from expressions of personal preference by pointing out that, when a person “declares something to be beautiful, he expects the same delight from others. He judges not merely for himself, but for everyone” (Kant 44). The delight we take in judging something “beautiful” carries with it a sense of “ought,” a feeling that everyone else ought to find it beautiful as well (we do not have a similar feeling about our preferences for black coffee or brown shoes). The sense of universality—the “oughtness” that accompanies aesthetic judgments—pressures us to refer in everyday language to a “beautiful object,” but Kant is careful to point out that beauty cannot be an objective quality ascribable to the object. Beauty is not a universal category of pure reason, the subject of Kant’s first critique. Similarly, the universality of our judgments about the beautiful cannot be grounded in those universal categories because, if it was, they would be judgments of our practical reason, the subject of Kant’s second critique, and would be concerned with the good rather than the beautiful. Kant tests this line of reasoning with a simple thought experiment: if an aesthetic judgment depended for its validity and universality on fundamental concepts

(the categories, etc.), then “necessary and universal approval would be capable of being enforced by proofs” (116), but argument by proof or syllogism does not fit with our experience of the beautiful. Instead, as Kant puts it, the “ought in aesthetic judgment...is still only pronounced conditionally. We are suitors for agreement from everyone else, because we are fortified with a common ground to all” (68). Moral judgments, for Kant, are grounded in an objective universal principle or “categorical imperative,” and objective principle makes it possible to present logical proofs that compel or demand assent, but aesthetic judgments do not rely on an objective foundation but, in the place of a principle, rely on the subjective (i.e. residing in the subject) structure of judgment itself: “it can only have its ground in the subjective formal condition of a judgment in general. The subjective condition of all judgments is the judging faculty itself, or the power of judgment” (116). For Kant, all debates or discussions about what is or is not beautiful are grounded in the universal structure of our ability to make subjective judgments, and, as a result, arguments about the beautiful must rely on the subjective art of persuasion rather than the compulsory force of logical proofs<sup>18</sup>. Kant gives this subjective and universal “common ground to all” the name “common sense” (68), by which he means

a *public* sense, i.e. a faculty of judging which in its reflective act takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of everyone else, in order, *as it were*, to weigh its judgments with the collective reason of mankind, and thereby avoid the illusion arising from subjective and personal conditions which could readily be taken for objective...This is accomplished by weighing and judgment, not so much with actual, as rather with the merely possible, judgments of others, and by putting ourselves in the position of everyone else. (123)

Kant’s *sensus communis*, the public sense which gives aesthetic judgments their universal “ought-ness” without making them subject to objective proofs, amounts to placing

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<sup>18</sup> The difference between the compulsory nature of truth and the rhetorical or persuasive nature of judgment plays a key role in Arendt’s vision of political judgment and will be discussed later.

ourselves in potential conversation with the plurality of human beings as we make aesthetic judgments.

Kant is careful to point out that “ought” is not “is”: common sense consists of an *a priori* consideration of how other human beings will judge an object from their subjective positions, and this thinking beyond our own personal conditions has little in common with—in fact, will frequently contradict—our following *a posteriori* the popular opinion that makes up a significant part of our private subjective conditions. In other words, we do not take a poll to determine what is or is not beautiful; instead, we place ourselves imaginatively in conversation with other human beings in order to make a judgment that can claim validity beyond our personal limitations (beyond the accidental conditions of our present circumstances—that I am male, educated, hungry, etc.). Arendt elegantly describes the process as seeking “potential agreement with others” and sets it in contrast to the interior dialogue handed down from Platonic dialectics: “the thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself, but finds itself always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind, in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement” (“Culture” 217). Judging is always judging *with* others, even if the judging person happens accidentally to be alone because judging is, in Kant’s most succinct formulation, “to think from the standpoint of everyone else” (Kant 124).

Arendt echoes the language of this formulation almost exactly when she claims that Eichmann suffered from “an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else” (*EJ* 49). Her direct application of Kant’s language to Eichmann’s distinguishing flaw pushes Kant’s concept of judgment—thinking in the potential presence of others—beyond the realm of aesthetics and into the heart of politics. She

argues that “judgment may be one of the fundamental abilities of man as a political being insofar as it enables him to orient himself in the public realm, in the common world...Judging is one, if not the most, important activity in which this sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass” (“Culture” 218). For human beings, whose baseline existence includes the fact of plurality, effectively navigating public space and sharing the common world are not lofty ideals; they are activities without which no human life *qua* human can exist<sup>19</sup>. Arendt holds judgment in such high esteem primarily because it is rooted in a public or common sense—Kant’s *a priori* presence of other people—and not in “transcendental truths” or “higher principles.”<sup>20</sup> Kant notes that judgment has the curious ability to carry a universal sense of “ought” without depending on a universal objective principle. These subjectively derived universals are invaluable at a time when the catastrophes of the twentieth century have exposed the hollowness of moral and political postulates that are no longer capable of guiding or explaining human action. We will return to why Arendt sees a turn to judgment, in particular, as the appropriate and necessary response to a break in the “thread of tradition,” but, before we can effectively ask that question, we need to clarify the nature of that break.

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<sup>19</sup> “No human life, not even the life of the hermit in nature’s wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings” (HC 22).

<sup>20</sup> Deborah Nelson elegantly describes common sense as a practice rather than a faculty or body of knowledge and highlights the connection between common sense and judgment: “Common sense, in Arendt’s use, is activity rather than knowledge; that is, it is something one does, not something one has. Moreover, unlike the ordinary term, Arendtian common sense is not self-evident but self-altering. Common sense as the sixth sense requires individuals to engage with others in the act of perception, sharing the world in a way that corrects and amends subjective insight” (91). Common sense provides a universal ground for judgment by requiring the subject to share her judgments with everyone else who shares the common world, and only judgments that could be shared universally carry the imprimatur of common sense. As Nelson notes, rather than serving as a thin veil for subjective interests, making oneself subject to common sense is likely to be a self-altering experience.

## THE CATASTROPHIC BREAK WITH HISTORY

Arendt ties tradition closely to the concept of natality which, along with the plurality of human existence, forms the groundwork for much of her thought. In the first chapter of *The Human Condition*, she points to “birth and death, natality and mortality” as “the most general condition of human existence” (8). Natality, the fact that we are all born into and inherit a world we did not make but in which we must live, has received remarkably little attention from the western tradition when compared with mortality, its correlate on the other end of life, but Arendt insists that “natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought” (HC 9). Natality serves as both cause and illustration of the fact that no single person owns or is solely responsible for the common world: each individual equally inherits the already-existing world by virtue of being born into it. Natality resembles Heidegger’s concept of thrownness, the un-chosen conditions in which we, as Dasein, discover ourselves and which limit the free exercise of our intentions (we cannot, for instance, fly like birds or live in 1840 just because we will it), but Arendt’s intellectual commitment to the fact of human plurality (as opposed to the relatively isolate existentialism of *Being and Time*) places natality in a significantly different context than Heidegger’s being-in-the-world. Because we share a common world, our actions and intentions are not only limited by the conditions of our own births but by natality as a fact of human existence: other human beings are constantly being born into the world we inhabit, so our world-making always and already includes those who come after us. The world is never ours alone. This “constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers” also threatens the stability of the world we make because every “newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew” (HC 9). We inherit a world we did not make; we make a world we will not inherit. The space of our living and acting, our common world and

present moment, is demarcated by a past and future which do not belong to us and over which we have little to no control. Arendt points out that, in order to cope with this rather tall order, western culture has made use of tradition as a kind of aid or crutch, and that, after the imperially assisted ascent of Roman concepts, “this gap was bridged over by what, since the Romans, we have called tradition” (“Gap” 13).

Arendt thinks of tradition in specifically Roman terms because she ties it to a particular type of authority associated with the founding of Rome. Arendt uses “authority” in a very specific sense<sup>21</sup>. Authority, by her definition, “precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority itself has failed. Authority, on the other hand, is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation” (“Authority” 92). In defining authority, she often uses examples of the relationships between children and adults. A parent or teacher speaking from a position of authority expects to be obeyed, and they undermine their own authority if they resort, on the one hand, to physical force or intimidation or, on the other, to arguing with and explaining their reasons to the child. We are responding to authority when we obey someone because of who they are or the office they hold and not because they have convinced us (in which case we are responding to force of our own reason) or compelled us (in which case we may be pliant but are not obedient in any meaningful sense). In other words, we can think of authority as a hierarchy in which someone is obeyed not because they are right or because they are powerful but because of their position.<sup>22</sup> When a group of people locate or invest authority in a particular moment, event or person in the past—as the Romans did with the founding of their city—then we

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<sup>21</sup> I am taking Arendt’s definition of authority primarily from “What is Authority?” in *Between Past and Future* and Part II of *On Violence* (1970).

<sup>22</sup> “The greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter” (OV 45).

refer to that authority as tradition. Religious traditions, for example, are traditional in so far as they invest a canon of scripture or magisterium with authority (that is, as long as they relate to that canon as an authority and not a good argument or a threat). In the context of Rome, Arendt tells us that “Tradition preserved the past by handing down from one generation to the next the testimony of the ancestors, who first witnessed and created the sacred founding and then augmented it by their authority throughout the centuries” (“Authority” 124). In more general terms, she calls tradition “the thread which safely guided us through the vast realms of the past” (“Authority” 94). Tradition gives human beings, born into and responsible for a world they did not make, a guide or shorthand for relating ourselves to the past and, by extension, to the world that emerged from that past. Tradition also reshapes how we relate to the future: by displacing the responsibility for making our common world onto a moment in the past, tradition simultaneously relieves us of the responsibility for the world we pass on to future generations (we are only custodians, not creators) and gives us some control over those future generations (we have authority over them as elders because they are born after us and farther from the moment of founding). By structuring the relationship of human beings to the past, tradition mitigates the effects of natality and tells them how to relate to the plurality of human beings in the present as well as the past and the future.

While the value of such a tradition is debatable and often debated, Arendt claims that debates over the relative value of the western tradition are arguing a moot point: the authority of the tradition is gone<sup>23</sup>. The loss of traditional authority has been a major

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<sup>23</sup> Arendt’s ambiguity towards tradition appears throughout her essay “What is Authority?”; in a representative passage, part of which I quote above, she describes its loss as both opportunity and threat: “With the loss of tradition we have lost the thread which safely guided us through the vast realms of the past, but this thread was also the chain fettering each successive generation to a predetermined aspect of the past. It could be that only now will the past open up to us with unexpected freshness and tell us things no one has yet had ears to hear. But it cannot be denied that without a securely anchored tradition—the loss of this security occurred several hundred years ago—the whole dimension of the past has also been

theme of philosophy at least as far back as Descartes' universal doubt and the subsequent attempts to re-found knowledge in human reason or sense perception; from the standpoint of philosophy, the fact that "this tradition has worn thinner and thinner as the modern age progressed is a secret to nobody" ("Gap" 13). The slow erosion of tradition as a foundation for both understanding and action—for truth and morality—has been a central philosophical problem for hundreds of years, but the catastrophic events of the twentieth century revealed the broader implications of the break with tradition: "When the thread of tradition finally broke, the gap between past and future ceased to be a condition peculiar only to the activity of thought and restricted as an experience to those few who made thinking their primary business. It became a tangible reality and perplexity for all; that is, it became a fact of political relevance" (ibid). The political relevance of the break is, for Arendt, mostly starkly evident in the experience of totalitarianism.

In her essay "Tradition and the Modern Age," Arendt makes two important points about philosophical critiques of tradition and the emergence of totalitarianism. First, philosophical attacks on the western tradition are not responsible either for the loss of tradition or for the rise of totalitarianism. Second, the historical rise of totalitarianism, its coming into existence as a political reality, finally broke the thread of the tradition those critiques had been warning was hollow:

neither the twentieth-century aftermath nor the nineteenth-century rebellion against tradition actually caused the break in our history. This sprang from a chaos of mass-perplexities on the political scene and of mass-opinions in the spiritual sphere which the totalitarian movements, through terror and ideology, crystallized into a new form of government and domination. Totalitarian domination as an established fact, which in its unprecedentedness cannot be comprehended through the usual categories of political thought, and whose

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endangered. We are in danger of forgetting, and such and oblivion...would mean that, humanly speaking, we would deprive ourselves of one dimension, the dimension of depth in human existence" ("Authority" 94).

‘crimes’ cannot be judged by traditional moral standards or punished within the legal framework of our civilization, has broken the continuity of Occidental history. The break in our tradition is now an accomplished fact. It is neither the result of anyone’s deliberate choice nor subject to further decision. (“Tradition” 26).

By confronting us with acts that exceed the reach of our “usual political categories,” “traditional moral standards,” and “the legal framework of our civilization,” the historical presence of totalitarianism reveals the inability of traditional intellectual, political, moral and legal categories to account for the world as we now know it and live in it. Simply put, we can no longer rely on tradition to bridge the gap between past and future. In his introduction to *Responsibility and Judgment*, Jerome Kohn reminds us that “the controversial, challenging, and difficult heart of what Arendt came to see was that the moral breakdown was not due to the ignorance or wickedness of men who failed to recognize moral ‘truths,’ but rather to the inadequacy of moral ‘truths’ as standards to judge what men had become capable of doing” (*RJ* x-xi).<sup>24</sup> Had the root cause of the twentieth century’s horrors been the loss of or break with tradition, then the remedy would be a return to traditional values and concepts, but Arendt breaks the back of that argument by pointing to the brute reality of those catastrophes as accomplished historical facts and the *prima facie* inadequacy of the technologies of traditional thought to comprehend or respond to the historical realities ushered in by those *faits accomplis*. Not only are the causes of totalitarianism unclear—even if we had the ability to sort through the “mass-perplexities” and “mass-opinions” that contributed to its rise—but, with regard to tradition, the question of causality is a purely academic point: in the wake of the twentieth century, we have no path by which we could return to traditional values and

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<sup>24</sup> *Responsibility and Judgment*, a collection of essays written between 1959 and 1975, was first published as a collection with Kohn’s introduction in 2003.

concepts, ancient or modern, because those values and concepts cannot account for or contend with (to paraphrase Kohn) what human beings have become capable of doing.

Arendt insists that we, as a culture or a civilization, cannot go back to a time before the mass catastrophes of the twentieth century, but (and this is her salvation from nihilism) we can go forward. The present time, the “gap between past and future,” is structured not only by human mortality but by the phenomenon of natality, and “each new generation, indeed every new human being as he inserts himself between an infinite past and an infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave it anew” (“Gap” 13). Tradition was an aid to this “paving anew,” but its absence or inefficacy does not and cannot do away with the potential of the future opened by human natality and action. Because tradition no longer has the authority to provide a common ground for understanding and action, we are forced to rely on judgment or common sense to create the common ground of the world. This is why Arendt refers to judgment—Kant’s “thinking in the place of everyone else” that carries a universal sense of “ought” without relying on universal or traditional concepts—as “the greatest and most original aspect of Kant’s political philosophy” (“Culture” 216). Judgment takes on the roles played by traditional concepts and makes it possible for human beings living after the collapse of traditional authority to share a common world in the gap between past and future.<sup>25</sup> In

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<sup>25</sup> Nelson explores Arendt’s dissatisfaction with another possibility in “The Virtues of Heartlessness: Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt, and the Anesthetics of Empathy.” Nelson argues that both Arendt and McCarthy rejected the post-war liberal emphasis on intimacy, solidarity and empathy that was intended to fill the gap between past experience and future actions: “Solidarity as they saw it practiced deprived individuals of the experience of reality by insulating them against its painful effects. This insulation came in many forms. National belonging protected individuals against the loneliness and isolation of mass society. Ideological solidarity eliminated unpredictability by providing a coherent theory of experience and a shared narrative of the future” (90). Identification in its various forms cannot replace traditional authority because—whether the in-group identification of solidarity or the broader attempt at empathy—identification insulates the subject from reality. Nelson calls identification “anesthetic” in a double sense: solidarity, etc. lessen the pain of worldly experience by relieving us of the primarily aesthetic practice of common sense. Common sense and judgment, by contrast, require us to be open and exposed to potentially painful realities: “This continual self-alteration by contact with the world [i.e. the activity of common

other words, we are thrown back on our judgment in order to account for both plurality and natality—the two characteristics that, for Arendt, most distinctly mark human life most *as human*.

### **ART VERSUS POLITICS, MAKING VERSUS ACTING**

Arendt's emphasis on judgment as the modern world's political and ethical virtue *par excellence* ties politics and ethics closely to the arts. Her vision of judgment and its central position in public life springs, after all, from Kant's critique of aesthetic judgments, and the two types of judgment share one and the same structure:

In aesthetic no less than in political judgments, a decision is made, and although this decision is always determined by a certain subjectivity, by the simple fact that each person occupies a place of his own from which he looks upon and judges the world, it also derives from the fact that the world itself is an objective datum, something common to all its inhabitants. ("Culture" 219)

The judgment or decision in each case is made subjectively (the evaluative criteria for the judgment is located within the subject and not in an external principle) but that subjective judgment can only take on its sense of universality or "oughtness" if the judging person submits her judgment *a priori* to the condition of human plurality (the individual must evaluate her decision from the perspective of the other people who share the common world, she must think from the standpoint of everybody else). Our experience of both the work of art and the world as objective sets of data (and not as dreams, hallucinations or the deceptive machinations of a Cartesian devil) emerges from and depends upon our common sense, our sense of holding the world in common with other human beings. We can no longer ground the objectivity of the world in the now-defunct tradition that relied

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sense] could be secured and enhanced by the cultivation of the organs of perception, that is, in the realm of the aesthetic" (96). Both self-alteration and historical reality can be painful, but, according to Arendt, they are absolutely necessary for people to inhabit and act in a common world without the aid of tradition.

on the coercive force of authority to present its moral and political principles as objective truths. In the public space held open by judgment, whether political or aesthetic, “it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake, but rather judgment and decision, the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world” (“Culture” 219). That is the reason, Arendt concludes, that art and politics belong together. Neither aesthetic nor political judgments approach truth as an objective entity existing outside the judging subject or subjects. As Arendt points out near the end of “The Crisis in Culture,” one of her most sustained inquiries into the phenomenology of art, aesthetic judgments “share with political opinions that they are persuasive; the judging person—as Kant says quite beautifully—can only ‘woo the consent of everyone else’ in the hope of coming to an agreement with him eventually” (“Culture” 219). Art is important because politics is important, or, more accurately, they are both important because judgment lies at their roots and because judgment offers us the possibility of living together *as human beings* in a common world that tradition, divested of its authority, can no longer guarantee nor describe satisfactorily.

While works of art are inextricably tied to political and ethical concerns through the structure of judgments, the relationship between them is not one of simple identity: art should not be confused for politics, and politics must not be confused for an art. Arendt concedes that “politics has often been defined as an art,” but, she immediately clarifies, “This of course, is not a definition but a metaphor, and the metaphor becomes completely false if one falls into the common error of regarding the state or government as a work of art, as a kind of collective masterpiece” (“Freedom” 152). Similar arguments that politics is not an art and the body politic should not be considered a potential masterpiece often take the form of a warning about consequences: if we view the state as

a work of art, then citizens become nothing more than raw material<sup>26</sup>. Arendt herself makes this consequentialist argument from time to time, but, rather than focus on the political *effects* of this misguided identification, she bases her objection more fundamentally on the *origins* of states and masterpieces: “Independent existence marks the work of art as a product of making; utter dependence upon further acts to keep it in existence marks the state as a product of action” (ibid). Confusing politics with art might have disastrous consequences, but (if not more importantly, at least more fundamentally) Arendt argues that we should avoid conflating them because they are products of two different modes of human activity: making and acting.

Making and acting are two of the three modes of the *vita activa* (the active, as opposed to the contemplative, life) that Arendt investigates extensively in her major work *The Human Condition* (1958). In the first chapter of that work, Arendt argues that, along with labor, making and acting (or “work” and “action”) comprise “fundamental human activities” because “each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man” (*HC* 7). The given-ness of these activities should not be read theologically but in terms of a phenomenological horizon: these activities comprise the world in which human beings find themselves. They form the ground for our lives on earth.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, the mid-century work of W.H. Auden, with whom Arendt shared an intimate and intellectual friendship. In his “Christmas Oratorio” *For the Time Being*, Auden writes Herod as politician whose tyranny centers in believing he is an artist; his “In Praise of Limestone” has “Intendant Caesars” answering the artist/politician’s call: “soft as the earth is mankind and both/ Need to be altered.”

<sup>27</sup> For a clear, concise and practical discussion of how Arendt turns the classical *vita activa* to her own uses, see Elisabeth Young-Bruehl’s *Why Arendt Matters* (2006). My reading of *The Human Condition* is informed by and indebted to this excellent little book. Young-Bruehl provides a remarkably elegant gloss of the *vita activa* in seven short sentences (including quotations from Arendt): “‘The human condition of labor is life itself.’ That is, people must labor to supply themselves with the necessities of food and safety that sustain life. ‘The human condition of work is worldliness.’ In their natural, earthly surroundings, people must build a ‘world,’ whether of portable shelters, farms, settlements, villages, city-states, empires, or nations, which they can inhabit and cultivate, developing *cultura*. ‘Plurality is the condition of human action.’ No two human beings are alike, so people must relate to one another, must come together, find

Arendt defines labor as any “activity which corresponds to the biological processes of the human body” (ibid); we labor to sustain our lives, and consumption is the intended use of labor’s products. Her definition includes activities whose immediate aim is producing food and shelter (i.e. growing vegetables, making a soup, etc.) as well as activities we perform solely for the sake of acquiring food and shelter (i.e. wage labor in industrial economies). Because labor’s sole concern is biological life and because its products are consumed by the life process, Arendt views labor as part of the larger life cycle we share with all living things. Labor characterizes human life to the degree that we are part of the greater whole of existence and participate in a Nietzschean eternal recurrence that grants us a kind of immortality as members of a species or components of the broad ecological processes of life. Human life exists in that context on an equal footing with animal and plant life or even the inanimate processes of geological cycles and astronomical motion, but human beings do not exist only as material objects or members of a species, and labor cannot account for the uniqueness of our existence or plurality as “the paradoxical plurality of unique beings” (*HC* 176). We live on earth as individuals whose lives have specific beginnings and ends, and that mode of temporality—lives that, according to Arendt, are structured like stories—cannot be reconciled with eternal recurrence. Labor forms an essential part of human life existence because it supports and sustains life, but it does not distinguish human life *qua human* from life-processes in general.

While our biological lives, maintained by labor, are entirely natural in the sense that we share the same life-cycle with all the other animals on earth, work creates “an ‘artificial’ world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings” (*HC* 7).

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ways to live together, negotiate their differences, exchange opinions, found relational political institutions in the world they have created. A person may labor alone or be a fabricator alone, but ‘action is completely dependent upon the constant presence of others’” (81).

Work, which Arendt also calls making or fabricating, produces products whose “proper use does not cause them to disappear” (i.e. they are not consumed) and that create a “stability and solidity without which [the world] could not be relied upon to house the unstable and mortal creature which is man” (*HC* 136). Beyond their relative durability, the products of work or making are able to create a world-as-home for human beings primarily because they are made for human use. A dog may be able to consume a steak just as well as a human can, but it cannot properly make use of a table: only a human being can use a table in accordance with its end *qua table* because tables are made for human use.<sup>28</sup> Unlike nature, which is on a whole indifferent to our existence, the human artifice constitutes a world made explicitly *for us* and for us *as human beings*. This artifice or world of things mediates between natal-and-mortal existents and the natural world of unending processes and eternal recurrence. We become accustomed to the objects we use in daily life and that familiarity adds a level of stability to our existence. To literalize the cliché, a house becomes a home when we have become *used to it* through extended use, and, because we are used to or familiar with it, we are able find something of ourselves reflected in the house and feel at home: Arendt phrases this phenomenon in terms of identity: “men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table” (*HC* 137). Both the everyday and specifically philosophical uses of “identity” operate in her description: the objects I am at home with tell me something

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<sup>28</sup> While this seems at first glance to be a glaring example of circular logic, it is a constitutive part of our definition of a table or any use object. As Husserl and Heidegger convincingly argue, a hammer is a hammer because we intend it as such. If, instead of using it to hammer nails, we use it as a weapon or a doorstop, then it is no longer a hammer (or, at least, we say that we are not using it “properly” as a hammer or as a hammer “ought to be used”). Heidegger’s distinction between being ready-to-hand and present-to-hand further illustrates this point: we only think of a hammer existing *as an object* instead of *as a hammer* when it is broken. Otherwise, we define it and imagine its existence in the world *as a hammer*, that is, we define it by the use we intend for it.

about who I am (a fact often exploited by advertisers) and reinforce my sense that I am the same person I was yesterday. On a broader scale, because we inherit it *en masse* from past generations and because it will outlast us, the material world offers a kind of stability for successive generations. The world transcends biological cycles and serves both as a physical home for human beings and a symbol of human life to the degree that it is distinct from the rest of nature: in Arendt's words, work "corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not embedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species' ever-recurring life cycle" (*HC* 7). By granting us some degree of permanence and continuity, work offers us some compensation for mortality by providing a specifically human world—a home that, unlike nature's eternal processes, is structured according to our natality and plurality.

While labor and work describe different interactions with the material world, action is "the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter" (*ibid*). Action is an affirmation or actualization of our original, unchosen arrival in the world; through action, we willingly "insert ourselves into the human world" and action's "impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative" (*HC* 176-7). Unlike labor and work, which involve creating material goods and have distinct ends defined by their products (whether that product is a meatloaf or a cathedral), action does not and cannot have an end or *telos*. Action takes place among human beings, and because each human being is equally capable of responding in new and unexpected ways, an actor never knows the consequences of his actions. Rather than being determined by an end, every action constitutes a beginning and has a "character of startling unexpectedness" (*HC* 178). Arendt sets the unexpectedness of action over against the predictable order of natural systems or large numbers and concludes that

human action “always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world” (ibid). For Arendt, action is the human activity *par excellence* because it simultaneously depends upon and reaffirms both natality and plurality: we can willingly appear in the world only because we were first born into it and because we share it with others to whom we can appear.<sup>29</sup> Action, then, is central to politics and closely related to power, “the human ability not just to act but to act in concert” (OV 44).

Arendt’s objection to describing politics as an art form rests primarily on the difference between ends and beginnings. The activity of the artist, she argues, is in the mode of work: like the craftsperson, the artist sets out to create a product (whether painting, sculpture or musical score), and he or she holds that particular end in mind while crafting their work of art. By contrast, when we engage in political activity we are acting, and the only end of action, its only *telos*, is the new beginning it constitutes. We cannot treat politics as if it were an art work with an end we can envision and control because the consequences of any given act are boundless: “action, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes” (HC 190). Even if we had perfect knowledge of situations and an infinite capacity for calculation, the inherent unpredictability of other people’s reactions—the fact that reactions are not merely

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<sup>29</sup> Appearance, for Arendt, is at the very heart of both action and politics. Kristeva argues that “we cannot grasp the originality of the Arendtian concept of *political action* without taking into account the fact that she sees it as an actualization—of a *who* that is hypothetical, dangerous, and dependent on hope rather than based on an improbable claim for its existence” (55 emphasis original). First and foremost, action discloses the actor as a unique human being, and this disclosure requires an audience of other human beings to whom the actor appears. Human particularity, for Arendt, is inextricably bound to plurality because we can only appear *as a who* to other people.

responses but, as actions, constitute *new* beginnings—would prevent us from accurately predicting the final results of political acts. This unpredictable nature of politics, the logical correlate and necessary trade-off for human freedom, elevates judgment to a chief political virtue. The political world does not behave according to reliable, consistent laws (it is not a science), so we cannot rely on a set of general rules or principles to tell us how we should act; instead, we must exercise judgment over and over and over again as action sets off reaction and so on. Because actions have no ends, there is no end to our need for judgment.

Arendt locates politics clearly and consistently within the mode of action, but she is less single-minded when it comes to locating the arts—the source from which she derives her concept of political judgment. In stark contrast to the boundlessness of action, art works, for Arendt, are products of making that are tied to specific ends or aims, but these ends are paradoxically (and unlike every other product of making) not uses. The roles that Arendt claims art works perform in support of action challenge the clean division she draws between making and acting. This tension is reflected in the structure of *The Human Condition* (1958)—where Arendt uses the book’s most sustained discussion of art as a pivot to turn from her chapter on work to her chapter on action—and reflects a broader tension in her thought as a whole. While her definition of what art *is* claims that art works are fabricated representations, her descriptions of what art must be capable of *doing* require a theory of the aesthetic that reaches explicitly into the realm of political action.

## WHAT ART IS VERSUS WHAT ART DOES

Art, for Arendt, is an exceptional product of work in two regards: art works are exceptions to the rule that work creates use-products and they are exceptionally good examples of the world-as-artifice that those products comprise. In the final section of *The Human Condition*'s chapter on work, "The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art," Arendt says that "the proper intercourse with a work of art is certainly not using it; on the contrary, it must be removed carefully from the whole context of ordinary use objects to attain its proper place in the world" (167). She is adamant that, while we engage or interact with art works, we do not properly use them in the way that we use tables and chairs. Partly because we do not use them in the same way we use tables, works of art last longer than other worldly objects, and because semi- or pseudo-permanence is a constitutive element of the world-as-artifice, Arendt calls art works "the most intensely worldly of all tangible things" and argues that "in this permanence, the very stability of the human artifice, which, being inhabited and used by mortals, can never be absolute, achieves a representation of its own" (HC 167-8). Art is "intensely worldly" because the longevity of an art work represents the durability of the world-as-artifice, the self-fashioned home for human beings. She echoes this sentiment in "The Crisis in Culture," where she claims that "from the viewpoint of sheer durability, art works clearly are superior to all other things; since they stay longer in the world than anything else, they are the worldliest of all things" ("Culture" 206). Arendt calls works of art the most worldly category of objects—work's most characteristic products—because their durability represents the stability of the world. She also focuses on representation and durability when she discusses the relationship of the arts to human actions. *Homo faber*, her term for human beings insofar as they are makers, assists acting human beings by representing and reifying their otherwise ephemeral actions:

acting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders and writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all. In order to be what the world was always meant to be, a home for men during their life on earth, the human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech, for activities not only entirely useless for the necessities of life but of an entirely different nature from the manifold activities of fabrication by which the world itself and all things in it are produced. (HC 173-4)

She describes artists and historiographers (we should remember that Clio was one of the muses) as scribes or recorders of the actions performed by and between human beings. Action needs to be recorded because actions, which take place directly between human beings and leave no material traces, are ephemeral in and of themselves. Arendt argues that, in order to make the world a fit place for action, works of art should not only reflect the world's permanence but also represent and reify fleeting human actions. From this perspective, the work of art engages with politics—whose proper domain is the field of action—by reifying action into semi-permanent representations.

Arendt claims that artists make the world fit for action by building monuments to great deeds and words that might otherwise be forgotten. In “The Concept of History,” she derives this particular relationship between the artist and the person-of-action from a paradox faced by the ancient Greeks, for whom “greatness was understood in terms of permanence while human greatness was seen in precisely the most futile and least lasting activities of men,” namely, action among men in the polis (“History” 45). Nature, for the Greeks, set the standard of perfection, but, as the syllogism goes, Socrates is mortal, and “all things that owe their existence to men, such as works, deeds, and words, are perishable, infected as it were, by the mortality of their authors” (“History” 43). Arendt points out that their solution “consisted in the immortal fame which the poets could bestow upon word and deed to make them outlast not only the futile moment of speech and action but even the mortal life of their agent” (“History” 46). *Kleos*, the glory that

Achilles chooses over quiet immortality, appeared to the Greeks as a cardinal virtue because it guaranteed that speech and action would survive the brief moment of their performance if they were great enough to be remembered by other human beings. With the help of artists, poets and historians, speech and action could attain a measure of permanence through “remembrance, Mnemosyne, who therefore was regarded as the mother of all the other muses” (“History” 43). Arendt portrays the work of art as a mnemonic device, a representation of human action that grants those actions the relative permanence of the human artifice and makes the world a proper home for action.

While she claims that artistic representations can make the world a place suitable for speech and action, Arendt insists that the artist’s reification of action does not constitute action in and of itself because art, unlike action, is end-focused.<sup>30</sup> She acknowledges that the virtuosity required for acting in a world full of other free actors plays some role in the process of artistic creation, but that similarity with action does not overcome the fact that the completed work of art serves as a definite end for the artist: “it is not the free creative process which finally appears and matters for the world, but the work of art itself, the end product of the process” (“Freedom” 152).<sup>31</sup> Actions, of course, constitute new beginnings and cannot have particular ends. The end-focused quality of the work of art stands out, for Arendt, in the fact that works of art are crafted out of material (even if that material is as gossamer as words or sounds). Art works are reifications of thought or action in material form, and the idea that precedes that reification stands in the same relation to the work of art that the idea or *eidos* of a chair

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<sup>30</sup> Kristeva puts it this way: “The artiste, and in particular the modern artist, is to her the quintessence of homo faber, that very mediocre variant of humanity, according to Arendt, and artists push to the extreme modern tendencies to commercialization and consumerism with respect to contemporary works” (41-2). One of the dangers Arendt sees in elevating art to the level of politics centers in the risk that *homo faber*, and his instrumentalist mentality, would dominate the public space and reduce everything, including action, to means-to-other-means-to-other-means, etc.

<sup>31</sup> Arendt frequently discusses this virtuosity as the chief virtue (virtu) of Machiavelli’s ideal prince.

stands in relation to the use object crafted in wood or leather or plastic: “The reification which occurs in writing something down, painting an image, modeling a figure, or composing a melody is of course related to the thought which preceded it, but what actually makes the thought a reality and fabricates things of thought is the same workmanship which...builds the other durable things of the human artifice” (*HC* 169). To a significant degree, art works cannot constitute speech or action *because* they take speech or action as models, and adhering to that model gives the work a definite end—that is, it marks the work of art *as work* and not action.

Arendt claims that art works may have definite ends tied to representation, but she does not want us to confuse those ends with uses. The arts do not have uses—their very non-utility accounts to a large degree for their characteristic durability—and their uselessness sets them at odds with a mindset that Arendt calls “philistinism”: “a mentality which judged everything in terms of immediate usefulness and ‘material values’ and hence had no regard for such useless objects and occupations as are implied in culture and art” (“Culture” 198).<sup>32</sup> While there is a type of philistine (to use Arendt’s term) that rejects the arts outright as a waste of time, energy or cold hard cash, Arendt is more interested in a second type of philistine: the “cultured” man or woman who sees art as a tool and uses it for self-improvement, social advancement or escapism. She argues that “the trouble with the educated philistine was not that he read the classics but that he did so prompted by the ulterior motive of self-perfection...the trouble was that he fled into a region of ‘pure poetry’ in order to keep reality out of his life—for instance, such ‘prosaic’ things as a potato famine—or to look at it through a veil of ‘sweetness and light” (“Culture” 200). Arendt attacks the narrow moralism of the Arnoldian didacticist who

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<sup>32</sup> This definition and the critique it serves are neither original nor unique to Arendt; it could be part of any number of critiques launched against “bourgeois” or “middle-class” values in the last two-hundred years.

sees art as a tool for moral, intellectual or spiritual improvement, and she just as forcefully rejects the epicurean who uses aesthetic concerns to escape from social and ethical responsibility. Such illicit uses of art can and have led people into serious ethical failures, but Arendt's strongest rejection of the philistine's utilitarian treatment of art has to do with the structure or nature of an art work. Art *as art* cannot make us better people or shelter us from the catastrophes of history, even if a large number of people use it for just these purposes (a hammer might or might not work as a doorstop, but that is not its proper use *as a hammer*). Arendt crowns her critique of utilitarian art appreciation with a comic analogy comparing the philistine's ulterior motives to a more mundane misuse of art:

The great works of art are no less misused when they serve purposes of self-education or self-perfection than when they serve any other purposes; it may be as useful and legitimate to look at a picture in order to perfect one's knowledge of a given time period as it is useful and legitimate to use a painting in order to cover a hole in the wall. In both instances the art object has been used for ulterior purposes. All is well as long as one remains aware that these usages, legitimate or not, do not constitute the proper intercourse with art. (199-200)

We would not use a Turner as a window shade, and we also should not use it as a window to the past. At least, we should not think that either of those uses has anything to do with the painting *qua* painting, with art *as art*. Arendt's language in this passage is particularly interesting at two points. By setting "the proper *intercourse* with art" at the end of the passage not only against the specific uses she names but also against the arts serving "*any other purposes*" (ibid., emphasis added), Arendt implies that, whatever legitimate interaction with art works looks like, it cannot be a use of any kind. The philistine does not misuse the arts because he wants them to serve the wrong purpose but because he wants them to serve any purpose at all; put simply, any use of art is a *misuse*.

A necessarily use-less art presents a significant challenge to Arendt's own description of the artist as scribe or recorder of great actions. If art works are not meant to instruct us morally or give us windows into the past, human nature, etc., then art *qua* art cannot be a mnemonic device: we misuse an art work when we use it as a tool to spark our memories or pass down knowledge. Art may have something to do with making the world a fit place for speech and action, but that role cannot be anything as simple or as direct as building lasting monuments to great words and deeds. This does not rule out the possibility or even the usefulness of monuments, but it does mean that monuments as such fail to measure up to Arendt's own definition of the work of art. Our lived experience supports this conclusion: while we might be tempted to read the *Illiad* as a monument to the actions of Achilles, we also recognize that a historical marker at the site of Troy would not automatically qualify as a work of art. We may have good reasons to want our monuments to also be works of art, but the quality or qualities of the work *as a work of art* are not located in the events they memorialize, and any overlap between monuments and art works is technically accidental. To paraphrase Justice Stewart's famous assertion, we know art when we see it, or, put to put it another way, we define and judge art works by our interactions with them and not through any prescribed content (whether "sweetness and light" or great words and deeds). Arendt claims that our interaction with art works, unlike every other object in the human artifice, is not and cannot be *use*.

How do works of art make the world a fit place for human action if not by preserving its memory, and how should we describe works that, as fabricated things, are part of the human artifice of use-objects but cannot be used? If art, as a product of work, must have an end, but that end cannot be a use, then what is the end of or "proper intercourse with" art? What criteria does Arendt use to judge a "great work of art" if art

works do not have purposes by which to judge their effectiveness? In the section of “The Crisis in Culture” where she attacks “cultured philistines” for turning art works into social capital, Arendt claims that permanence rather than utility or social fashion is the proper yardstick by which to measure artistic achievement:

the only nonsocial and authentic criterion for judging these specifically cultural things is their relative permanence and even eventually immortality. Only what will last through the centuries can ultimately claim to be a cultural object. The point of the matter is that, as soon as the immortal works of the past became the object of social and individual refinement and the status accorded to it, they lost their most important quality, which is to grasp and move the reader or the spectator over the centuries. (“Culture” 199)

Arendt’s emphasis on the relative permanence of art works emerges from the importance she places on the stability of the human artifice, but we need to be exceptionally careful when describing the relationship of the art work’s durability and the stability of the world as artifice. Arendt goes astray even by her own terms when she locates the art work’s importance to the world in its ability to reify and represent action, and she makes a similar error when she treats permanence itself as the criterion for evaluating a work and its importance. Her critique of the “philistine” uses of art implicitly contains the same lessons that underlie the late twentieth century’s reevaluation of literary canons: fashion, prejudice and social capital inevitably play some role in immortalizing individual works and authors or keeping them in obscurity. A work’s longevity depends on so many historical accidents that we cannot view “relative permanence” as a measure of its quality as a work of art (there is also a problematic circularity in arguing that long-lasting works are great because great works achieve longevity). Permanence is an effect, not a quality, and a focus on permanence alone does not get us any closer to understanding what the “proper intercourse with art” actually looks like.

Arendt does, however, provide a clue to the appropriate interaction with art works in the language she uses at the end of the long passage quoted above: she says that the art work's "most important quality" is "to grasp and move the reader or spectator over the centuries" (ibid). She echoes this language of "grasping" and "moving" a few pages later while lamenting the philistine transformation of art objects into cultural exchange values: "In this process, cultural values were treated like any other values, they were what values always have been, exchange values; and in passing from hand to hand they were worn down like old coins. They lost the faculty which is originally peculiar to all cultural things, the faculty of *arresting* our attention and *moving* us" ("Culture" 201, emphasis added). Her complaint that the economic use of art works wears them out fits neatly into Arendt's definition of art works as durable, pseudo-permanent objects that help stabilize the world-as-artifice, but the faculty she describes at the end of the passage comes much closer to explaining the specific interaction between human beings and art works. In each passage, Arendt claims that works of art have the ability to arrest or move us, and this faculty is both a type of intercourse or interaction and a constitutive feature of those works.<sup>33</sup> We define most human-made objects by their uses (hammer, table, etc.), but because art works, to the degree that they are art works, do not have a use, we define them by their effect on us. Of course, this definition also has to take into account our intentions towards the work: if we view a sculpture as either a hammer or a commodity, we are not likely to experience it as an art work (this is the root of Arendt's complaint about turning culture into an exchange value), but when we approach an object as an art work, we open ourselves to its ability to arrest us or move us. This interaction with the work could only be called a use in a metaphorical sense; as a mode of engagement, it

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<sup>33</sup> Unlike permanence or the representation of great actions, a work's ability to arrest or move is rooted in the object's existence as a work of art; it constitutes a substantial rather than accidental feature of art *qua* art.

resembles our relationships with other people more than our use of tables or hammers. The artist and the craftsperson may each work with an end in sight (a completed object), but the craftsperson aims at an object for people to use while the artist aims at an object with which people will interact, an object that has the power to move or arrest its audience.

Arendt spends much more time discussing the relative permanence of art works and their potential as lasting representations of action than she spends explaining what specifically she means by “moving” on the one hand and “arresting” or “grasping” on the other, but her brief discussions of moving and seizing offer us a way of reading her aesthetic philosophy that does not depend on permanence or representation—qualities that, on Arendt’s own terms, cannot account for either the importance or the specific nature of a work of art. Arendt elevates art’s ability to move and arrest its audience above permanence or representation and calls it both art’s “most important quality” and a feature “originally peculiar” to works of art (“Culture” 199, 201), but she leaves it almost entirely up to her readers to determine what she means by “moving” and “arresting” and why they are important. “Moving” and “arresting” are almost infuriatingly vague terms for describing our experience with a work of art, and we could write them off as Arendt’s refusal to engage with aesthetic experience at a primary level (it is not uncommon, after all, to hear someone describe being moved by a work of art as an ineffable and even anti-rational experience). On the other hand, the balance created by moving and arresting and the consistency with which she describes those actions (even when her language shifts from “arresting” to “grasping”) implies another, more generous, reading. While Arendt treats moving and arresting as a single action or ability, we do not tend to think of them as synonyms in everyday thought and language. I can move an object, or I can stop it from moving. Thrust and drag, acceleration and braking are set in opposition to one

another with one critical exception: in the language of Newtonian physics, they both counteract the inertia of an object. Newton tells us that an object in motion and an object at rest will stay in motion or at rest until acted on by an outside force, and that outside force, whether moving a resting object or arresting a moving one, acts against the force of inertia. Moving and arresting are interventions in the physical world; they reach in from the outside and change the course or direction of an object. Works of art are similarly interventions, but rather than moving and arresting physical objects, they act on human beings and change the course of the world made and inhabited by human beings.

For Arendt, the natural course of things, the force of the world's inertia, is entropic: left on its own, the world tends towards decline and decay: "it is disaster, not salvation, which always happens automatically and therefore always must appear to be irresistible" ("Freedom" 169). In "The Crisis in Education," Arendt cites the entropic tendencies of the world as the reason that politics, as opposed to education, cannot take a conservative position: "In politics this conservative attitude—which accepts the world as it is, striving only to preserve the status quo—can only lead to destruction, because the world, in gross and in detail, is irrevocably delivered up to the ruin of time unless human beings are determined to intervene, to alter, to create what is new" ("Education" 189). If, to paraphrase Yeats, the world naturally falls apart, then we cannot preserve the world by maintaining things as they are; if we want to preserve the world as a place fit for human action, we have to intervene. Arendt's view of the world as an entropic system whose inertia carries it naturally towards its own destruction may be her best argument against a fixed canon of semi-permanent art works. If active human intervention is needed to preserve the world, then we do not need works of art to be permanent (even if that were a possibility) but works that move and arrest us, that break us out of our natural course.

Arendt bases her description of the world's natural decline and the need for ongoing human intervention to the basic human conditions of mortality and natality:

If left to themselves, human affairs can only follow the law of mortality, which is the most certain and the only reliable law of a life spent between birth and death. It is the faculty of action that interferes with this law because it interrupts the inexorable automatic course of daily life...The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin...thus action, seen the viewpoint of automatic processes which seem to determine the course of the world, looks like a miracle. (HC 246)

The human world falls apart because it is created by finite and mortal human beings: we are not eternal, and everything we create is ultimately subject to the conditions of our mortality. On the other hand, we are not *only* mortal. Because human beings are born with the capacity to act, and because human action constitutes a new and unpredictable beginning, we do not have to sit idly by and accept the inevitable destruction of the world we inhabit. Natal human beings preserve the world by disrupting its natural decline, and our interventions, because they are interruptions of automatic processes, look like miracles: "Every act, seen from the perspective not of the agent but of the process in whose framework it occurs and whose automatism it interrupts, is a 'miracle'—that is, something which could not be expected" ("Freedom" 168). Human action is miraculous because it is an "infinitely improbable" interruption of natural processes (ibid); action moves or arrests processes that, left on their own, would be the end of the world.

#### **THE NECESSARY USELESSNESS OF ART AS ACTION**

Viewing the work of art as an intervention blurs the line between Arendt's descriptions of work and action. Arendt claims that only action is miraculous because

miracles are unexpected new beginnings and action is the human capacity for beginning. Work, by contrast, is defined by its definite ends that make it both utilitarian and necessarily predictable. While she places art clearly in the mode of work, the ends she requires of art (preserving the world made by and for humans) as well as the methods she attributes to it (moving and arresting us) belong more properly to action.

Arendt further blurs the line between work and action when she claims that “the immediate source of the art work is the human capacity for thought” (*HC* 168). Arendt defines thought in contradistinction to both cognition and intelligence, and she aligns those three mental capacities with action, work and labor, respectively. Arendt describes cognition in exactly the same terms she uses to define work: “like fabrication itself, it is a process with a beginning and an end, whose usefulness can be tested, and which, if it produces no results, has failed, like a carpenter’s workmanship has failed when he fabricates a two-legged table” (*HC* 171). Cognition is end-focused and utilitarian. It “always pursues a definite aim” and “once this aim is reached cognitive process comes to an end” (*HC* 170). Because cognition is the process “by which we acquire and store up knowledge,” Arendt identifies it with the sciences. For Arendt, science is end-focused and utilitarian whether that end is technological, as in the applied sciences, or the abstract questions of “pure research.” In either case, the scientist has a particular end in sight (a technological solution or the answer to a question), can judge the success of his or her work according to how well it achieves that end and, finally, will add the product of that work (whether a piece of technology, a data set or an explanatory theory) to the accumulated mass of scientific progress: “scientific results produced through cognition are added to the human artifice like all other things” (*HC* 171). With one exception, Arendt does not draw any distinction between scientific products and all the other products of work. That one exception is the thought-inspired work of art: “Thought, on

the contrary, has neither an end nor an aim outside itself, and it does not even produce results; not only the utilitarian philosophy of *homo faber* but also the men of action and lovers of results in the sciences have never tired of pointing out how entirely ‘useless’ thought is—as useless, indeed, as the art works it inspires” (HC 170). Unlike every other product of work, the work of art is not a result of cognition; art is a product of thought which, like action, has no end or aim outside its own performance.<sup>34</sup>

While the work of the artist may resemble the craftsman or scientist to the degree that the artist does aim at making or fabricating a product (the work of art), the nature of that product makes the work of the artist *as artist* fundamentally different from the work of other fabricators. If art were the product of cognition, then the artist might be simply another iteration of *homo faber* recording the speech and action of great people to prevent the memory of those events from passing out of the world (as Arendt sometimes follows the ancient Greeks in claiming). But if, as Arendt argues, the work taken on by the artist is the product of *thought* (which has no aim outside itself) as opposed to

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<sup>34</sup> Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb makes this point in her wonderful introduction to *Reflections on Literature* (2007), a collection of Arendt’s writings on literary art which Gottlieb also edited. Gottlieb argues that “Because cultural pursuits are ends-in-themselves, they are comparable to the mode of the *vita activa* that Aristotle calls *praxis* and Arendt translates as *action*” (xxiv). While Gottlieb grants art works as ends-in-themselves the status of action, she stays close to Arendt by immediately insisting that “From the perspective of the artist, by contrast, the means-end schema is all consuming” (ibid.). As Arendt’s description of art as world-preserving and Gottlieb’s Arendtian depiction of W.H.Auden make clear, the greatest potential of art lies in the artist’s ability to renounce the means-end schema. According to Gottlieb, Auden distinguishes “between compassion for those who suffer and obfuscating doctrines that claim to know how suffering can be eradicated. This, according to Arendt, is the ‘main thing’ for Auden: ‘to have no illusions and to accept no thoughts—no theoretical systems—that would blind you to reality’...Arendt’s portrait of Auden represents more than an *aesthetica in nuce*; it refutes the desperate alternatives between which much of political thought since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment has been caught: either one affirms the idea of progress, which sees in history a cure to suffering, or one embraces some kind of cultural pessimism, in which case one shields oneself from the fact of suffering by ascribing it to the eternal ways of this unhappy world. Auden, in Arendt’s eyes, lives out the rejection of this alternative, for despite the misery to which he mercilessly exposes himself, the ‘key word’ of his poetry is *praise*” (xxx-xxxii). The artist at work may be, to some degree, the artist-as-fabricator, but that description is not comprehensive: artists can *act* in excess of means-ends. They can act in opposition to both *animal laborans*’s pessimistic acceptance of natural cycles and the end-directed belief in necessary progress that is characteristic of *homo faber*.

*cognition* (which “always pursues a definite aim”), then the aim of the artist—as far as we can say he has one—*cannot* be the definite aim of recording great acts or speeches and accumulating a mass of examples for posterity. It is only accidentally or incidentally that art works record or memorialize action, and monument building on its own cannot make the world “a fit place for action and speech” (*HC* 173). The importance of the work of art in and for the world cannot be the utilitarian reification of stories about action—work more suited to cognition—but the art work’s presence as a use-less product of thought. From the perspective of human action, the importance of the work of art does not lie in the content of the work (stories or representations of action) but in their mode of existence: as ends-in-themselves, art works, like actions, mark beginnings rather than ends.<sup>35</sup>

As part of her argument that art works belong in the category of work, Arendt points out that “works of art are thought things, but this does not prevent their being things” (*HC* 168-9), and making things, unlike acting, requires the artist to exercise skill and craft (i.e. painting, modeling, writing, etc.). To make an art object, artists have to suspend their thought processes long enough to fabricate the material form of the object: “it is precisely the thought process which the artist or writing philosopher must interrupt and transform for the materializing reification of this work” (*HC* 170-1). The artist, even if he or she is inspired by thought rather than cognition, still works as a fabricator. While this description is undeniably true with respect to the process of creating an art object as far as it is an object (a novel, a painting, etc.), this description of artist-as-fabricator does not provide an exhaustive definition of the artist’s activity. The artist does not aim at

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<sup>35</sup> Thinking specifically about narratives and the Holocaust, Kristeva finds in Arendt a similar opposition between narrative, on one side, and meaning, understanding, etc., on the other: “Now it is narrative itself, and not some kind of understanding, analysis, or rationalism, that Arendt assigns the capacity to think the horror of the Shoah” (45).

making *any* kind of thing but a *specific* kind of thing (a novel, a painting, etc.), and the final end of the artist's creative process exceeds the utilitarian ends he or she shares with other fabricators. Arendt argues in "The Crisis in Culture" that "Fabricators cannot help regarding all things as means to their ends or, as the case may be, judging all things by their specific utility" ("Culture" 212). The artist may view anything and everything as a potential means to the end of creating his or her artwork (Roth's Nathan Zuckerman provides an extreme example of the artist who cannot turn off the urge to use all of life as fodder for his work), but the same judgment of "specific utility" does not apply to the finished work of art. While insisting on the usefulness of their products does not pose a problem for fabricators of objects like tables and hammers that are made to be tools (their proper end is to be a means towards some other end), the artist would undermine his finished work's status as a work of art if he viewed it as only another means-to-an-end. Arendt goes so far as to say that "the greatest threat to the existence of the finished work arises precisely from the mentality which brought it into being" ("Culture" 213). As a writer writes, he or she views the work of writing and everything that supports it as various means to the end of completing the poem, novel, etc., but the finished work of art is ruined *as art* if, on completion, it becomes just another means to yet another end. Arendt's criticism of "philistine" mentalities and the nearly universal use of "didactic" as a pejorative term in reference to the arts are both based on the fact that education, moral instruction and the other ulterior purposes reduce the work from an end-in-itself to just another means.

Calling a work an end-in-itself is not the same as calling for art-for-art's-sake. While the call for art-for-art's-sake explicitly refuses to make art serve some outside purpose, it still conceives of art works in the category of means-to-an-end, even if that end is nothing more than the existence of art or artistic freedom. By contrast, calling art

an “end-in-itself” removes the individual work of art from the category of means: in Heideggerian terms, it treats the work as a self-sufficient for-the-sake-of-which instead of an instrumental towards-which or in-order-to. The artist may work in-order-to make an art object, but he does not make the art work in-order-to fulfill any other goal. Arendt introduces the concept of an end-in-itself to clearly separate action from the means-ends cycle of fabrication, and she insists that the meaning of any given action “can lie only in the performance itself and neither in its motivation nor its achievement” (HC 206). Arendt borrows the concept of the end-in-itself essentially whole cloth from Aristotle’s concept of *entelecheia*. She argues that action and speech inform

Aristotle’s notion of *energeia* (‘actuality’), with which he designated all activities that do not pursue an end (are *ateleis*) and leave no work behind (no *par’ autas erga*), but exhaust their full meaning in the performance itself. It is from the experience of this full actuality that the paradoxical ‘end in itself’ derives its original meaning; for in these instances of action and speech the end (*telos*) is not pursued but lies in the activity itself which therefore becomes an *entelecheia*, and the work is not what follows and extinguishes the process but is imbedded in it; the performance is the work. (ibid)

The meaning of an action, in Arendt’s terms, does not come from the motivation of the actor or the consequences of the act. The meaning of action lies in action itself, in its unpredictable appearance in the human world and, ultimately, in its character as a new beginning. While the work of the artist-as-fabricator has specific aims and leaves a product behind, the work of art—either the work of the artist *as artist* or the work performed by art—exists as an *entelecheia*: its meaning does not lie in an external end but in an activity performed in concert with the reader or audience.<sup>36</sup> If an art work

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<sup>36</sup> In “A Political Life: Arendtian Aesthetics and Open Systems,” Sue Spaid, a prominent curator of contemporary art, borrows the language of irreversible “open systems” from thermodynamics to describe how formal experimentation in the arts can act politically: “Recent avant-garde works that qualify as open systems demonstrate a particularly political dimension... Since an irreversible work must be incomplete, there is no finality to it. Neither the process nor the end goal is fixed, so the work of art remains in a state of mobility or constant flux... the incompleteness of open systems lends art unpredicatability and variability”

constitutes an activity that takes place between human beings and has no knowable, controllable ending, then the work of art crosses over from the mode of fabrication and becomes a new beginning in the same vein as speech or action. Each reading of a novel or encounter with a painting becomes a potential miracle, a “moving” or “arresting” with the power to shift the entropic inertia of the world.<sup>37</sup>

While miracles may be desirable and even necessary, they are not and cannot be ends. The miracle of action lies in its appearance as a new beginning, not in its consequences. As Arendt makes clear in her discussion of action and politics, we cannot act with an eye towards consequences because the results of any action and the reactions that follow it are both unforeseeable and uncontrollable. The moment our actions ceases to be an *entelecheia* and sets its targets on producing an end result, it slips out of the mode of action and into the mode of making or fabricating. The work of art as action cannot have any political or moral ends in the traditional sense: a novel that pushes a thesis or political position or satirizes human folly with the hope of correcting it sets its sights on a particular end and does not qualify as action. A book that attempts to bear witness to a historical wrong or raise the awareness of its readers also fails as action to the same degree that it takes those definable ends as goals. A work of art that takes a set of moral or political principles as its end also takes itself out of the mode of action and, ironically, forfeits the only chance it has to act politically or ethically. Arendt points out that human beings are not raw materials and cannot be corrected or perfected by the work of *homo faber*; humans are natal beings existing in plurality with

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(99). While Spaid’s initial assertion is intriguing, she does not address Arendt’s claims that art is a product of anti-political *homo faber*, and her substantial reliance on Curtis’ reading of Arendt significantly undermines the potential of “open systems” by insisting that the goal of formal experimentation is permanence and durability.

<sup>37</sup> Nelson points out Arendt’s influence on McCarthy’s belief that “Art works best when it is most like a fact,” that is, when it has “the ability to alter the observer and the capacity to reveal the unexpected and the unmasterable” (96).

one another, and only action—the mode of acting made possible by natality and plurality—can appear as a miracle, as the infinitely improbable possibility of a new beginning in the face of the world’s otherwise inevitable slide into catastrophe. That appearance in world is, for Arendt, the very heart of politics; it is the necessary and sufficient condition of human freedom.

#### **APPOSITION AS THE PREREQUISITE OF POLITICAL ART**

A novel or poem can appear in the world as a miraculous new beginning, but it can only do so by abandoning external aims and appearing as an *entelecheia* or end-in-itself. Such a shift away from means and ends and into the free possibility of action requires actively resisting narrative forces that press readers into closing off readings and cementing final conclusions or meanings. In order to break the cycle of means and ends, an author must break or frustrate narrative structures that beg for completion and totality. Art as action cannot be committed to a particular set of consequences because, as action, it can only be committed to its own appearance. An artistic commitment to appearance rather than any particular end requires a high tolerance for the openness of reading, and the unforeseeable and uncontrollable character of acting bears more than a passing resemblance to the negative capability praised by Keats. If the only aim of the work is appearance, then the artist must aim not only to delay but ultimately to prevent the reader from drawing final conclusions about the meaning of the work. Because even ideal readers will eventually tend to settle on a particular interpretation or range of interpretations, a work that wants to indefinitely suspend the closing-off of interpretation has to engage in a certain amount of narrative sabotage. In order to preserve its character as action, a work of art has to disrupt its audience’s tendency to view it as a transparent

medium or window into the world and foreground its own existence as a material object. In Arendt's language, it foregrounds its own appearance in the world by disavowing its reification or representation of the world (appearance cannot coincide with representation because representation implies a fixed end and falls within the mode of fabrication). The work of art as action does not represent the world. In Williams' language, the work stands in *apposition* to the world.

Because apposition is based on the reader's experience of the work as an independent entity and not as a representation of the world, an appositional work of art is able to appear in the world as action. An appositional work of art does not try to represent truth or otherwise instruct its readers; the work appears in the world, and its appearance engages the audience's capacity for judgment<sup>38</sup>. The work's primary connection to the world is structural—it consists of the reader's mirrored experiences of work and world—and by standing in apposition to the world of everyday experience, the work of art places the reader's *experience of the work* in apposition to his or her *experience of the world*. The appositional work, like any other action, is an *entelecheia* concerned primarily with its own appearance, and in the end it is this appearance and the type of response it elicits that helps make the world a place fit for other actions. Appositional works of art cannot be programmatic or offer specific advice to their readers, and that makes them largely unpredictable. The artist cannot know exactly how his or her audience will respond to a work or how the work will affect an audience's view of any particular ethical or political concern, but this risk is the condition necessary for the possibility of action. Action, Arendt insists, is a beginning and not an end.

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<sup>38</sup> As a narrative strategy, apposition avoids the two pitfalls that Arendt discusses under the heading of "philistinism": by focusing its readers' attention on the political and ethical catastrophes of our history, the work avoids the trap of escapist fantasy, and by actively resisting solutions and explanations, the work avoids the pretense of education or self-improvement.

If acting without regards to consequences seems risky or even irresponsible, we only have to remember Arendt's discussion of Eichmann to see the alternative. Eichmann's view of the world was full of clear meanings and set principles that freed him from the need to exercise judgment. A book that aims at set moral or political principles and supports them with a settled, totalizing narrative relieves its readers of the need to think from the position of everybody else; it forecloses on its readers' need to exercise judgment about either the work or the world it represents. Action is unpredictable, but only action has the possibility to intervene in the otherwise disastrous arc of history. Because action is necessarily unpredictable and requires us to exercise our judgment, a work of art cannot show us how to act politically or ethically by representing potential actions. A work of art can only support action—can only make the world a fit place for speech and action—by acting. Acting in the world, which always also means reacting to previous actions, requires us to exercise judgment, to submit our own acts as well as the acts of others to the potential scrutiny of everyone else. That is why Arendt calls judgment the most important part of Kant's political philosophy, and it is also why art can only make the world a place suitable for action by displacing its audience and forcing them out of settled interpretations and back onto their faculty of judgment.

As readers, we are tempted to read narrative representations, particularly representations of historical catastrophes, for satisfactory pictures of what “really” happened, explanations of causes and effects, or prescriptions for how we should act in response to the catastrophic. In everyday language, we want answers and we want closure. Artists face a corresponding temptation to provide us with a satisfactory representation of what happened, what we should think and what we should do. Representation, after all, is a function of fabrication, and it aims at a finished, useful product. It aims at satisfaction. By contrast, oppositional writing aims at *dissatisfaction*.

While the content of an appositional work focuses its readers' attention on a particular catastrophic history or event, the structure of the work indicates that a satisfactory knowledge of or response to the event is unobtainable both because it is historical (and thereby walled off from our experience by the retreating gulf of the past) and because it is catastrophic (and, like the sublime, exceeds our finite capacity for conceptualization). The practical effect of satisfaction is acceptance of the event and our relationship to it in a coherent, totalizing meta-narrative. The practical effect of dissatisfaction is epistemic displacement: the reader cannot settle into any one interpretation but is, on the contrary, pushed to continue searching, continue encountering competing narrations. Like the canny chef whose portions are too small to satiate either the stomach or the palette, the appositional work of art leaves its readers hungry for more—more information, more understanding, more interpretation—creating, in effect, a subjective experience of their onto-epistemological position. We are limited creatures with finite perspectives, and every disclosure is also necessarily a closing off: we only achieve clarity with regard to any one aspect of the world by foreclosing on other aspects and other possibilities. Apposition displaces us from the certainty of our limited perspective and forces us back onto judgment, onto thinking from the position of everyone else.

The narrative strategy of apposition and the epistemic displacement it effects stand in stark contrast to Arendt's description of the modern practice of history. In "The Concept of History," Arendt argues that, at least since Hegel, historians and other political thinkers have used coherent historical narratives as tools to elide the unpredictable riskiness of action and represent the world of the past as a meaningful system:

History—based on the manifest assumption that no matter how haphazard single actions may appear in the present and in their singularity, they inevitably lead to a

sequence of events forming a story that can be rendered through *intelligible narrative* the moment the events are removed from the past—became the great dimension in which men could become ‘reconciled’ with reality (Hegel). (“History” 85, emphasis added)

History in the form of an “intelligible narrative” offers to free us from the burden of living in the gap between past and future: since tradition has lost its ability to persuade through authority, history can fill that void by creating meaningful systems that satisfactorily “reconcile” us to the past. These intelligible narratives may be able to satisfy our desire for meaning with regard to the past, but they do so by presenting events that necessarily have happened (because they are historical facts) as though they had to happen out of necessity. They operate, as Nietzsche says in *Twilight of the Idols*, like crabs: “By searching for origins, one eventually becomes a crab. The historian looks backward; eventually he also believes backward” (470). Arendt essentially paraphrases Nietzsche when she points out that the “historian, by gazing backward into the historical process, has been so accustomed to discovering an ‘objective’ meaning, independent of the aims and awareness of the actors, that he is liable to overlook what actually happened in his attempt to discern some objective trend” (“History” 88). The meaning-seeking historian substitutes, in Aristotelian language, the order of knowledge for the order of being: we know historical events as fixed entities because they have already happened, but the historian takes that necessity as a quality of the event itself, presenting it as though it always had to happen.<sup>39</sup>

The totalizing narratives made possible by the substitution of meaning for being present history as a closed system, and systems, in turn, allow us to easily and consistently assign meaning to particular events that would otherwise appear as chaotic

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<sup>39</sup> For the sake of stylistic brevity, “historian” from this point forward will be used to mean “historians who, following Hegel, impose a totalizing narrative on history in order to create a meaningful system.” This use should not be interpreted as a claim that all historians, or even most contemporary historians, fall into this category.

and unpredictable. Arendt points out that the choices involved in making history systematic ultimately undermine the meaningfulness the system is intended to secure:

the particular incident, the observable fact or single occurrence of nature, or the reported deed or event of history, have ceased to make sense without a universal process in which they are supposedly embedded; yet the moment man approaches this process in order to escape the haphazard character of the particular, in order to find meaning—order and necessity—his effort is rebuffed by the answer from all sides: Any order, any necessity, any meaning you wish to impose will do. (“History” 88-9).

Because the order of the system comes from the crab-like historian and not from the character of the events, it is possible to impose any order and thereby generate any meaning from history. That does not mean that history can and does, in fact, mean anything we want it to mean; it means that writing history as an intelligible narrative fails to produce meaning that means anything. Real meaningfulness, according to Arendt, lies in the nature of events as the results of action, and in order to preserve their meanings, we must treat history as a series of free and therefore unpredictable actions and their consequences. Those consequences cannot be understood systematically because they are not only unforeseen but unforeseeable: “Whoever begins to act must know that he has started something whose end he can never foretell, if only because his own deed has already changed everything and made it even more unpredictable” (“History” 85). In Arendt’s conception of history, narratives only exist retrospectively and are only necessary to the degree that one particular set of events, as opposed to its infinite counterfactual possibilities, became an actualized reality. In history as it is lived and not as it is retrospectively narrated, action appears outside of or even in opposition to trends and systems, and we miss the true character and significance of action when we retroactively transform it into part of a system. Totalizing, intelligible narratives about the past may satisfy our desire for easily determinable meanings, but they do not really

“reconcile” us to reality. They only generate meaning by imposing systems that, because they are arbitrary, deprive meaning itself of any meaningfulness.

### **NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AS RESISTANCE-TO-MEANING**

In the first few pages of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt describes Eichmann’s trial as a contest between meaning and judgment. Arendt sets the prosecutor, who acts at the behest of the Israeli government’s political branches and wants to turn the trial into theater, on the side of meaning, and she places the presiding judges, who have to answer the demands of justice, on the side of judgment. While trials necessarily involve establishing and interpreting facts, Arendt argues that, in Eichmann’s case,

Justice demands that the accused be prosecuted, defended, and judged, and that all other questions of seemingly greater import—of “How could it happen?” and “Why did it happen?,” of “Why the Jews?” and “Why the Germans?,” of “What was the role of other nations?” and “What was the extend of co-responsibility on the side of the Allies?,” of “How could the Jews through their own leaders cooperate in their own destruction?” and “Why did they go to their deaths like lambs to the slaughter?”—be left in abeyance. (EJ 5)

Justice demands that Eichmann is “prosecuted, defended and judged,” and any political, ethical or historical questions “of seemingly greater import”—questions that look for meaningful, satisfactory explanations—stand at counter-purposes to justice. Arendt claims that, for the prosecution, the trial was an attempt to place history, rather than Eichmann, in the dock and wrest some meaning from it: “For it was history that, as far as the prosecution was concerned, stood in the center of the trial” (EJ 19). She claims that the prosecution’s case not only constituted “bad history and cheap rhetoric” but was also “clearly at cross-purposes with putting Eichmann on trial, suggesting that perhaps he was only an innocent executor of some mysteriously foreordained destiny” (ibid). The prosecution’s attempt to write Eichmann’s actions into an intelligible narrative

undermined its ability to prosecute him for his actions. In order to construct a satisfactory story, the prosecution presented history as a set of systematic processes, but if history is intelligible because it is systematic and follows definite processes, then Eichmann's actions could not be punished *as his actions*. At most, they could be lamented as the inevitable result of a tragic process, and inevitable, natural processes lie well beyond the reach of human justice. In order to do justice not only to the man in the dock but also to the victims of his crimes, the court would have to choose judgment over theater, it would have to judge Eichmann's inscrutable actions without embedding them in a meaningful story. Arendt believes that the court in Jerusalem served justice precisely—and only—to the degree that the presiding judges succeeded in keeping the prosecution's narrative out of their judgment.

Totalizing, intelligible narratives of history fail to serve the demands of justice, and, what is worse, they can also precipitate atrocities by satisfying the consciences of the people who commit them. Both morbidly and ironically, the historical approach adopted by the prosecutor to draw some meaning out of Eichmann's actions was the same approach used by Himmler to get men and women like Eichmann to perform those actions in the first place. According to Arendt, "The member of the Nazi hierarchy most gifted at solving problems of conscience was Himmler" (EJ 105), and, rather than arguing the ideological necessity of the crimes he asked people to commit, Himmler disseminated slogans and clichés that fascinated Eichmann. Arendt notes how these slogans convinced thoughtless people like Eichmann that they were instruments in a necessary historical process and allowed them to act against their natural impulses: "What stuck in the minds of these men who had become murderers was simply the notion of being involved in something historic, grandiose, unique...which must therefore be difficult to bear. This was important, because the murderers were not sadists or killers by

nature” (*EJ* 105). Himmler succeeded in convincing otherwise ordinary Germans to commit atrocities primarily by writing the crimes they were committing against the Jewish people and the human status into a meaningful history, a historical process that was as difficult as it was inevitable. The prohibitions of traditional morality could not and did not stop these men and women from killing millions of their fellow creatures in cold blood, and Himmler’s story of historical process helped destroy the last vestiges of traditional authority by clothing genocide in a cloak of historical meaning. The particular actions that individuals were asked to perform may have been repugnant, but they were justified by the meaningful process of history.

The success that the Nazi’s experienced using historical narratives to elicit the cooperation average people with seemingly unthinkable atrocities generates a host of “seemingly more important questions” about Eichmann and about the Holocaust more generally, but we cannot answer those questions using the same strategies that Himmler and the Nazi propaganda machine used to conscript its executioners. We cannot simply substitute “our” story for “theirs” because the root problem is with the structure, not the content, of those stories. Even if a thoughtless man like Eichmann bought into our story today, there is no guarantee that he will not prefer a monstrous story tomorrow or even that our story will not lead to monstrous ends. Arendt locates a possible solution in the example of those who, unlike Eichmann, did resist the story offered by Himmler and the National Socialist narrative: “Those who were still able to tell right from wrong went really only by their own judgments, and they did so freely; there were no rules to be abided by, under which the particular cases with which they were confronted could be subsumed. They had to decide each instance as it arose, because no rules existed for the unprecedented” (*EJ* 295). Those who resisted Nazi rhetoric could not rely on traditional morality because the historical realities they were facing outstripped the general

principles of moral guidance offered by tradition. They also could not rely on satisfying narratives about history because the Third Reich's arguments about Aryan superiority and Semitic corruption employed equally comprehensive, equally meaningful stories. Those who resisted the ethical collapse of the world around them resisted on the strength of their own judgments.

In her "Postscript" to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt discusses the debate that surrounded the publication of her book as an example of the historical crisis (in both senses of that phrase) presented to the twentieth-century by the historical reality of the Shoah. She argues that the world-wide attention to Eichmann's trial and her report from Jerusalem demonstrated that "the era of the Hitler regime, with its gigantic, unprecedented crimes, constituted an 'unmastered past' not only for the German people or for the Jews all over the world, but for the rest of the world, which had not forgotten this great catastrophe in the heart of Europe either, and had also been unable to come to terms with it" (*EJ* 283). Following the unimaginable violence of two World Wars, the industrialized genocide of the Shoah and the use of atomic weapons against the populations of entire cities, anyone writing about or otherwise approaching "unmastered past" of the twentieth century faces a daunting crisis of representation, and this crisis meets them between past and future. The catastrophes of the immediate past exceeded the capacity of finite human minds to understand and, to an even greater degree, the capacity of literary works to represent them. At the same time, any future that is not to be hopelessly predetermined by the violence of that past relies on a new and unexpected beginning that can be neither prescribed nor represented by a work of the imagination: even attempting to do so would foreclose on the real possibilities of an unimagined future.

In this context, the well-recorded turn of Postwar American literature towards “postmodern” tropes, metafiction and, in general, a broad concern with its own textuality does not constitute a retreat out of the world and away from its concerns. Postwar, meta-textual literature is not, or is not simply, a “literature of exhaustion” that plays with itself because its role in the world has been played out. Rather than pure formalist experiments or a Nero-esque fiddling while the world burns, postwar American metafiction grows out of ethical concerns with preserving a world in which speech and action between human beings—and the new beginnings such action affords—are real possibilities. Many American writers who felt an ethical obligation to engage with the crises of the twentieth century also saw their hands tied with regards to what they could represent—that is, in relation to the content of their works—and subsequently turned their attention to the form and practice of narrative. Arendt’s description of the essays that make up her collection *Between Past and Future* applies equally well to those fictional works that experiment with ethically motivated strategies of non-representation: “their only aim is to gain experience in *how* to think; they do not contain prescriptions on what to think or which truths to hold. Least of all do they intend to retie the broken thread of tradition or to invent some newfangled surrogates with which to fill the gap between past and future” (“Gap” 14). The books by Nabokov, Roth and Morrison that are the focus of following chapters attempt to embody a way of thinking or acting rather than presuming the ability to faithfully represent the past or envision a future. Each of these authors in their own way crafts narratives that abandon representation or instruction in favor of apposition: rather than attempting to show us the truth about the world or tell us how to act in it, their works are actions in Arendt’s sense of the word. By abandoning utilitarian goals and appearing in the world with no end apart from their own appearance, these appositional narratives contain a possibility that lies outside the reach of representation—they contain

the possibility of a new beginning. As actions these works elicit reactions that cannot be predicted or prescribed, and the only guide they offer to their readers is judgment, the human capacity that allows us, as Kant demonstrates, to make judgments about art *as art* and, as Arendt insists, to interact with the other human beings *as humans*, as natal beings who live together in plurality and whose actions erupt like miracles to make and remake the world.

**Left-Handed Fiction:  
Space, Time and the Ethical Gulf Between Worlds in Vladimir  
Nabokov's American Novels**

Now and then, in the course of events, when the flow of time turns into a muddy torrent and history floods our cellars, earnest people are apt to examine the interrelation between a writer and the national or universal community; and writers themselves begin to worry about their obligations.

— “The Art of Literature and Commonsense”

Between the wolf in the tall grass and the wolf in the tall story there is a shimmering go-between. That go-between, that prism, is the art of literature.

— “Good Readers and Good Writers”

Vladimir Nabokov is a postmodern writer in a strictly Arendtian sense: having, like Arendt, lived in stateless exile in Western Europe before fleeing Nazi expansion and ending up, finally, in the United States, Nabokov was intimately aware of the final collapse of moral, philosophical and political traditions, of the impotence of tradition to either prevent or later to account for the horrors of totalitarianism. Writing self-consciously in the gap between past and future, Nabokov turned his first American novels towards the immediate yet unrecoverable past of the twentieth century, and the narrative experiments that proliferate in those novels explicitly address the questions of how to remember an event whose horror exceeds our finite human capacity for understanding and how art can approach that which is not only unrepresentable but also unthinkable. Nabokov's tentative answers to those questions—theorized and embodied in his novels—

depend on explicitly disavowing representation as a mode of narration in favor of a more complex, oppositional relationship between the world of historical experience and the worlds of his fictions. As the above epigraphs indicate, Nabokov felt both external and internal pressure to address the historical catastrophes emerging from and through totalitarianism, and, while his fictions hold traces of the totalitarian regimes that shaped his personal history, his fictions are not and should not be read as historical accounts. Nabokov insists that his novels do not aim at telling the truth about atrocity or giving an accurate testimony: “Literature is invention. Fiction is fiction. To call a story true is an insult to both art and truth” (“Good Readers” 5). Nabokov is neither a Platonist nor a Keatsian idealist, and he does not believe that either beauty or art are equivalent with the truth.

In referring to the story of the boy who cried wolf as the birth of literature, Nabokov claims that “the magic of art was in the shadow of the wolf he deliberately invented, his dream of the wolf,” and not in some wolf he had seen or the one that eventually ate him (ibid).<sup>40</sup> The insight Nabokov wants us to draw from the fable is not “tell the truth or be eaten”; he wants us to see the essential and inescapable difference between the wolf in the field and the one that is invented (for starters, the fictional wolf could never have eaten its author), but he also wants us to see that there are connections between the world of fiction and the world where wolves can eat us, a “shimmering go-between” or “prism” (ibid). As the choice of “prism” indicates, Nabokov does not see this link between worlds as simple reflection or mimetic representation—art is decidedly not a mirror held up to nature. If the connection between the worlds of fictions and the world

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<sup>40</sup> This description is taken from “Good Readers and Good Writers,” which Fredson Bowers indicates “has been reconstructed from parts of [Nabokov’s] untitled written-out opening lecture to the class before the exposition began of *Mansfield Park*, the first book of the semester” (LL xiv-xv). Nabokov would have delivered many versions of this lecture while teaching undergraduate literature students from 1941-1958.

of shared historical experience were based on representation, then we could judge art by standards of accuracy and truthfulness. Because art is a prism rather than a mirror, a medium that distorts, bends and even breaks the light passing through it, Nabokov offers a more complicated, nuanced and richer description of the “shimmering go-between” based on the nature of art, the structure of narrative, and, ultimately, the relative properties of time and space.

For Nabokov, the artist or reader who acts as though the connection between art and the world is straightforward and representational falls ends up creating what he scornfully calls “topical trash” or “Literature of Ideas” (*L* 315). On the other hand, the escapist artist or reader who denies that there is *any* link between the worlds of fiction and historical experience fails both on an ethical level—by abdicating their worldly responsibility—and also aesthetically—by ignoring the structures that connect the world of the novel to other worlds, including the world of shared, historical experience. In contrast to both of these approaches, Nabokov is committed to a non-didactic, non-escapist literature that actively explores the prismatic connections that bind fictional and historical worlds: he resists didacticism by insisting that his fictions are independent worlds separate from the world of historical experience, and he resists escapism by insisting that those worlds, while distinct, stand in apposition to one another.

While Nabokov’s American novels—a set that is, not coincidentally, coextensive with his post-war novels—insistently return to the violent century played out in his native Europe, Nabokov goes to great narrative lengths to avoid representing the Holocaust or the Gulag or writing “topical trash” that claims to show its readers the “truth” about totalitarianism, and he instructs readers to avoid looking for such truths or representations in fiction. He begins the “*L’Envoi*” to his undergraduate literature students (collected at the end of *Lectures on Literature*) by saying, “To some of you it may seem that under the

present highly irritating world conditions it is rather a waste of energy to study literature, and especially to study structure and style. I suggest that to a certain type of temperament...the study of style may always seem a waste of energy under any circumstances” (“L’Envoi” 381)<sup>41</sup>. Without agreeing to the charge of uselessness, Nabokov assents that his syllabus did not offer his students any life lessons, at least as far as the immediate moral or social application of his reading list is concerned: “The novels we have imbibed will not teach you anything that you can apply to any obvious problems of life” (ibid). Nabokov rejects the notion that the role of art or the artist is to explain the world to his readers; the *raison d’être* for literature, according to Nabokov, is not identification, education or explanation. It is, he claims, a matter of structure:

In this course I have tried to reveal the mechanism of those wonderful toys—literary masterpieces. I have tried to make of you good readers who read books not for the infantile purpose of identifying oneself with the characters, and not for the adolescent purpose of learning to live, and not for the academic purpose of indulging in generalizations. I have tried to teach you to read books for the sake of their form, their visions, their art. I have tried to teach you to feel a shiver of artistic satisfaction, to share not the emotions of the people in the book but the emotions of its author—the joys and difficulties of creation. (“L’Envoi” 381-2)

The importance of any novel, for Nabokov, does not rest in its ability to show us more of the world or make us more sympathetic with the characters it presents. A work’s merit and our reason for reading it lies in the internal structure of the novel and in our ability as readers to participate in the novel’s *structure* (as opposed to interacting with the people, places or ideas it presents). Even the idealized connection with the author hinted at in the final sentence of the passage is not participation in the author’s view of the world—it is

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<sup>41</sup> Bowers tells us that the “L’Envoi” is “abstracted from his [Nabokov’s] untitled closing remarks at the end of the semester after completing the last lecture on *Ulysses* and before going on to discuss the nature of the final examination” (*LL xv*). This farewell, like the other lectures in the volume, may have varied from semester to semester during Nabokov’s teaching career, but the understated “highly irritating world conditions” could serve as a general description of any number of geopolitical events and situations from 1941-1958.

not, in other words, Eliot's objective correlative—but participation in the author's "joys and difficulties" in crafting the world of the novel. Nabokov wants readers to share the author's experience with the *work*, not his experience with the *world*.

It may be tempting to read Nabokov's "L'Envoi" as a cold formalist's amoral pronouncement that art is created for art's sake and that writers are responsible for nothing but the internal integrity of their creations. The "highly irritating world conditions" among which literature is created would seem to have no claim on good readers or good writers *in their capacity as readers and writers*. But such an interpretation of Nabokov's lecture fails to account for the frequency with which those "world conditions" intrude into his fiction and particularly the fiction he wrote while delivering this lecture to his undergraduates.<sup>42</sup> While Nabokov insists that we should not read his or any other literary works for historical insight or ethical instruction and while claims that we should read only to share with the author the pleasurable experience of creation, his novels do not stand apart in the cold distance of art for art's sake—in fact, they drive their readers repeatedly back into the horrors of totalitarian oppression and genocide. If his lecture is not a simple prohibition of commerce between the literary worlds of novels and the world of historical experience (with its ever-irritating conditions), what does this seeming prohibition entail? The answer lies in structure. While Nabokov explicitly instructs his students not to identify with characters, look for life lessons or abstract general ideas, he does not claim that art is without wider ethical significance, and his insistence that we (as readers and students of literature) spend our energies focusing on the structure and texture of a work indicates that what Nabokov calls "the live heart of the matter" ("L'Envoi" 382)—including, I will argue, the work's

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<sup>42</sup> As Bowers notes, Nabokov delivered this lecture between 1941 and 1958. During that time, he wrote and published *Bend Sinister* (1947), *Lolita* (1955) and *Pnin* (1957).

ethical import—lies in its structure. Nabokov employs narrative apposition as a type of aesthetic prophylactic against “infantile” identifications and “adolescent” lesson seeking among his readers. If the ethical potential of literature lies in the structure of a work, then these immature practices of misreading—practices that, as infancy and adolescence, are characterized by blind self-interest—hold the potential for ethical disaster. Works that speak to or about the catastrophic always run the risk of fostering abusive, solipsistic or self-serving interpretations of the events they address or record. Nabokov does not try to sidestep this danger by writing “Chinese box” stories that actively avoid or are at least indifferent to the “highly irritating world conditions” that he warns his students against projecting into the “wonderful toys” they have read. The fact that his fictions do not remain aloof, that they return repeatedly to war, oppression and genocide, can be explained in part by the dangers Nabokov saw in remaining silent. One of his most explicit descriptions of why the artist must speak about the catastrophic—even while the heart of his fiction remains its structure—is found in “Conversation Piece, 1945,” a short story that poignantly and succinctly illustrates the ethical double-bind of the artist faced with the horrors of the Holocaust. The story serves as an invaluable point of departure and clearly presents a number of problems that Nabokov addresses through his use of aesthetic apposition.

#### **MALICIOUS LIES AND AESTHETIC EQUIVOCATION**

As is typical of Nabokov’s fiction, “Conversation Piece” pivots on a doubling of identities; the narrator (who, like Nabokov, is a Russian author who immigrated to America via Western Europe) begins by telling his readers, “I happen to have a disreputable namesake” (*Stories* 587). Having been repeatedly and inconveniently

mistaken for his double while living among other Russian exiles in Europe—including a revealing demand that he return a long-overdue copy of *The Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion* to an émigré library—the narrator hopes that by moving to America he has escaped his namesake. The double, however, follows him across the Atlantic, and the bulk of the story relates the narrator’s accidental attendance at a post-VE Day meeting of German sympathizers to which his double was invited. The group, predominantly composed of middle-aged society women, has gathered to listen to a professor of history who proudly identifies himself as an American citizen of “pure Bavarian stock” (590). This historian, whom the narrator dubs “Dr. Shoe,” presents a number of carefully crafted arguments defending the Germans’ conduct in the war and denying the Holocaust. A stress-induced speech impediment prevents the narrator from confronting Shoe then and there, but, as he flees from Shoe’s post-lecture rendition of the “Star-spangled Banner,” he stammers his shock and disgust to the meeting’s host and mistakenly takes Shoe’s hat instead of his own. The following day, Dr. Shoe comes to the narrator’s home looking for his hat, and Shoe once again gets the best of the exchange. The story ends when the narrator receives a “cease and desist” order from his incensed and inadvertently impersonated double who claims that he, not the narrator, has been pursued across the ocean and demands remuneration for the damage to his good name.

While the narration is remarkably straightforward by Nabokov’s standards, the story poses a number of serious questions to the artist confronted by a catastrophe like the Holocaust. The first and most obvious reading of the story presents in graphic detail the major failing of maintaining a respectful silence towards the unspeakable: it fails to confront (and risks complicity with) those who deny the event. As Maxim Shroyer argues at the end of an insightful article on “Jewish Questions” in Nabokov’s fiction, “Nabokov warns his post-war American readers, the Mrs. Halls and Mrs. Mulberries of the story,

about current (and perhaps future) attempts to falsify the history of the Holocaust” (88-9). Hall and Mulberry are two of the story’s willingly gullible society ladies, and Shrayer sees them as representative of an American audience that might too easily fall under the sway of charismatic and diabolical charlatans like Dr. Shoe. While Nabokov’s immediate audience was not technically post-war (Japan would not surrender until more than two months after the story’s original publication in the *New Yorker* under the title “Double Talk”<sup>43</sup>), the fact that conspiratorial denial of the Holocaust appeared essentially simultaneously with the discovery of concentration and extermination camps by Allied forces only strengthens the need for similar warnings against attempts to falsify history. Shrayer points out that Nabokov’s story “is one of the earliest statements on the Holocaust in all of American fiction” (89), and its focus on Holocaust denial demonstrates an awareness that silence risks complicity with those who would deny, distort or, at the very least, suppress the historical facts about the destruction of six million European Jews along with Romani, homosexuals (among them Nabokov’s brother Sergei) and other groups singled out by the Nazi regime.

The story at the center of “Conversation Piece,” what Shrayer correctly identifies as Shoe’s “malicious lie” (88), is presented by the charming historian with unflappable

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<sup>43</sup> I discuss the story’s later title below, but the original title of this story is evocative in its own right. “Double Talk” refers, of course, to the mixture of truth and lies that Shoe uses to win over his listeners, but it can also refer to talk about doubles. The narrator of the story says he has one double, but we know that he has two: besides the doppelganger he knows about, he is also a double of Nabokov. We should notice, and the title “Double Talk” points us in this direction, that identifying the narrator too closely with Nabokov (who, because the story does not provide him with any name other than the publication credit, also shares the narrator’s name) is just as mistaken as identifying him with his fictional double. Nabokov likes to play with doubles and mistaken identities—two Dr. Krug’s, Kinbote and Charels the Beloved, Humbert and Quilty, Vadim Vadomich N., Nabokov and Humbert, Nabokov and Kinbote, Nabokov and Pnin, etc.—and many of those doubles double for Nabokov in some regard, but he tells us not to read these characters for points of biographical identification or insight. For instance, he tells readers of *Lolita* that “my creature Humbert is a foreigner and an anarchist, and there are many things, besides nymphets, in which I disagree with him” (*L* 315). Humbert is not Nabokov because he is Nabokov’s creature, a character who inhabits a world that Nabokov created, not the world in which Nabokov lives. The discussion of *Look at the Harlequins!* below goes into greater detail about Nabokov’s oppositional treatment of literary doubles

coolness as nothing but “dull facts”: “let us forget propaganda for a moment and turn to dull facts. Allow me to draw you a little picture, but perhaps a necessary one” (592). Shoe’s claim that he presents simple “facts” and his immediate use of “a little picture” to support them calls to mind the fragile status of historical facts outlined by Arendt in “Truth and Politics.” Arendt’s essay presents two related concepts about facts and lies. First, a lie is in its very nature (by its quality of being an invented thing) political, but, since facts do not require invention, factual truth is only in certain circumstances political (when confronting an accepted lie, for instance). This distinction means that, in the political arena, lies have home court advantage—they are inherently political. Second, historical facts are entirely contingent, and their accidental nature can be a liability when they are put up against the crafted plausibility of a political image: as Arendt points out, “the surest sign of the factuality of facts and events is precisely this stubborn thereness, whose inherent contingency ultimately defies all attempts at conclusive explanation. The images, on the contrary, can always be explained and made plausible—this gives them their momentary advantage over factual truth” (Arendt “Truth” 253). In Nabokov’s story, for example, Dr. Shoe has the luxury of choosing a story that sounds plausible, one with understandable human motivations, while the historical causes of the Holocaust defy satisfactory human explanations even after sixty years of earnest study and consideration.

Even if, as Arendt argues, lies “can never compete in stability” with historical facts that exist “because it happens to be such and not otherwise” (ibid), does not necessarily mean that lies are ineffective. Lies may be unstable, but their success, unlike historical facts, does not rely on long-term stability. While the lie that replaces the fact may eventually fall apart (since all constructed things have the potential to deconstruct), this does not guarantee the eventual return to factual truth since there is no reciprocal condition that guarantees the re-construction of a thing once destroyed. As Arendt quotes

Montaigne, “If falsehood, like truth, had but one face, we should know better where we are, for we should then take for certain the opposite of what the liar tells us. But the reverse of truth has a thousand shapes and a boundless field” (ibid). The lie may eventually be revealed as a lie, but if it has effectively destroyed the true fact then its own destruction has not undone its political success. The real danger is not an exact substitution of truth for lies but that “the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world—and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end—is being destroyed” (Arendt 253). Unlike logical proofs, historical facts lack *a priori* necessity, and while their absolute contingency places them at risk of attack on grounds of their existence (i.e., they never happened) it also means they are vulnerable to misinterpretation on grounds of their contingency (i.e., they had to happen). Political responsibility finds itself in a precarious position between the rock of denial and the hard place of fatalism: “The political attitude toward facts must, indeed, tread the very narrow path between the danger of taking them as the results of some necessary developments which men could not prevent and about which they can therefore do nothing and the danger of denying them, of trying to manipulate them out of the world” (Arendt 254). The final result is that facts are fragile and susceptible to destruction. The vulnerability of historical facts and the presence of Holocaust-denying narratives make silence an unacceptable option for the artist who, like the narrator of “Conversation Piece, 1945,” feels an ethical obligation towards the victims of oppression and genocide. If he does not speak, then the malicious lie might permanently obscure the truth of their suffering.

At the same time, the narrator of “Conversation Piece” has a very difficult time speaking, and, when he does speak, the political or ethical success of his speech is questionable at best. The artist in the story describes his inability to speak out against Dr. Shoe as a combination of three elements: “Timidity, and perhaps morbid curiosity, kept

me from leaving the room. Moreover, when I get excited, I stammer so badly that any attempt on my part to tell Dr. Shoe what I thought of him would have sounded like the explosions of a motorcycle which refuses to start on a frosty night in an intolerant suburban lane" (*Stories* 590). "Timidity" seems to be a description of an ordinary, understandable but still culpable attack of moral cowardice; I will return to "morbid curiosity" later, but first I want to call attention to the specifics of the artist's "stammer." The speech impediment which keeps him from immediately denouncing Shoe does not hinder his general facility with language. After all, the man who cannot speak in Mrs. Hall's apartment is the same man who has written this account of his failure, and Shroyer's note that Nabokov is here "Writing brilliantly in an adopted language" (88) applies equally well to Nabokov's character. The character, like his creator, clearly has a commanding facility with the English language, but when this brilliant writer does eventually force himself to speak, he barely manages to blurt out sixteen half-coherent words of accusation before running from the scene: "'You are either murderers or fools' I said, 'or both, and that man is a filthy German agent'... As I have already mentioned, I am afflicted with a bad stammer at crucial moments and therefore the sentence did not come out as smooth as it is on paper" (595). While his parting remark to Mrs. Hall may have come out smoother on paper than in person, the narrator's failure in this situation was not a matter of speaking instead of writing since his attempt to put a denunciation on paper is equally ineffective: "As soon as I got home, I started writing a letter to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, but did not get very far" (595). His letter to the FBI fails, in part, because he cannot recall names and other details necessary to a criminal investigation (even "Dr. Shoe" is a name fabricated to replace the historian's forgotten name), but the narrator places the bulk of blame elsewhere. The problem, he says, lies in an unavoidable sense of unreality: "Worst of all, the whole affair assumed a dreamlike,

grotesque aspect when related in detail, whereas all I really had to say was that a person from some unknown address in the Middle West, a person whose name I did not even know, had been talking sympathetically about the German people to a group of silly old women in a private house” (596). “Dreamlike” and “grotesque” sound more like the story we have just read than a letter to federal officials, and this transformation of affidavit into short story shows that the salient distinction in the story is not between writing and speaking but between artistic and the political language. The narrator wants to challenge Dr. Shoe in the political arena, but the only language he can call to service is aesthetic.

The practical distinction between aesthetic and political language is on full display when, the day after the meeting, Dr. Shoe comes in search of his hat, and the author’s brief interview with the subtle propagandist leaves him both frustrated and humiliated. The narrator tries threatening Shoe with the failed letter to the FBI, but Shoe meets him with a calculated reminder of politically protected speech—”Thank God we live in a great country, where everybody can speak his mind without being insulted for expressing a private opinion” (ibid). By invoking the free speech protections of the first amendment, Shoe shifts the focus of scrutiny from the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis to the supposed “old world” narrowness of the narrator’s politics: “When my final splutter had petered out, he said, ‘I go away, but please remember, in this country—’ and he shook his bent finger at me sideways, German fashion, in facetious reproof” (ibid). For all his German inflections and mannerisms, Shoe, the American citizen, displays a remarkable mastery of political rhetoric, and the ease with which he employs both popular sympathies and constitutional protections overwhelms the narrator’s ability to put words into action and, to some extent, his ability to act at all: “Before I could decide where to hit him, he had glided out. I was trembling all over. My inefficiency, which at times has amused me and even pleased me in a subtle way, now appeared atrocious and

base” (ibid). The narrator’s inefficiency—his inability to put language to immediate, practical use in the political world into which he is thrust—strikes him as a serious ethical failing.

The final failure of the story comes through a similarly reversed indictment. The narrator receives a letter from his double, a man who, like Shoe, is capable of using language for instrumental purposes, and his letter turns the narrator’s original description of their entanglement on its head. The double, after accusing the narrator of pursuing him across Europe and tormenting him with his “depraved, decadent writings,” warns, “I could have you jailed and branded as an impostor, but I suppose you would not like that, and so I suggest that by way of indemnity...” (597, ellipsis original). Only a single line of narration follows the double’s threatening letter, and this short closing sentence implies a payoff and indicates the narrator’s final defeat, “The sum he demanded was really a most modest one” (597). The artist narrator, hindered throughout the story by his political stammer and inefficiency, ends by giving in to his double, and his silence in this case literally supports (in a pecuniary sense) his anti-Semitic counterpart. The indirectness of the sentence as well as its tone of resignation carry the guilt of an apology or a confession; the author knows he should have fought, but, finding himself outmatched, he threw in the towel. Note that the narrator’s double is not angered or disgusted by any particular political position he has taken but by his “decadence,” i.e. the apolitical, inefficient writing that the narrator had taken pride in until he found himself thrust into politics. The apolitical philosopher Krug in *Bend Sinister* faces a similar condemnation from Paduk: they are reviled not for any position they have taken but because they have not taken overtly political positions. While Nabokov in no way suggests that all writing should be expressly engaged in politics, these two stories indicate that the refusal to think

politically is likely to end badly because any one of us is likely to be thrust, at any time and against our will, into the stream of political life.

One might argue, and it is worth considering, the possibility that the payoff might not be the end of the incident and that the artist, by writing the story, gets the final word in the affair. His letter to the FBI, the argument might go, may have failed, but the story it grew into has exposed Shoe and his ilk. The artist, in this reading, has subsumed them and triumphed; he lost the battle but, by recasting the debate through his aesthetic vision, he wins the war. The major problem with that reading—apart from its failure to overcome the bleakness of the narrator’s final capitulation—lies in the narrator’s suspicion of the arts throughout the story. The story’s first allusion to art and performance comes when the narrator is led to Mrs. Hall’s apartment by an “ancient elevator attendant, oddly resembling Richard Wagner” (588), the German composer who famously influenced both the conditions of operatic performance and the ideology of Adolf Hitler. Continuing the atmosphere of aesthetic appreciation, the first thing the narrator sees when he enters the apartment is “a certain type of ornamental vase manufactured in China, and possibly of great antiquity” (*ibid.*). His descriptions of the women attending the meeting are fashioned almost exclusively from their various connections to the arts. During the question and answer period with Shoe, the narrator has a hard time seeing the gathered women as “real people” and not puppets in a “Punch-and-Judy show,” and he is certain that the ladies “belonged to book clubs” and “had found substitutes for creative power in various aesthetic pursuits, such as, for instance, the beautifying of committee rooms” (590).<sup>44</sup> He senses that the woman seated next to him was “worrying about a bit of decoration having to do with some social event or wartime

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<sup>44</sup> Whether or not these ladies actually are book-club-crazed aesthetes is beside the point (although Shoe, the savvy propagandist, treats them as if they are); the point here is the narrator’s perspective: he looks at the atmosphere of artistic culture and feels how easy it is for art to conspire against its audience.

entertainment the exact nature of which I could not determine” (ibid). Taken together, these references create an atmosphere of aesthetic and artistic appreciation inside of which Shoe spins his noxious tale of German nobility and Jewish propaganda. Shoe lingers for effect on the aesthetic and cultural heritage shared, he persistently reminds his listeners, by Germany and the United States:

“The tragedy of Germany,” said Dr. Shoe as he carefully folded the paper napkin with which he had wiped his thin lips, “is also the tragedy of *cultured* America. I have spoken at numerous women’s clubs and other *educational* centers, and everywhere I have noted how deeply this European war, now mercifully ended, was loathed by *refined, sensitive* souls. I have also noted how eagerly *cultured* Americans revert in memory to happier days, to their traveling experiences abroad, to some unforgettable month or still more unforgettable year they once spent in *the country of art, music, philosophy, and good humor.*” (591, emphasis added)

Shoe takes advantage of the aesthetic sensibilities and artistic inclinations of his audience to discount the emerging reports of death squads and concentration camps. Their aesthetically justified appreciation of Wagner, Beethoven, Goethe and other German masters provides a fertile soil for Shoe’s lie to take root. A less cultured, less artistic crowd would not be vulnerable to this particular deception.

Shoe argues in part that the Holocaust is impossible because Germans have such advanced artistic and intellectual sensibilities: how could a culture that produced such magnificent works of art and intellect also be responsible something as unthinkable as industrialized genocide? While Shoe’s argument seems to convince his roomful of listeners, it reminds Nabokov’s readers that the Shoah did, as a matter of fact, take place in a “country of art, music, philosophy, and good humor.” Nabokov offers a similar reminder of art’s proximity to the Shoah in *Pnin*, where we learn that the love of Pnin’s young life, Mira Belochkin, “was selected to die and was cremated only a few days after her arrival in Buchenwald, in the beautifully wooded Grosser Ettersberg, as the region is

resoundingly called. It is an hour's stroll from Weimar, where walked Goethe, Herder, Schiller, Wieland, the inimitable Kotzebue and others" (*Pnin* 135). The location of the Buchenwald concentration camp, named after the beech forest where Goethe strolled with Schiller, was so closely associated with Goethe that a particular oak associated with the Romantic poet was left standing within the gates of the camp.<sup>45</sup> The immediate commentary on this proximity comes from Pnin's colleague Dr. Hagen, chair of the German department: "'*Aber warum*—but why—' Dr. Hagen, the gentlest of souls alive, would wail, 'why had one to put that horrid camp so near!' for indeed, it was near—only five miles from the cultural heart of Germany—'that nation of universities,' as the President of Waindell College, renowned for his use of the *mot juste*, had so elegantly phrased it" (*Pnin* 135-6). Hagen's comments are a sorrowful but symmetrical counterpart to Shoe's outright denial: both men see an incongruity between artistic achievement and death camps, and both seem to show more concern for artistic culture than eradicated human beings. Shoe tries, with some success, to deny the existence of the camps behind the cognitive dissonance of the incongruity. Hagen, while he recognizes and admits the existence of Buchenwald, seems to lament its *proximity* to Weimar more than the fact of its *existence*: his question is not "Why did this happen" or "How could this happen" but "Why did it happen in this particular space?" While Hagen is (somewhat ironically) referred to as "the gentlest of souls alive," his aesthetic concerns lead him to prioritize a

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<sup>45</sup> "To reach Buchenwald, one drives up a wooded mountainside that overlooks the small city of Weimar in the east German state of Thuringia. In July 1937, the SS brought inmates from the camp at Sachsenhausen to clear 370 acres of forest above the town which, as the home of Goethe and his meeting place with Schiller, symbolizes classical German culture. The Nazis spared one magnificent oak, known to be a favorite of Goethe and his love Charlotte von Stein, and made it the center of a concentration camp built to imprison and work to death Hitler's opponents and victims" (Farmer 100). [Sarah Farmer. "Symbols that Face Two Ways: Commemorating the Victims of Nazism and Stalinism at Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen." *Representations* No. 49, Special Issue: Identifying Histories: Eastern Europe Before and After 1989 (Winter, 1995), pp. 97-119. U of California P.]

kind of cultural horror at the befouling of Weimar over the foulness itself—the methodical murders of tens of thousands of human beings. Artistic refinement does not provide a safeguard against brutality. Art is amoral. Art does not inherently support good actions and can just as easily be used to support evil. Even Nabokov’s narrator, an artist who does demonstrate an appropriate moral outrage, finds himself remaining at the meeting—and remaining silent as Shoe speaks—in part because of his “morbid curiosity” (590): in the end, his account of the meeting makes a good story, and speaking up earlier would have disrupted the lecture and prevented him from crafting a fictionalized account of it.

Through both the aesthetic atmosphere of the anti-Semitic meeting and the narrator’s artistic drive to turn the meeting into fiction, Nabokov’s story highlights the ethical risks of writing about the Shoah. The artist cannot remain silent in the face of political lies like Dr. Shoe’s, but he also has to worry about the risks that come with putting the aesthetic concerns of a story in competition with the ethical demands of bearing witness to the catastrophic. The depth of this risk is illustrated by a passage in which the narrator’s artistic ambition collapses the distance between himself and the willingly gullible audience in Mrs. Hall’s apartment. While their credulity and his indignation seem to set a wide gulf between the narrator and his grotesque subjects, his description of the woman next to him discloses a shared preoccupation. He notices his neighbor is distracted by the details of a social obligation “the exact nature of which I could not determine. But I did know how badly she needed that additional touch. Something in the middle of the table, she was thinking. I need something that would make people gasp” (590). Two things are interesting about this moment of empathetic knowledge. First, this particular intuition is possible because he is an artist. While he cannot determine the exact subject of her preoccupation (he is neither an omniscient

narrator nor a mind reader), he either guesses at its aesthetic nature and fills in the creative drives and motivations well know to him as a writer, or he projects his mental state onto her entirely. Second, he slips into a rare (for this story) moment of free indirect discourse while imagining her thoughts: “*I need something that would make people gasp*” (ibid, emphasis added). The first person singular pronoun that begins the sentence remains momentarily ambiguous, and the claim attached to it applies to the narrator’s story as appropriately as it does the woman’s “great big huge bowl of artificial fruit” (590-1), and the symmetry between these two “conversation pieces” is reinforced by the story’s revised title. The narrator needs to shock his readers. If his story does not make people gasp, then it will fail on two fronts: ethically, it will not move people to moral indignation, and, aesthetically, it will not be an interesting read. While a story can always be tweaked to make it more interesting or entertaining, the need to craft a good story poses a significant danger to responsibly representing human suffering. If, as Arendt argues, historical facts can be displaced by plausible images, then well-meaning fictions can be as destructive as malicious lies. Because any story that supplants historical facts has removed those facts from public memory, the potential for suppressing the truth by eclipsing historical events (and only later falling apart) is present in any and every constructed representation of a historical event. Whether or not the representation intends to lie, it potentially eradicates the historical facts it supplants. Seen in this light, even a representation allied to the truth is dangerous: if it ever supplants the facts which it intends to support, it can effectively destroy the event it remembers. The end result would be the same as the political lie: the facts will have ceased to exist in the world. By writing even obliquely about the Shoah, the narrator of “Conversation Piece, 1945” risks becoming the obscene double not only of the man who shares his name but of Dr. Shoe as

well. If he claims that his constructed story presents the “facts”—or, as Shoe phrases it, the “dull facts” (592)—then he jeopardizes the history he wants to defend.<sup>46</sup>

### THE PERVERSITIES OF REPRESENTATION AND “HUMAN INTEREST”

Nabokov’s three novels written during this period provide further evidence that he was concerned about the risks associated with writing in the wake of the totalitarianism. Most obviously, he decided as a writer of fiction not to remain silent about the atrocities perpetrated during his lifetime. *Bend Sinister*, *Lolita* and *Pnin* all carry indictments of police states and mass executions. While Nabokov refuses to ignore his century’s historical catastrophes, these three novels employ a range of metafictional strategies that indicate an awareness of and anxiety about creating fictional doubles of Nazism and Stalinism. Nabokov’s preface to *Bend Sinister*, written after the novel and appended to it in 1963, provides one of the clearest examples of this delicate balancing act. In a passage reminiscent of the “L’Envoi” to his students, Nabokov warns his readers against reading the novel for a history of or commentary on totalitarianism: “The story in *Bend Sinister* is not really about life and death in a grotesque police state. My characters are not ‘types,’ not carriers of this or that ‘idea’” (*BS* xiii). We should not, in other words, read his novel

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<sup>46</sup> The historian shares many of these risks with the novelist. While history claims a different relationship to the world than Nabokov claims for fiction, history tells stories as constructed as any novel. Facts might exist in the world with what Arendt calls a stubborn “thereness,” but history must be made from the raw material of those facts. Totalizing histories that claim to tell a complete and final story or—like Nietzsche’s crab-historians—portray the pseudo-necessity of “thereness” as actual necessity or inescapability jeopardize the availability of historical facts for further examination, reflection or understanding. Nabokov’s “Conversation Piece, 1945” stands as an interesting example of history and fiction being written side by side. Boyd reports that Nabokov read a version of “Double Talk” at Wellesly on April 17, 1945. Earlier that week, on April 12, CBS broadcast Edward R. Murrow’s report from Buchenwald, the first concentration camp to be liberated by American forces. Murrow’s broadcast and Nabokov’s story are very different linguistic and rhetorical objects, but they share at least one goal: they strive to make the historical facts of the Holocaust—a term that in itself indicates a great deal of historicizing by collecting individual events into a larger whole—present in the world and available for intellectual, ethical, spiritual, juridical and other inquiries. To that effect, they each stand in direct opposition to Dr. Shoe.

with the “adolescent” purpose of learning about the realities of life under totalitarianism. In another echo of his “L’Envoi,” Nabokov reminds both those who write novels and those who read them that there “are few things more tedious than a discussion of general ideas inflicted by author or reader upon a work of fiction” (*BS* xii). Notably, Nabokov even extends this attack on “academic” (used in a pejorative sense) searches for general ideas to the meta-critical discussion of whether or not his book qualifies as didactic:

The purpose of this forward is not to show that *Bend Sinister* belongs or does not belong to ‘serious literature’ (which is a euphemism for the hollow profundity and the ever-welcome commonplace). I have never been interested in what is called the literature of social comment...I am not ‘sincere,’ I am not ‘provocative,’ I am not ‘satirical.’ I am neither a didacticist nor an allegorizer. (xii)

Nabokov clearly despises “serious literature,” but, rather than simply denouncing it and claiming that his book is a different kind of creature, he takes the further step of rejecting the conversation altogether. He is, of course, taking part in the very discussion of *Bend Sinister*’s relationship to “serious literature” he claims to reject, and the preface addresses at length the various connections that clearly do seem to exist between his novel and real life terrors on the European continent. This double move—simultaneously presenting and withdrawing the question—indicates the need for a different set of questions or a different way of asking. Nabokov does not want readers to stop thinking about his novel’s relationship to the world; instead, he wants readers to reconsider the categories of didacticism and aestheticism, and he insists that those considerations must be based on a careful examination of fictional worlds and how they exist within and beside the world of historical experience.

Nabokov insists that *Bend Sinister* does not carry moral or historical lessons, but he acknowledges that the novel invites the kind of readings he tells us to avoid. After describing the phrase “bend sinister” in terms of heraldic devices, he claims that the

“title’s drawback is that a solemn reader looking for ‘general ideas’ or ‘human interest’ (which is much the same thing) in a novel may be led to look for them in this one” (*BS* xii). Nabokov admits that the title of *Bend Sinister* encourages readers to look for “general ideas,” academic pursuits he warns against in his lectures, as well as “human interest,” a use of art that receives a more sinister description within the body of the novel. Among the disparate entries in an old notebook belonging to Adam Krug—the novel’s philosopher protagonist—Nabokov places an entry about a particular Roman entertainment that included an Orpheus “among real lions and bears with gilded claws”: “this Orpheus was acted by a criminal and the scene ended with a bear killing him, while Titus or Nero, or Paduk, looked on with that complete pleasure which ‘art’ shot through with ‘human interest’ is said to produce” (*BS* 156). Nabokov draws an unflattering comparison between people who read novels for “human interest”—and who may even be tempted to believe that their motivation is more ethical or more serious than more “frivolous” aesthetic interests—and bloodthirsty despots who take pleasure in artistically staged human dismemberments. Nabokov reverses the relationship of the fictional character to the living human being in order to strengthen the force of this connection. Whereas readers who love “human interest” in their novels want to see fictional characters stand in for flesh-and-blood human beings, Paduk and Nero make living actors stand in for the mythological Orpheus. We are more likely to find the latter substitution repulsive and repugnant, but the point is that, whichever way the substitution happens, the pleasure of “human interest” is nothing more than a perverse satisfaction derived from witnessing the suffering of a fellow creature. The fictional presentation of suffering is, like the gilding on the claws of Nero’s bears and lions, an embellishment indicating that this particular bloodshed is meant for artistic appreciation.

Nabokov is suspicious of fictional representations of suffering for many of the same reasons that Susan Sontag is suspicious of photography. In *On Photography* (1977), Sontag's suspicion centers on the photograph's tendency to beautify whatever it captures while simultaneously claiming absolute verisimilitude. She points out that the fact of representation itself tends to beautify indiscriminately: "Bleak factory buildings and billboard-cluttered avenues look as beautiful, through the camera's eye, as churches and pastoral landscapes" (*Photography* 78). Human beings are, as Aristotle notes, creatures who delight in representations, and our delight in interesting representations can draw both artists and audiences into complicity with the causes of human suffering: "To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are...(at least for as long as it takes to get a 'good' picture), to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing—including, when that is the interest, another person's pain or misfortune" (*Photography* 12). There is a fine line between enjoying the representation of another person's pain and enjoying that fact that they are suffering, especially if the representation is only interesting because of that pain. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Sontag addresses the aesthetic, even erotic, pleasure derived from representations of human suffering, noting that, historically, "the appetite for showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked" (41). While *On Photography* tends to trace this pleasure to the beautifying effects of photographic representation, Sontag's later book finds two other locations for the pleasure derived from representations of suffering. She claims that images of suffering present their audiences with "the provocation: can you look at this? There is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching. There is the pleasure of flinching" (*ibid*). It is worth recognizing that both pleasures are tied up with the viewer's moral estimation of him- or herself: in the first case, they are hard-minded realists who do not need to deceive

themselves about the world's evils; in the second, they are sensitive souls who feel too much human sympathy to look without flinching. In either case, they are connoisseurs of "human interest" deriving pleasure from the pain of others.

Nabokov humorlessly lampoons the entertaining and erotic potential of art full of "human interest" in the grisly torture and death of Krug's son David, easily the single most disturbing event in *Bend Sinister*.<sup>47</sup> In a scene that combines the theatrical setting of Paduk's Orpheus with the scopophilic gaze of the camera, both Adam Krug and the novel's readers watch, through a series of macabre film sequences, as David, mistakenly taken to a facility for treating the criminally insane used in a "medical" experiment, is released among a group of eight older boys who rape and torture him to death. While the circumstances of David's death recall the pseudo-scientific atrocities performed by Nazi physicians (a corruption of medicine that Nabokov more explicitly condemns when Pnin imagines Mira's death in Buchenwald), its setting draws attention to the dangers inherent in representing such atrocities. David's murder took place in an enclosure that "looked extremely attractive, reminding one of some of those open-air theatres that were so dear to the Greeks" (219). David's appearance on this stage is also filmed, and the clumsy bureaucrats at the facility attempt to use the film segment to show Krug how well they had been treating David (he was dressed warmly and walking through a beautiful

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<sup>47</sup> In his brief but insightful chapter on David's death, "Suffer the Little Children," Zoran Kuzmanovich says that "when it comes to imagining David's last end, the story really enters us while denying us its sense. Even after I close *Bend Sinister* I cannot rid myself of the sickening crunch of a child's broken bones or the last image of a bare-legged, living David staring in shivering, floodlit incomprehension at the group of hooligans who are about to torture him to death" (53). Kuzmanovich tries on many explanations (including several offered by other critics) of why Nabokov would chose to include this irredeemable scene of torture, but feels that "as a fictional act it defeats our understanding, because we cannot quite find the emotional or moral means to encompass it; we cannot get the necessary closure, and, in my case, I cannot even begin to imagine what it would be like to do so" (55-6). Kuzmanovich notes that even fictionalized accounts of torture that avoid falling into complicity with state violence still risk making that violence explicable: "In the end, such torture cannot make sense in the world of *Bend Sinister* or in any other world. It cannot because it must not" (57).

courtyard), but the film's decidedly unscientific inter-titles indicate that the film was both horrific and intended for entertainment and erotic gratification. The silent film opens with scenes of the female doctor in charge—along with interlaced decidedly non-clinical titles like “No Whistling, Please!” and “Watch Those Curves”—and proceeds to show the inmates being searched for weapons—the caption “Bad Luck, Fatso!” accompanies the confiscation of a “lumberman's saw” from one of the boys (*BS* 223). The staff abruptly cut the film off just as David is about to encounter the older boys, and the last image is the inter-title, “Uh-Uh. Who's that?” (224). David's cruel death, obscene in both the ordinary sense of the word and as that which must be kept “off the stage,” is never directly presented to Krug or the novel's readers: as with the murder of Agamemnon or the blinding of Oedipus, the violent act takes place out of sight. Even so, both Krug and Nabokov's readers were previously provided with the details of what typically happens to the experiment's “release instruments” (218): “Sometimes the ‘squeezing game’ started after the ‘spitting game’ but in other cases the development from harmless pinching and poking or mild sexual investigations to limb tearing, bone breaking, deoculation, etc. took a considerable time” (219-20). After viewing the film, Krug is taken to David's theatrically made-up corpse: “The murdered child had a crimson and gold turban around its head; its face was skillfully painted and powdered: a mauve blanket, exquisitely smooth, came up to its chin” (224). The whole event, from its amphitheatre setting to the comic and lascivious inter-titles of the film to the costuming of David's brutalized corpse, stands as a warning against representing atrocities. It also warns its readers against the desire to see atrocities represented. Elena Sommers persuasively argues that “Nabokov forces the reader's imagination to picture the circumstances of the victim's deaths by providing different...detailed scenarios of what could have happened” (36). The collection of weapons confiscated from the inmates and displayed on film “serves its

purpose—as one’s glance moves from item to item on the tray, the resisting mind pictures different scenarios of the victim’s death” (42). This narrative strategy compels the reader’s conscious participation in David’s suffering and, set alongside the obvious pleasure taken by David’s Ekwilist captors, accuses the reader of enjoying the process. Nabokov refuses to show us David’s death. Instead of his murder (which is kept off the screen), we are shown obscene appropriations of his horrible end for the purpose of perverse entertainment. By lampooning the representation of torture for entertainment, the novel provides a grotesque example of why representing the catastrophic in fiction is dangerous: the medium itself, like film or theater, tempts us into being entertained by the unspeakable. David’s obscene murder, like real-world catastrophes, may be best left off stage. Representation risks turning them into a source of illicit pleasure or, like the decorative centerpiece from “Conversation Piece,” just a bit of flair to make people gasp.

If the novel portrays “human interest” as, at best, a kind of prurient fascination with misery and, potentially, a variety of bloodlust, then why does Nabokov give his book a title that by his own admission tempts reader to stray down that path? The answer lies in part within a parenthetical aside he slips into the discussion of his title. Nabokov tells us, without telling us why he tells us, that a heraldic “bend sinister” consists of a “bar or band drawn from the left side (and popularly, but incorrectly, supposed to denote bastardy)” (xii). He does not take up the possible associations of “bastardy” or legitimacy with his novel, but (as is evident in the discussion above) he does take up the problem of popular but incorrect supposals. Nabokov names his novel—a book he has good reason to believe will be illegitimately read for “human interest” and “general ideas” by a popular audience—after a device that is popularly mistaken for illegitimacy. The titular emblem in this case stands less for “bastardy” than for popular misreading. His title, in part, warns the astute reader against looking for “human interest.” While *Bend Sinister* may look like

a book about life under totalitarian rule, it is better understood as a novel about how we approach that kind of book.

According to Nabokov, we should approach his seemingly topical novel in the same way we approach any novel—as a world distinct from our own. In his preface to *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov explains that his novel is “not really about life and death in a grotesque police state” because “Paduk, the abject dictator...Doctor Alexander, the government’s agent; the ineffable Hustav; icy Crystalsen and hapless Kolokololiteishchikov; the three Bachofen sisters; the farcical policeman Mac; the brutal and imbecile soldiers—all of them are only absurd mirages, illusions oppressive to Krug during his brief spell of being, but harmlessly fading away when I dismiss the cast” (xiii-iv). The villains of *Bend Sinister*—unlike Stalin, Hitler and their political machines—exist at Nabokov’s whim. When we read *Bend Sinister*, we are not viewing a reflection of European totalitarianism; we are, instead, investigating a new world. As Nabokov insists in “Good Readers and Good Writers,”

We should always remember that the work of art is invariably a creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is to study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know. When this new world has been closely studied, then and only then let us examine its links with other worlds, other branches of knowledge. (“Good Readers” 1)

Nabokov generalizes his insistence that *Bend Sinister* is not about the world in which his readers live: the work of literature comprises a self-subsisting world that stands apart from the “worlds” that its readers have previously encountered, including the world of historical experience.<sup>48</sup> While the qualifiers Nabokov uses in each instance—“no *obvious*

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<sup>48</sup> Nabokov’s use of the plural “worlds” refers presumably to other books as well, but it also bears some remarkable similarities to a Heideggerian being-in-the-world in which we, as individual Daseins, construct our worlds through the interaction of existential freedom and stubborn facts. It is worth noting that, for Heidegger, the process of reading—the ongoing hermeneutical circle of prejudging the text and being

connections” and “not *really* about”—do imply that these worlds are not absolutely separate from one another, he instructs his students to read first *as if* there are no links between those worlds and only look for connections *after* they have thoroughly explored the world presented in the novel. If we presume an obvious connection between worlds—a presumption that requires much less work on the part of the reader—then we are likely to draw obvious, platitudinous morals from the book. John Ray’s forward to *Lolita* performs exactly this kind of facile moralizing based on the assumption that Humbert’s book rather simply reflects the reality of our lived world: “still more important to us than scientific significance and literary worth, is the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader; for in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson” (L 5). The phrases “serious reader” and “general lesson” stand out as red flags in Nabokov’s critical vocabulary, signals that his readers, unlike Ray, should not see “the wayward child, the egoistic mother, the panting maniac” as directly and practically applicable to “bringing up a better generation in a safer world” (L 5-6). Humbert’s story will not help us protect children from pedophiles for the same reason that *Bend Sinister* cannot serve as a field guide for combating totalitarianism: the novel is not a simple reflection of the world, not a copy of the things and people we encounter in our daily lives, and taking it as mirror image oversimplifies both the novel and the world of experience.

Ray tells us to read *Lolita* for the verisimilitude of its content: if we study Humbert’s account, we will understand the mind of a predator and be better equipped to protect our children. In “A Book Entitled Lolita,” his 1956 afterword to the 1955 novel, Nabokov instructs his readers to be less concerned with the accuracy of the book’s content and more concerned with our practice of reading it. Nabokov’s explanation of

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confounded by it—and being-in-the-world—projecting free possibilities for existence against an originary and nonnegotiable thrownness—are structurally identical processes.

why his books are not topical parallels his defense against charges that *Lolita* is pornographic. While conceding that the book “does contain various allusions to the physiological urges of a pervert” (L 316) and without making recourse to the presence of these urges in real-world perverts or the necessity of Humbert’s perversion to the story (John Ray, by contrast, makes both of these claims), Nabokov argues that *Lolita* is not pornographic because it does share the narrative structure of pornography:

in modern times the term ‘pornography’ connotes mediocrity, commercialism, and certain strict rules of narration...Old rigid rules must be followed by the pornographer in order to have his patient feel the same security of satisfaction as, for example, fans of detective stories feel...action must be limited to the copulation of clichés. Style, structure, imagery should never distract the reader from his tepid lust. (L 313)

Nabokov goes on to outline, in convincing detail, the clichéd structure that allows a book to operate as pornography, and he argues that *Lolita* employs too much originality to be actually pornographic. While admitting that “Certain techniques in the beginning of *Lolita* (Humbert’s Journal, for example) misled some of my first readers into assuming that this was going to be a lewd book” (ibid, emphasis added), the style, structure and imagery of the novel as a whole do not support that initial misreading. As for the presence of Humbert’s proliferating perversions, Nabokov reminds his readers that “after all we are not children, not illiterate juvenile delinquents, not English public school boys who after a night of homosexual romps have to endure the paradox of reading the Ancients in expurgated versions” (L 316). Nabokov simultaneously mocks both the “illiterate juvenile delinquents” who would read *Lolita* for sexual gratification and the prudish schoolmasters who would try to forestall this gratification through censorship: reading *Lolita* as a storehouse of erotic content is childish, no matter what the reader’s intentions towards that content may be. Nabokov extends his denouncement of childish readings to include people who read for educational insights: “It is childish to study a

work of fiction in order to gain information about a country or about a social class or about the author” (L 316). That shift on “childish” ways of reading fiction essentially equates the salacious interests of “illiterate juvenile delinquents” (or, for that matter, the illicit pleasures of “human interest”) with the more wholesome but equally misguided interests of readers like John Ray.<sup>49</sup> Any reading for content—whether for sexual stimulation or moral guidance—fails to properly engage with and understand the novel.

In his afterword’s “impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book,” a bookend to his “impersonation of suave John Ray” in *Lolita*’s foreword (L 311), Nabokov confronts the “gentle souls who would pronounce *Lolita* meaningless because it does not teach them anything” and insists that he is “neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and despite John Ray’s assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow” (L 314-5).<sup>50</sup> We should notice that, while Nabokov explicitly states that he is not a didactic writer and *Lolita* “has no moral in tow,” he is explicitly defending the novel against charges of meaninglessness, implying that *Lolita* does have meaning (if not “a meaning”). While Nabokov vociferously dismisses “topical trash or what some call Literature of Ideas” (L 315), those terms of disdain are best read as markers of a work’s structure—the

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<sup>49</sup> In his “L’Envoi,” Nabokov calls reading for identification “childish” and reading for instruction “adolescent.” Here, lesson-seeking is called “childish” and sexual gratification is called both childish and adolescent. While Nabokov is not developing a strict taxonomy, he does consistently indicate that certain ways of reading—identification, prurient gratification, moral or historical instruction—are immature and not characteristic of adult readers. We should remember, as Arendt consistently points out, that children and adolescents live within the isolation of the home or private life and that only adults live and act in the public world. Even when technologically augmented adolescence has pushed the lives of young people more and more into public light, adolescents still lack any significant agency or power in public life, and what agency they have usually derives from their parents (who are of majority) or through participation in the adult world (through employment, for instance). Moral-seeking readers who see themselves as socially responsible are, according to Nabokov, solipsistic minors who disqualify themselves for public life by pretending to find simple explanations of the common world.

<sup>50</sup> As he does in his foreword to *Bend Sinister*, the “Works by the Narrator” of *Look at the Harlequins!*, and Kinbote’s feverish “notes” in *Pale Fire*, Nabokov treats the book’s paratextual devices as part of the novel rather than a peek behind the curtain of reality. They do not operate within the same diegetic rules of the novel’s body, but they do play various fictional games and are not identical with the historical person Vladimir V. Nabokov.

participation it invites or requires from its readers—and not the work’s content. If, as Nabokov argues, *Lolita* can escape charges of pornography based on an assessment of its structure rather than an inventory of its sexual content, then the novel escapes the moniker “topical trash” not by avoiding certain topics—totalitarianism, state terror, genocide—but by departing structurally from narrative markers of veracity, historicity, and general ideas. “Topical trash” claims to have a moral in tow, to give us “information about a country or about a social class” (*L* 316). In order to assure the transmission of its message, “Literature of Ideas,” like pornography, must assume that some obvious connection exists between the fictional world it presents and the world of historical experience (if, for instance, Humbert is not a simple reflection of predators in the world, then he cannot serve as a useful warning for parents and educators). Put simply, “topical trash” locates its meaningfulness in a message transmitted through the novel’s *content*.

### **BLISS VS SYMPATHY**

Rather than argue that *Lolita* is meaningful because of some element it contains, Nabokov answers the charge of meaninglessness by describing the novel’s *existence*, its being *qua being*, and he describes the meaning of fiction as inseparable from its existence: “For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (*L* 315).<sup>51</sup> Nabokov redirects the attention of “gentle souls” away from didacticism and

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<sup>51</sup> This bears an interesting resemblance to both Augustine’s claim that whatever is good and Nietzsche’s insistence that we define good against bad rather than evil. Nabokov claims that good fictions are fictions which exist—as opposed to bad fictions which, rather than existing as evil, are bad because they have no substance of their own. We should not ask whether or not fictions are evil; we should ask whether or not they are substantial. In “The Art of Literature and Common Sense,” Nabokov takes the explicitly Augustinian view that “‘badness’ is a stranger to our inner world; it eludes our grasp; ‘badness’ is in fact

moral tropes—the problems and solutions reflected in a book’s content—and towards the “aesthetic bliss” made possible by the work’s mode of being. His claim may at first seem to be an escapist assertion of “art for art’s sake,” but only if we ignore Nabokov’s definition of the “art” to which “aesthetic bliss” connects us. Curiosity, tenderness, kindness and ecstasy appear to be a rather strange definition of art, and, if he were describing art objects, it would border on the nonsensical. On the other hand, these terms make perfect sense if we apply them to the reader or audience of the work of art (this definition of art, like Arendt’s, is based on how we interact with the work). A novel’s meaning does not come from any moral content but from its readers’ participation with it. In the language of Nabokov’s “L’Envoi,” a work becomes meaningful when its readers are able “to feel a shiver of artistic satisfaction, to share not the emotions of the people in the book but the emotions of its author—the joys and difficulties of creation” (“L’Envoi” 382). In a variation of the claim that great books teach us how they should be read, Nabokov argues that fictions are meaningful when they invite their readers to share in the act of creation, when their structures require curiosity, tenderness, kindness and ecstasy as norms.<sup>52</sup>

Taking up Nabokov’s elevation of “aesthetic bliss” and his four-part definition of art, Richard Rorty locates *Lolita*’s meaningfulness in the audience’s practice of reading by depicting Humbert as an anti-example of how we should engage with both art and

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the lack of something rather than a noxious presence; and thus being abstract and bodiless it occupies no real space in our inner world” (“Commonsense” 375-6).

<sup>52</sup> Humbert’s incuriosity closely resembles the “thoughtlessness” that Arendt claims as Adolf Eichmann’s defining characteristic. Neither the fictional nor the historical man was capable—or, at least, never exercised the capacity—to think from the position of anyone else, with the result that neither of them was capable of judging his own actions. While Eichmann’s inability to think was evidenced by a corresponding inability to speak even his native German in anything but worn clichés, Humbert and Kinbote are each masters of their adopted English. Nabokov’s characters indicate that thoughtlessness can dress in less pedestrian garb and that ecstasy and thoughtlessness are not mutually exclusive. Eichmann, according to Arendt, found *Lolita* to be an “unwholesome book.”

other people. In his often-cited chapter “The barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on cruelty” (1989), Rorty argues that Nabokov’s fictions—and particularly *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*—are primarily concerned with the internal experience of cruelty, that is, with what it looks and feels like to be cruel: “Nabokov wrote about cruelty from the inside, helping us see the way in which the private pursuit of aesthetic bliss produces cruelty” (Rorty 146). Rorty argues that aesthetic bliss does not safeguard us against being cruel and may in fact contribute to cruelty. He points out that Humbert and Kinbote, each of whom writes ecstatically, are “exquisitely sensitive to everything which affects or provides expression for their own obsession, and entirely incurious about anything that affects anyone else. These characters dramatize, as it has never before been dramatized, the particular form of cruelty about which Nabokov worried most—incuriosity” (Rorty 158 italics original). Kinbote’s blindness to Shade’s suffering underlies much of the comedy and pathos of *Pale Fire*, and Humbert, as Rorty demonstrates, callously ignores a significant number of human tragedies as he pursues (and then writes about pursuing) Lolita. Rorty’s reading centers on Humbert’s conversation with the barber of Kasbeam (whose mustached young son had died around 1917, quite possibly in the First World War) and his inattentiveness to the death of Lolita’s younger brother (who died, at two, when she was four): “It is left to the reader to make the connection—to put together Lolita’s remark about death with the fact that she once had a small, chubby brother who died. This, and the fact that Humbert does not make the connection himself, is exactly the sort of thing Nabokov expects his ideal readers...to notice.” (Rorty 163). Rorty argues that Nabokov “tells us in his Afterword what we have missed” because his actual readers are prone to ignore the comparatively large sufferings that lie behind these small nodes in Humbert’s narrative (ibid). We, as readers, discover that we have been as inattentive and incurious as Humbert, and that, by doing so, we have shared in his cruelty. We also discover that

cruelty is what happens when we are incurious and fail to pay attention. Based on this reading, Rorty claims that *Lolita* has a moral after all: “The moral is not to keep one’s hands off little girls but to notice what one is doing, and in particular, to notice what people are saying. For it might turn out, it very often does turn out, that people are trying to tell you that they are suffering” (Rorty 164). Rorty makes a compelling case that *Lolita*’s meaning does not exist primarily in its content—even though Humbert is a vivid example of a “the monster of incuriosity” (Rorty 161)—but in the relationship between the reader and the text.

Rorty’s argument is compelling, but it is also incomplete. Rorty is not a precise reader of Nabokov’s complex diegetic levels, and his reading of *Lolita* is much stronger than his readings of *Pale Fire* and *Bend Sinister* (the other two novels he addresses in any detail in this essay), each of which has a significantly more complicated narrative structure than Humbert’s narration. For instance, his insistence that Kinbote is a more successful writer than Shade completely ignores the fact Kinbote, who is supposedly writing a commentary to Shade’s poem, is a spectacular failure: Kinbote does not intentionally add anything to the reader’s understanding of Shade’s “Pale Fire,” and he also fails to convince us that the poem is a coded message about Zembla, that he is Charles the Beloved or that the Charles of his story would be loved by anyone other than himself. Most of the successes of *Pale Fire*—the comic genius, the play between text and critical apparatus, the subtle poignancy of Shade’s search for an afterlife balanced with the parodies of espionage, revolutionary intrigue, orgiastic decadence, masturbatory criticism, and really bad neighbors—belong to Nabokov, the author; Kinbote, the narrator, shares only in the seductive force of his manic eloquence. While this may be a relatively minor point—and one that does not take away from Rorty’s description of Kinbote as a definitively incurious character—Rorty’s misevaluation of Kinbote’s

success as an author shares a common root with another, more substantial misreading of Nabokov's fiction. Rorty's tendency to collapse or conflate diegetic levels produces a distorted picture of how Nabokov's novels operate in the world. He argues that Nabokov had an exceptionally large capacity for bliss, and that "the other side of this capacity for bliss was an inability to put up with the thought of intense pain. The intensity of his pity brought him to the novel which has aroused the most protest among his admirers: *Bend Sinister*... Nabokov does not attempt to portray Krug's pain. More than that, he refuses to countenance the reality of a pain that great" (Rorty 155). Because Rorty does not take the time to parse the less-than-obvious connections between Krug's world and ours, he fails to see why Nabokov has his narrator interfere with our empathy for Krug. Nabokov does not "refuse to admit" that Krug is suffering, as if Krug were a fellow human being whose suffering is a worldly reality which exists whether or not we pay attention to it. Nabokov does not *relate* Krug's suffering—or, for that matter, refuse to relate it. Nabokov *causes* Krug's suffering: he is literally the author of all Krug's tortures. Krug, the fictional character, is not actually suffering, or, more accurately, Krug only suffers within his own diegetic world, so if we stop reading, if we do not actualize the world which exists potentially in the written text of *Bend Sinister*, then he stops suffering because he ceases to exist (to paraphrase Nabokov, we can dismiss the cast). As readers, we should not believe that sympathizing with Krug bears any direct relation to sympathizing with our fellow creatures. Krug's world is not identical to ours, and he suffers both differently and for different reasons than people in the world of historical experience, and we cannot and should not equate Nabokov's efforts to highlight this difference with a refusal to "countenance the reality" of pain. Rorty stumbles while reading *Bend Sinister* because he takes the diegetic concerns that Nabokov thrusts to the foreground of that novel as an

inability to imagine real pain rather than an intense interest in examining how the representation of pain in fiction is related to suffering in the world.

Rorty's misreading of the diegetic levels in Nabokov's fiction also contributes to a more general misapprehension of how Nabokov describes the relationship of art to the world of historical experience. Rorty's argument that "Nabokov wrote about cruelty from the inside" is based on the claim that "the private pursuit of aesthetic bliss produces cruelty" (Rorty 146). Nabokov defines "aesthetic bliss" as a connection to a state of being where art is the norm, but Rorty too often collapses the rich possibilities of aesthetic bliss (etymologically a kind of blessedness) into the simpler experience of ecstasy (a kind of mystical departure or altered conscious state) which Nabokov describes as only one component of art (along with curiosity, tenderness, and kindness).<sup>53</sup> This conflation allows Rorty to discuss Nabokov's interest in "aesthetic bliss" as a kind of pious dedication to keeping our own souls free of cruelty and to set that private, aesthetic piety in contrast to worldly-minded "topical trash," what Rorty (not Nabokov) describes as "the kind of book which helps further reduce future suffering and serves human liberty" (Rorty 146). Rorty prides himself throughout *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* on not forcing false choices—he believes that we can and should have both private aesthetic bliss (ala Nabokov) and public, worldly fictions (ala Orwell)—but his insistence that Nabokov is an internal writer misses the public, worldly potential in Nabokov's use of

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<sup>53</sup> In his chapter, Rorty acts as though ecstasy is the only criteria for judging something as a work of art. Any ecstatic work or behavior, according to Rorty, is also aesthetic or artistic. While it is true that we are not likely to call a work with no potential for ecstasy art even if it elicits curiosity and kindness—not many people would identify Kant's second critique or Mill's utilitarianism aesthetic works—it is also true that ecstasy on its own does not reach the threshold of the arts. To provide only one example, Wordsworth's definition of poetry requires more than the spontaneous overflow of emotion: without a later recollection in tranquility, an emotional overflow might be pleasurable, desirable or even laudable, but it is not poetry. Similarly, ecstasy can come through a wide variety of channels—sweathouse lodges, psychoactive drugs, sexual release, religious euphoria—but, according to Nabokov, that ecstatic experience is not aesthetic bliss unless it also affords a connection to curiosity, tenderness and kindness.

aposition. Despite Rorty's assertion that, for Nabokov, "the effect produced by style as opposed to that produced by participative emotion—is *all* that matters" (Rorty 147), Nabokov is interested in a specific type of participative emotion, but he believes readers should participate with the author (sharing the joys and difficulties of creation) rather than identify with the author's characters. Rorty's misreading of *Bend Sinister* and his claim that Nabokov could not "countenance" the reality of Krug's pain misses the point that supposedly external, political or participatory fictions are the most likely to lead to solipsistic, masturbatory and ultimately ineffective emoting. Nabokov believes that artists and readers should be focused on the construction of worlds because only through understanding how fictional worlds work can we relate them to the world of historical experience and grasp whatever lessons they have to offer about living in a world where human suffering is an ever-present reality. Nabokov does not prefer the personal or "internal" (as Rorty calls it) to the public or "external"; rather, he believes that literature's only path to affecting us privately or publicly lies in understanding how the structures of fictions connect the worlds they comprise to the world of historical experience.

#### **ONTONARRATOLOGY AND THE ORDER OF BEING**

If we are going to understand *what* a novel can teach us about living in the world, we have to start by understanding *how* fictional worlds operate and *how* they are connected to the everyday world we inhabit (we need to know how they teach before we can see what they teach). In "Good Readers," Nabokov claims that the first thing we need to know about this connection is that, while the fictional world takes raw material from the world we live in, the world created in and by a fiction is governed by its own laws:

The art of writing is a very futile business if it does not imply first of all the art of seeing the world as the potentiality of fiction. The material of this world may be

real enough (as far as reality goes) but does not exist at all as an accepted entirety: it is chaos, and to this chaos the author says “go!” allowing the world to flicker and fuse. It is now recombined in its very atoms, not merely in its visible and superficial parts. The writer is the first man to map it and to name the natural objects it contains. Those berries there are edible. That speckled creature that bolted across my path might be tamed. (“Good Readers” 2)

While this naming of creatures resembles Adam in Eden, Nabokov describes the writer as much closer to Adam’s creator, a god-like author “who sends planets spinning and models a man asleep and eagerly tampers with the sleeper’s ribs” (ibid). Nabokov’s deific description of the author, echoed in his claim that *Bend Sinister* is narrated by an “anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me” (*BS* xviii), indicates that a work of art does not reflect the world in which we live or even show us the furniture of that world transported and rearranged according to the artist’s fancy. The real work of art recreates the world at an atomic level, and, while it is not creation *ex nihilo*, it is the fabrication of a new world. As in the first chapter of Genesis, this new world comes into being as it is spoken.

Nabokov plays with the possibilities of artistic free creation in his novel *Transparent Things* (1972). The double plot of *Transparent Things* presents the fictional life of Hugh Person (called into being by the generative address, “You, person”) in parallel with that life’s creation by the novel’s narrator. This author-narrator interrupts the story about Hugh with frequent asides about the process of creation and experiments with the world he is constructing. These asides occasionally take on a tone of instruction, as if the reader were an apprenticed world-maker sharing the joys and difficulties of creation: “When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want matter to stay at the level of the moment” (1). A few pages later, the narrator proves his point by creating a masterful two-page history

of a pencil that Hugh finds in a desk drawer. The exercise demonstrates the artist's endless possibilities for world-creation and includes, on the lead's side of the pencil's genealogical tree, the particular bit of lead being crafted, cut to length and boiled in fat. This expansive object lesson includes "a shot of the fleecy fat-giver being butchered, a shot of the butcher, a shot of the shepherd, a shot of the shepherd's father, a Mexican" (7). The narrator performs a similar exercise with the pencil's wooden component, claiming to "recognize its presence in the log as we recognize the log in the tree and the tree in the forest and the forest in the world that Jack built" (7-8). The god-like narrator—by Jack or any other name—can at any moment delve into the detailed history of any worldly object because this particular world is his creation and, whether moving forwards or backwards in time, *he creates it as he moves*. For the author, omniscience and omnipotence are one and the same: whatever can be known can be created, and the author's knowledge of a fact calls it into being. The logical result of this relationship is that no facts or events exist in the world of the novel until they are known by their author; this relationship between knowledge and existence is a perfect inversion of the world of historical experience where facts can be known only because they exist and where existence must necessarily precede knowledge. In the world of a novel, the author's freedom to expand and explore his world at will is only limited by his desire to tell one story and not another, so, after the narrator of *Transparent Things* demonstrates his abilities by conjuring the ontological history of an abandoned pencil, he skims over objects in order to "stay at the level of the moment" (1).<sup>54</sup> Nabokov plays similar, if less explicit, games with world-creation throughout his oeuvre. The unnamed narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*—Nabokov's first English-language novel and the

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<sup>54</sup> As collections of "transparent things," novels have more in common with clear glass than mirrors: rather than reflecting worldly objects with more or less accuracy, they have an existence of their own that can be clearly examined at will.

immediate predecessor to *Bend Sinister*—makes a nearly identical claim about his authorial quasi-omnipotence. Knight's half-brother biographer explains that a near-infinite accumulation of details in a novel "is rendered possible by the fundamental assumption that an author is able to discover anything he wants to know about his characters, such capacity being limited only by the manner and purpose of his selection in so far as it ought to be not a haphazard jumble of worthless details but a definite and methodical quest" (*RLSK* 94). In the language of "Good Readers," these authors decide what berries are edible and what creatures can be tamed.

Nabokov's ventriloquized "anthropomorphic deity" who narrates *Bend Sinister* demonstrates a similar level of control over the world of that novel. The unusually complex narrative of that novel shifts subtlety and often rapidly among four separate focalizations: an objective Krug, a subjective Krug, an objective narrator and a subjective narrator. This division is explicitly hinted at in the novel's early pages. After a fragmented first paragraph in which first and third person pronouns as well as Krug's proper name switch places (sometimes in midsentence) we are told, in the second chapter, that "the throbbing man in him was soaked. As usual, he discriminated between the throbbing one and the one that looked on: looked on with concern, with sympathy, with a sigh, or with bland surprise. This was the stronghold of the dualism he abhorred. The square root of I is I" (*BS* 7). There are, in other words, two ones in everyone. This distinction between the narrating and the narrated subject is not in itself unusual, but the combination of Krug's divided autodiegesis and the explicit interventions of the frame narrator combine to form an exceptionally and (at first glance) unnecessarily complicated narration. The narrator's double-nature appears at several points in the course of narration. In the third chapter, the narrator describes a conversation in English between several professors, one of whom speaks with a French accent: Dr. Beuret, the Frenchman,

speaks English “like a Frenchman in an English book, ‘eez eet zee verity zat, as I have been informed by zee reliably sources, zee disposed *chef* of the state has been captured together with a couple of other blokes (when the author gets bored by the process—or forgets) somewhere in the hills—and shot? But no, I ziss cannot credit—eet eez too horrible’ (when the author remembers again)” (*BS* 37). While the narrating/narrated character is a common trope of the novel, the narrated third-person narrator is a more rarefied metafictional trope that foregrounds the constructed, artificial (and art-ful) nature of the novel. Nabokov even has his narrator work occasionally in the imperative tense, indicating a narrator directing himself in narration or even a *Transparent Things*-like narrative apprenticeship: “Close up! Close up! In the farewell shadows of the porch, his moon-white monstrously padded shoulder in pathetic disharmony with his slender neck, a youth, dressed up as an American Football Player, stood in one last deadlock with a sketchy little Carmen...yes, one distinguishes everything—even the short clumsily lacquered fingernails, the rough schoolgirl knuckles” (*BS* 60). In a later scene, when Krug goes to Paduk’s official office and confronts the bloody demagogue, the narrator struggles to get the scene just right. After trying out a version that includes an increasingly farcical set of interruptions by Paduk’s staff, the narrator scraps the scene: “No, it did not go on quite like that” (147). The narrator makes another attempt at writing the scene—this time using explicit stage directions—but decides that that version, also will not work:

Thus? Or perhaps in some other way? Did Krug really glance at the prepared speech? And if he did, was it really as silly as all that? He did; it was. The seedy tyrant or president of the State, or the dictator, or whoever he was—the man Paduk in a word, the Toad in another—did hand my favourite character a mysterious batch of newly typed pages. The actor playing the recipient should be taught not to look at his hand while he takes the papers *very slowly*. (151)

The reference to Krug as his favorite character and the stage directions that follow remind readers that we are witnessing an act of *creation*, not an act of description. Even the “final” revision is undercut by the opening line of the next chapter: “Thinking of that farcical interview, he wondered how long it would be till the next attempt” (*BS* 153). Since all three versions are farcical, we do not know which interview Krug is remembering, and we also cannot be sure whether the “next attempt” will be a fresh try by Paduk (in a separate interview) or by the narrator (to get the same interview how he wants it). We as readers are watching as the narrated narrator narrates the scene between Krug and Paduk and struggles to find the right tone, the right set of details, the right balance between the farcical and the serious. Nabokov makes his readers privy to the joys and difficulties his narrator experiences in crafting Krug’s story, and, while it is not the same as looking over Nabokov’s shoulder as he changes and corrects his manuscript, this open exercise in composition indicates that *Bend Sinister* is not a novel about totalitarianism as much as it is a novel about writing about totalitarianism. The baroque narrative levels of *Bend Sinister*—the result of a divided protagonist narrated by a divided narrator—may be, at times, maddening to parse, but they provide the most satisfactory solution to Nabokov’s seemingly disingenuous claim that his novel is not about life and death in a police state: *Bend Sinister* is, instead, a novel about writing fiction in a world that contains extermination camps, Gestapos, Gulags and other grotesque horrors.

If Nabokov’s novel were absolutely separate from the world of experience, then he would have unlimited freedom in his authorial acts of creation, but this is not the case. The full richness of the world cannot fit within a novel, but the novel certainly exists inside the world, and the novel’s fundamental and unalterable connection to the world of historical experience—its existence within the world whose raw mater it recombines a t

an atomic level—places significant limits the creative power of the novelist. “Conversation Piece, 1945” illustrates some of the limitations placed on Nabokov and his contemporaries by the “irritating world conditions” of the twentieth century: for the narrator of “Conversation Piece,” and by extension for Nabokov himself, ignoring the constraints that history places on his writing would make him complicit with Shoe and the story’s other Holocaust deniers. As twentieth-century intellectuals from Bonhoeffer to Sartre to Derrida have demonstrated, inaction is itself a form of action. In his “L’Envoi,” Nabokov instructs his students to postpone looking for connections between the novel and other worlds, but he also tells them that they must eventually examine those connections: “When this new world has been closely studied, then and only then let us examine its links with other worlds, other branches of knowledge” (“Good Readers” 1). Besides their existence within the world of historical experience, author-creators are also limited by the mundane constraints Nabokov describes in *Transparent Things* (they must limit themselves if he wants to tell a particular story, etc.) and by the conventions of their specific genres (connections to other novelistic or poetic worlds). While Nabokov makes plenty of hay playing with the conventions of novels, biographies, scholarly editions and so on, his metafictional play is only effective because those recognizable conventions exist: *Pale Fire*, for instance, relies on the generic conventions of critical introductions, explanatory notes, etc., and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Look at the Harlequins!* and even *Lolita* have parasitic relationships to the conventions of biography and autobiography. Whether they are followed or subverted, generic conventions limit the freedom of an author to create whatever worlds he or she wills. Any author of any novel must balance the creation of her novel’s independent world with the necessary connections between her novel and other worlds, but the ethical stakes are much higher when those links connect the novel to historical catastrophes. The writer who addresses

the catastrophic must be vigilantly aware not only of the fictional world he or she is creating but also—and even more so—of how the novel presents its own connections to the catastrophic.

In *Bend Sinister*—with its baroque narrative structure, performative revisions and numerous interruptions by an “anthropomorphic deity” who finally breaks off the story altogether—Nabokov puts a tremendous amount of energy into keeping the specific nature of his novel’s worldly connections in the foreground. In his introduction to *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov claims that “the influence of my epoch on my present book is as negligible as the influence of my books, or at least of this book, on my epoch” immediately before telling us that:

There can be distinguished, no doubt, certain reflections in the glass directly caused by the idiotic and despicable regimes that we all know and that have brushed against me in the course of my life: worlds of tyranny and torture, of Fascists and Bolsheviks, of Philistine thinkers and jack-booted baboons. No doubt, too, without those infamous models before me I could not have interlarded this fantasy with bits of Lenin’s speeches, and a chunk of the Soviet constitution, and gobs of Naziest pseudo-efficiency. (*BS* xii-xiii)

It may seem contradictory for Nabokov to admit the impact of Bolshevik and Nazi regimes on *Bend Sinister*—to the degree that the novel plagiarizes Lenin and the Soviet constitution—while claiming that his “epoch” (the “irritating world conditions” of “L’Envoi”) has had only a minor influence on the novel. This contradiction can be resolved through a distinction analogous to Aristotle’s distinction between the orders of being and of knowledge. For Aristotle, our knowledge of the world moves forward by moving backwards up the ladder of being. That is, Aristotle’s unmoved mover—the “first mover” in his order of being—is the first cause of all beings but the last object of our knowledge of being. Similarly, for Nabokov, our experience of a fictional world follows a trajectory that inverts the novel’s coming into being. *Bend Sinister* would not have

existed if it did not share certain features with the Europe Nabokov fled in 1940, but the novel's readers cannot initiate their experience of the novel with those connections. The world of Padukgrad is not Bolshevist Russia or Nazi Germany, and its tyrants and thanatocrats must be understood as novelistic fantasies before their reflections and connections to historical experience can be understood. Finally, if we are going to understand Padukgrad, we have to act as though Nabokov's epoch had no impact on its creation; if we blithely substitute Hitler for Paduk in our order of knowledge, then we will never grasp the connections between them in the novel's order of being. This substitution, in some ways, treats the world as if it existed within the novel instead of treating the novel as an object in the world. As I discussed in relation to *Transparent Things*, knowledge of an object or event *precedes* existence in fictional worlds (the author's language calls fictional objects into being by naming them) but *follows after* existence in our everyday world (something must exist or have happened before we can have knowledge of it). From a historical perspective, the novel could not come into being unless its raw material was already available to the novelist. From the perspective of the novel, the author's work predates the novel's connections to the historical world because, prior to the artist's calling it into being, the fictional world existed as pure possibility with no internally necessary connection to any particular historical fact. Treating the novel as simple reflection of the historical world substitutes the artist's free choices of selection and creation for the historical necessity of past events (in a caricatured example, "this must be true because I read it in a novel"). Only by treating the author's choices as contingent and free from specific historical necessity (by refusing to say "this event is in the book because it happened in the real world") can we understand the world of the novel on its own terms, and only then can we parse the significance of the historical connections (influences, etc.) that are present.

## KRUG'S MADNESS AND THE LUNACY OF REPRESENTATION

The functional, non-reflective link between totalitarian Europe and the world of *Bend Sinister* is figured in that novel by an appositional link or portal that Nabokov inserts between the world of the narrator and Padukgrad. This link is centered in the doubled consciousnesses of Krug and the narrator and represented throughout the book by puddles and blotches in the shape of a footprint. Nabokov's preface draws attention to the puddle and points out that the "oblong pool, shaped like a cell that is about to divide, reappears subthematically throughout the novel" and provides a list of the puddle's disguised appearances chapter by chapter (xiv).<sup>55</sup> Nabokov says that the puddle "kindled and rekindled in Krug's mind remains linked up with the image of his wife not only because he had contemplated the inset sunset from her death-bedside, but also because this little puddle vaguely evokes in him my link with him: a rent in his world leading to another world of tenderness, brightness and beauty" (xv). The complex shifting of diegetic levels in this statement (as in much of the novel) requires several careful readings. The puddle reappears both in the narrator's consciousness (in his composition of Krug's world) but also in Krug's consciousness. Because the puddle first appears as Krug is learning of Olga's death, Krug associates it with his departed wife, but since "An oblong puddle" are the first three words of the novel (1), the puddle also marks the first contact between the two worlds and Krug's first opportunity to suspect a world outside of his own. It is important to note that this entire description of the link between worlds is focalized within Krug's consciousness; the puddle "evokes *in him* my link with him"

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<sup>55</sup> One of these appearances is the pool of milk that is spilled during one of Krug's variously drafted interviews with Paduk. This trace of the narrator's world adds another layer to that scene's explicit focus on its own narration.

(*ibid*, emphasis added). We cannot assume that the world beyond Krug's is, in fact, "a world of tenderness, brightness and beauty" (*ibid*), though the bereaved widower seems to imagine it that way. We should also notice that Nabokov makes us work through the connection from the inside out: we start with Krug's perception of the link within his narrated world and work our way out towards his narrator.

One reason Krug imagines that the world signified by the puddle is bright and beautiful lies in the image he sees reflected in it. The first chapter opens with a description of the puddle reflecting the last sunset of Olga's life: "An oblong puddle inset in the coarse asphalt; like a fancy footprint filled to the brim with quicksilver; like a spatulate hole through which you can see the nether sky" (1). What Krug sees is a reflection of the sky (a part of his own world), but "through which" and "nether sky" imply that he imagines he can see through this puddle into the world of the narrator. Such a portal would imply a direct window-like connection between the world of the character and the world of his narrator (standing in for the world of the novel and the world of its author). The novel's second paragraph consists of Krug's second attempt at describing the puddle and straddles the line between viewing the puddle as a portal or window and viewing it as a mirror: "It lies in shadow but contains a sample of the brightness beyond, where there are trees and two houses. Look closer. Yes, it reflects a portion of pale blue sky—mild infantile shade of blue—taste of milk in my mouth because I had a mug of that colour thirty-five years ago" (*ibid*). While Krug's descriptions of the puddle focus exclusively on the image it contains (whether reflected or projected), the narrator emphasizes the shape of this link between worlds. (The idiosyncratic association of sky blue with milk emphasizes once again the filter of Krug's consciousness.) On the last page of the novel, after Krug has gone mad but before a bullet pierces his skull, Nabokov abruptly leaves Krug's world and has his narrator stand up from his writing desk and

walk to a window. Out that window, in the novel's final paragraph, the narrator looks out on Krug's puddle: "I could also distinguish the glint of a special puddle (the one Krug had somehow perceived through the layer of his own life), an oblong puddle invariably acquiring the same form after every shower because of the constant spatulate shape of a depression in the ground" (241). According to the narrator, the link between Krug's world and his is not the image reflected on the water's surface but the shape of the indentation that holds the water. The form and persistence of the connection, not its specific content, links the world of the writer to the world of his novel.

In its last appearance in Krug's world (and immediately prior to its appearance outside the narrator's window), this spatulate metafictional link takes the form of a "pale gleam like the footprint of a phosphorescent islander" on the floor of Krug's prison cell (232). This puddle-shaped spot of light, cast by an arc light in the prison yard, wakes Krug from a dream about Olga and David; there, in the dark, "the luminous pattern he saw assumed a strange, perhaps fatal significance, the key to which was half-hidden by a flap of dark consciousness on the glimmering floor of a half-remembered nightmare" (232-3). The "luminous pattern" in his jail cell gives Krug the strange impression that his life has been artificially produced by "the mind behind the mirror" (233), and the novel's anthropomorphic deity intervenes:

It was at that moment, just after Krug had fallen through the bottom of a confused dream and sat up on the straw with a gasp—and just before his reality, his remembered hideous misfortune could pounce upon him—it was then that I felt a pang of pity for Adam and slid towards him along an inclined beam of pale light—causing instantaneous madness, but at least saving him from the senseless agony of his logical fate. (ibid)

Krug's madness takes the form of a revelation: the narrator allows him to see that he is a character in a novel rather than a flesh-and-bone historical personage. Nabokov claims that his narrator shows mercy by pitying Krug and relieving him of sanity, but the scene

also reminds us that Nabokov and his narrator are directly responsible for the suffering from which Krug's madness is a perverse relief. The narrator may call Krug "my favourite character" (151), but Krug receives little favor in the world into which he is narrated. The imprisoned Krug perceives the luminescent footprint—the sub-thematic puddle that serves as a structural link between Krug's world and his narrator's—in a sinister light up until the moment he is driven mad:

It would seem that some promise had been broken, some design thwarted, some opportunity missed—or so grossly exploited as to leave an afterglow of sin and shame. The pattern of light was somehow the result of a kind of stealthy, abstractly vindictive, groping, tampering movement that had been going on in a dream, or behind a dream, in a tangle of immemorial and by now formless and aimless machinations. (233)

A machination is, after all, a plot, and the story of *Bend Sinister* perfectly mimics a divine plot against Krug. The narrator has grossly exploited the opportunity to torment his creature Adam, and in the "afterglow of sin and shame" he feels pity for Krug and "gifts" him with insanity.

An uncharitable reading of this scene might also claim that Nabokov has grossly exploited his readers as well. After the crescendo of state terror and technologized violence that begins with Krug's harassment on the bridge in chapter two and reaches its apogee in David's pseudo-medical rape and murder, Nabokov rather coarsely breaks the frame and tells his readers that they are not *really* reading about "life and death in a grotesque police state" (xiii). David has not really been dismembered because he never really existed, and, while we may have thought that Krug was hounded by a tragic fate, all of his losses (his wife, his friends, his son, his sanity) were really just a game. While a disclaimer that "no children were tortured in the writing of this novel" may provide some emotional consolation, it also constitutes a fairly serious breach in the implicit agreement between readers and writers of fiction: we, as readers, have suspended our disbelief and

placed ourselves in Nabokov's hands, and, after abusing our sympathies with elaborate descriptions of inhuman tortures, he offers us the metafictional equivalent of the decidedly unsatisfactory (and characteristically juvenile) "It was all really a dream" conclusion. Here, in what is often regarded as Nabokov's most straightforwardly political novel, we appear to find the cheapest and sloppiest kind of metafictional trick.

A more charitable reading, on the other hand—one that reads *Bend Sinister* as a book that addresses the problems of *narrating* state terrors and not as a book that takes state terrors as a topic—sees Krug's lunatic break as an opportunity rather than a cheap trick. The narrator's intrusion and Krug's subsequent madness allow Nabokov to focus on the links that connect fictional and historical worlds while maintaining that his readers should follow the advice he offers his undergraduate students: in order to understand how a novel is related to other worlds, we have to begin by examining the world of the novel according to its own laws of construction. Rather than telling a story in which a character misreads a novel and suffers the consequences (an approach that would assume a simple, reflective connection between those worlds) or providing a discursive gloss on how to view that connection (an approach that would address the link between worlds before it examines the world of the novel), Nabokov thematizes the novel's link to the everyday world within the world of the novel and has Krug engage with the very same connection that Krug's readers must grapple with while reading *Bend Sinister*. Nabokov strongly invites his readers to consider the potentially disastrous consequences of misinterpreting the link that connects his novel to the world in which state terror and senseless violence do not go away when we close the covers, but the only way to properly understand this connection is to approach it from the perspective of the novel. This circuitous route is necessary because, for Nabokov, although the everyday world predates the novel, the world of the novel exists logically prior to the connections that link the novel back to the

world of historical experience: in other words, the novel itself provides the only perspective from which we can accurately perceive its relationship to the broader world.

From the perspective of our everyday world, the “madness” gifted to Krug by his narrator saves him from suffering and enlightens him with a more accurate picture of reality, but, by insistently calling Krug “mad” even though his “madness” results in a clearer understanding of reality both within the novel’s dominant diegetic frame and from the perspective of its readers, Nabokov implies that our perspective may not be the appropriate lens for judging Krug’s condition. In his introduction to *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov offers a fairly optimistic interpretation of Krug’s lunacy: “Krug, in a sudden moonburst of madness, understands that he is in good hands: nothing on earth really matters, there is nothing to fear, and death is but a question of style, a mere literary device, a musical resolution” (xviii-xiv). From the perspective of the narrator who “experiences a pang of pity and hastens to take over” (xviii), Death is only a “question of style,” and style is nothing but a literary device, but this interpretation, offered in Nabokov’s introduction, obscures much of the ambiguity that exists in his narrator’s original claim, on the last page of the novel, that death is a question of style: “I knew that the immortality I had conferred on the poor fellow was a slippery sophism, a play upon words. But the very last lap of his life had been happy and it had been proven to him that death was but a question of style” (241). Krug’s immortality is a sophism, a logical trick, because on the diegetic level at which he lives his tragic life, Krug does in fact experience death—his own as well as the deaths of Olga, David and those whose deaths he guarantees with his own exit from the story. As opposed to the introduction, this lesson that death is “but a question of style” retains its ambiguity and, along with artistic practice, indicates the inevitability of mortality: everyone dies, so the only question is the style or manner of your death. In a novel that includes David’s untimely and horrific

execution as well as the petty, cruel, pointless and sadistic murders of major and minor characters all over Padukgrad, the style of one's death is not a moot question or an empty philosophical exercise.

With regard to the friends and colleagues who beg Krug to save their lives, the question of style—of how and when they will die—is profoundly and immediately ethical. Krug, however, does not respond to them in any sane way because his madness has stripped him of the ability to differentiate their style of death from death as literary style. When Krug is brought out of prison to ceremoniously pardon his otherwise-condemned friends, we are told that they all “wanted to talk to the smiling philosopher (for it was not known that his son had died and that he himself was insane)” (235). Paduk offers to spare the lives of his friends and colleagues in return for Krug's cooperation with the totalitarian state, but Krug's certainty that he is a character in a book gives him liberty to ignore the pleas of his friends and relatives. Both the reader and the characters whose lives are at stake might be willing to grant Krug the moral leeway to refuse this offer. Professor Rufel, the spokesman for the group, tells Krug as much: “We are no heroes. Death is hideous. There are two women among us sharing our fate. Our miserable flesh will throb with exquisite joy, if you consented to save our lives by selling your soul. But we do not ask you to sell your soul” (236). While either decision—saving their lives or refusing to legitimize Paduk—could be defended on ethical grounds, Krug refuses to make any decision because he fails to take the situation as anything but a joke. He tells Rufel, “what on earth are you afraid of? What does it all matter? Ridiculous! Same as those infantile pleasures—Olga and the boy taking part in some silly theatricals, she getting drowned, he losing his life or something in a railway accident. What on earth does

it matter?” (ibid).<sup>56</sup> Krug becomes literally irresponsible not by choosing one action over another but by failing to take his fellow creatures seriously: his madness—the blending of his world with the narrator’s—renders him incapable of responding. When they realize he is insane, the condemned characters spend four pages desperately pleading with Krug to recognize them and save their lives, but he refuses even to acknowledge their situation. Krug mis-locates himself. He begins to view himself as a fictional character existing in the world of his narrator and not as a person living in his own diegesis, and, as a result, he cannot act responsibly towards those whose lives depend on his actions. Krug is, without any question, a fictional character in someone else’s novel, but from the perspective of that novel (the only world in which he has being), Krug’s belief that he is a fictional character constitutes both a problematic break with reality and a tremendous ethical failure.

Krug’s madness and his ethical impotence both stem from what is essentially a bad reading practice: Krug’s madness is marked by misperceptions about death and time—not accepting the reality of death, believing that Olga and David are play-acting death, conflating his colleagues execution with his childhood—and his lunacy takes this particular form because he misreads the narrative ontology of their negations, immortality and eternity. In “The Art of Literature and Commonsense”—one of the “assortment of

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<sup>56</sup> The “railway accident” was a game Krug was playing with David just before the Ekwilist troops took David away. Krug and David had lined up their dining room chairs like a locomotive and were pretending or rehearsing their escape by train from Padukgrad. The soldiers and secret police who disrupt this escape game knock over the chairs, simulating a train wreck. While David does not die in the apartment, this is the last time Krug sees his son alive. Krug the lunatic is unable to distinguish between what has happened at his level of narration and the story or game that he invented for David. The reason for Krug saying Olga pretended to drown is less obvious, but it is also tied to a collapse of diegetic levels. In the first paragraph of the novel, when Krug has just learned that his wife’s surgery was unsuccessful, he notices the wet leaves stuck to the pavement around the spatulate puddle: “Drowned, I should say, before the puddle had shrunk to its present size” (*BS* 1). If David pretended to die in the “silly theatrical” of Krug’s train game, then Olga’s pretend drowning takes place as part of a game played by the narrator. All three diegetic levels have collapsed in Krug’s mind, and he loses his grasp on the world in which he exists.

lectures” that Nabokov delivered at Wellesley around 1941 and which Bowers includes in *Lectures on Literature* (LL xii)—Nabokov presents a narrative logic that addresses the intimately related concepts of deathlessness and timelessness in the language of artistic creation. In his attack on “commonsense,” a term of derision that Nabokov uses in this essay to describe an unreflective belief that statistical probability forms the fabric of existence,<sup>57</sup> Nabokov offers a proof of immortality that resembles the “slippery sophism” his narrator offers Krug, and he considers whether this similar (and similarly slippery) sophism might lead to insanity:

only commonsense rules immortality out. A creative writer, creative in the particular sense I am attempting to convey, cannot help feeling that in his rejecting the world of the matter-of-fact, in his taking sides with the irrational, the illogical, the inexplicable, and the fundamentally good, he is performing something similar in a rudimentary way to what [*two pages missing*] under the cloudy skies of gray Venus. (“Commonsense” 377, brackets and italics original)

This language of irrational immortality is echoed in the intervention that saves Krug “from the senseless agony of his *logical* fate” (BS 233, emphasis added). Nabokov adds that “Common Sense will interrupt me at this point to remark that a further intensification of such fancies may lead to stark madness” (“Commonsense” 377). Nabokov does not entirely refute this warning. He admits that believing in the power of the creative

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<sup>57</sup> Nabokov argues that mathematics, which were originally a utilitarian tool created by, from and for the human mind, “transcended their initial condition and became as it were a natural part of the world to which they had been merely applied” (“Commonsense” 374). Numbers were transformed from a tool for making the world less frightening or irregular into the substance of the world itself, and commonsense now demands fealty to this mathematical model of reality. Nabokov argues in contrast that reality is composed of the concrete particular rather than the statistically probable and that, in an Augustinian vein, “‘goodness’ is something that is irrationally concrete” (“Commonsense” 375). Expecting that “commonsense will accuse me of substituting the concrete for the abstract,” Nabokov accepts the charge and emphasizes that the primacy of the particular over the general “is one of the essential phenomena in the kind of world I am inviting you to inspect” (ibid). The “commonsense” that Nabokov relentlessly attacks in this essay is not the *sensus communis* described by Arendt, who largely shares Nabokov’s disdain for mathematical probability. Because, for Arendt, authentic action is not only unforeseen but the unforseeable eruption of something new, probability cannot account for the activity which is most fundamentally human. She argues that if we give ourselves over entirely to the laws of probability then we foreclose on the possibility of action, which always appears against all odds.

imagination over bodily death could lead to madness, but only “when the morbid exaggeration of such fancies is not linked up with a creative artist’s cool and deliberative work” (ibid). Nabokov stakes out a position in contradistinction to both “commonsense” and insanity, and he locates that position within the “cool and deliberative work” of the artist. The first piece of cool and deliberative work that a careful reader should notice is the lacuna Nabokov performs in the midst of what, supposedly, is his fictionally-guaranteed proof of immortality. Like the typographical error in *Pale Fire* that turns “mountain” into “fountain” and taunts Shade with “Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!” (*PF* 62), these two missing pages—pages that appear to hold a clear proof of immortality—taunt Nabokov’s audience with an erased guarantee of an afterlife. Also like Shade’s fountain, this lacuna is both tragic and very funny. Nabokov knows how appealing a generalized theory of human immortality based on the enumerable properties of art would be (either to accept or to refute), but he refuses to present a general proof of immortality because offering such a theory outside the act of literary creation would be madness. Logical proofs and generalized abstractions are the domain of commonsense, so he undercuts the logic of his explanation with a joke: the explanation does not exist, or, more accurately, it only exists in so far as we play along with Nabokov’s joke in which the explanation exists but is accidentally missing. Accepting the claim that artistic creation guarantees an afterlife might lead to lunacy, but playing a game in which we imagine that such an explanation exists but has been presently (and perhaps irrecoverably) lost leads us towards Nabokov’s theory of artistic inspiration.

## INSPIRATION AND NARRATIVE SPACE-TIME

According to Nabokov, lunatics (like Krug) are half-related to artists, but lunatics only practice the first, destructive half of artistic creation: “Lunatics are lunatics 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” (“Commonsense” 377). In the language of “Good Readers,” the lunatic can strip the materials of the world down to their atomic level but lacks the ability to recombine those elements into another whole. The work of recombination, according to Nabokov, is solidified in an instantaneous revelation: “The passage from the dissociative stage to the associative one is thus marked by a kind of spiritual thrill which in English is very loosely termed *inspiration*” (“Commonsense” 377, italics original). Both the artist and the lunatic dissolve the world into its elemental parts, but the artist’s inspiration allows him or her to escape madness by adding the “cool and deliberative work” of creation (ibid). In lieu of a definition, Nabokov offers this example of inspiration:

A passerby whistles a tune at the exact moment that you notice the reflection of a branch in a puddle which in its turn, and simultaneously, recalls a combination of damp green leaves and excited birds in some old garden, and the old friend, long dead, suddenly steps out of the past, smiling and closing his dripping umbrella. The whole thing lasts one radiant second and the motion of impressions and images is so swift that you cannot check the exact laws which attend their recognition, formation, and fusion. (“Commonsense” 377-8)<sup>58</sup>

The flash of inspiration reveals an associative link between the past and present within the consciousness of the inspired person, and that link allows the author to recombine disparate worldly elements into a new creation. While the immediate result of this

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<sup>58</sup> Both the puddle in this example and Nabokov’s choice of term “lunatic”—a person governed by the moon—resonate with Krug’s “sudden moonburst of madness” (*BS* xviii). Krug experiences a dissociation of worldly elements in which his past mixes freely with the present (his final confrontation with Paduk is conflated with the schoolyard of their shared youth), and his dead wife and son spring back to life. Rather than reconfiguring these elements into a new world, Krug acts as though the chaotic mixture of dismembered elements constituted a world, and he is rightly described as insane.

example is the resurrection of a long-dead friend, Nabokov describes the momentary flash as a suspension of temporality rather than a victory over mortality: “it is the past and the present *and* the future (your book) that come together in a sudden flash; thus the entire circle of time is perceived, which is another way of saying that time ceases to exist” (“Commonsense” 378, italics original). Nabokov is careful to locate this eternity (non-time) within the consciousness of the inspired subject: time ceases to exist when its complete circuit is *perceived*. Once the author moves from perception to communication—when the experience of inspiration is translated into the world of everyday experience—time reasserts its existence, but the world created by the author’s inspiration retains a type of eternity: “Sequence arises only because words have to be written one after the other on consecutive pages, just as the reader’s mind must have time to go through the book, at least the first time he reads it. Time and sequence cannot exist in the author’s mind because no time element and no space element had ruled the initial vision” (“Commonsense” 380). Human beings, as authors and readers, are inextricably bound to time, so our connection to the world of the novel is regulated by the time it takes to write or to read words on a page. By contrast, the world comprised by the novel takes its being from a singularity, the instantaneous flash of inspiration, and is not governed by time as we experience it in our everyday world.<sup>59</sup> The link between the

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<sup>59</sup> In “The Art of Literature and Common Sense,” Nabokov uses the Russian words *vostorg* and *vdokhnoventie* (which he translates as “rapture” and “recapture”) to distinguish between the instant of inspiration and the process of translating that inspiration into prose. While he acknowledges the necessity of “recapture,” Nabokov privileges the rapturous moment: *vostorg* “is all important in linking the breaking up of the old world with the building up of the new one” and “the force and originality involved in the primary spasm of inspiration is directly proportional to the worth of the book the author will write” (“Commonsense” 378-9). He describes *vdokhnoventie* as little more than an amanuensis to *vostorg*: “The pages are blank, but there is a miraculous feeling of the words all being there, written in invisible ink and clamoring to become visible” (“Commonsense” 379). The author’s work of crafting sentences realizes the potential world whose condition of possibility is the originary inspiration. Without inspiration, the words are only words and not the elements of existence recombined into a new world (this is why bad fictions, for Nabokov, do not actually exist).

world of historical experience and the world of any novel is conditioned by a difference in temporal experience: time in our everyday world functions in a radically different way than what appears as time in the worlds of fictions.

In *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974), the last of Nabokov's novels published in his lifetime, Nabokov provides his most elaborate and most explicit demonstration of his narrative ontology of time. Nabokov's insistence that time as such does not exist in novels and that what we perceive as time passing in a book is in reality the text's extension in space plays a key role in his critique of the reader's desire to view the novel as a reflection of its author's biography. *Look at the Harlequins!* masquerades as the literary autobiography of Vadim Vadimovich N., a fictional author whose doubling of Nabokov begins with the nearly identical phonemes of their names and extends as far as a list of "Other Books by the Narrator" that immediately follows the novel's title page (*Laughter in the Dark* becomes *Slaughter in the Sun*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* becomes *See under Real*, *Lolita* reverts to its earlier title *A Kingdom by the Sea*, etc.). Nabokov extends this doubling to the consciousness of his narrator, and Vadim begins to worry that he is nothing but a double of his author:

I now confess that I was bothered that night, and the next and some time before, by a dream feeling that my life was the non-identical twin, a parody, an inferior variant of another man's life, somewhere on this or another earth. A demon, I felt, was forcing me to impersonate that other man, that other writer who was and would always be incomparably greater, healthier, an crueler than your obedient servant. (*LATH* 89)

Nabokov casts himself as the Cartesian devil afflicting Vadim, but he is also the "other" author in a separate world, the original of which Vadim is a parody. Nabokov baits the novel with overt (though largely superficial) connections to his own person, but Vadim is decidedly not Vladimir, and the novel as a whole lampoons the impulse to read novels for biographical significance (it shares this parodic role with *The Real Life of Sebastian*

*Knight* and certain sections of *Pale Fire*). Nabokov's joke at the expense of those who want to see Nabokov behind Humbert and Nabokov behind Kinbote and a Nabokov behind every arras, hinges on the peculiar operations of time and space within the world of the novel. More than a chronicle of Vadim's literary career, *Look at the Harlequins!* is a case study of his idiosyncratic disease: Vadim suffers from a spatiotemporal malady (a conflation of space and time) that terrifies him but only confuses or amuses everyone to whom he makes a shame-filled confession of his ailment's details.

Vadim always presents his ailment in terms of navigating space. Four times in the course of the novel, Vadim "confesses" (his term) to being physically incapable of imagining himself taking a walk, turning around and walking back the way he came. He can imagine walking one direction, then imagine walking the other, but he cannot imagine reversing direction: "it is not so much the pivotal swing which is hard to perceive mentally—it is the result, the reversion of vista, the transformation of direction, *that's* what one vainly strives to imagine" (*LATH* 179). While the description is given in spatial terms, the novel continually plays with and subverts the distinction between space and time: in one instance, Vadim tells us that Annette, his typist-lover, "laid the blame for her lateness on her innocent watch, an object for measuring motion, not time" (*LATH* 97). This description of a watch is, of course, technically true: while we use chronometers to tell time, what we actually measure is the spatial position of the hands on the watch face. This general blurring of the spatial and temporal collides with Vadim's spatial malady and his fear that he may be a fictional copy of another author in his fourth and final attempt to explain his "illness." Rather than go through the always painful and often embarrassing task of explaining his tragi-comical ailment in person, Vadim writes his symptoms into the manuscript of his latest novel and asks his current mistress (a former schoolmate of his daughter addressed throughout the narrative in the second person) to

read through the manuscript. As she reads the manuscript—written, in proper Nabokovian fashion, on index cards—Vadim takes a walk and imagines her progress: “I could calculate how far you had read not simply by consulting my watch but by actually following one line after the other to the right-hand brink of each card” (*LATH* 234). Lines of prose, like the watch he does not need to consult, are spatial entities used to measure time: eyes move across sentences like the hands move across the face of a clock. It is important to note that Vadim’s statement is literally true with regard to the reader (the other addressee of the second-person pronoun “you”): he only progresses on his walk as long as you, the reader, read along. At the end of his walk—an event coinciding, he imagines, with “you” (his mistress or the reader) reaching the last card of his manuscript—Vadim finds that he cannot return:

I wished to go back to you, to life, to amethyst lozenges, to the pencil lying on the veranda table, and I could not. What used to happen so often in thought, now had happened for keeps: I could not turn. To make that movement would mean rolling the world around on its axis and that was as impossible as travelling back physically from the present moment to the previous one. (*LATH* 236)

Vadim’s walk, measured by lines of text in both his mind and in the experience of the reader, cannot be reversed anymore than time can be reversed. He cannot change direction because text, like time, is not reversible.

Time does not exist as such in the novel; what appears to be the passing of time is only an effect of the text’s necessary extension in space. Because English is read in only one direction, the narrative’s extension is linear and unidirectional (it exists spatially from left to right, from top to bottom); we cannot read (from left to right) a sentence describing Vadim’s walk then reverse the trip by reading from right to left (though you can write a new sentence describing a return trip). Vadim, who rightly suspects that he is a character in someone else’s book, also intuitively feels the spatial limitations on his textual

existence, and these limitations on spatial motion through a text give fictions the appearance of time. Vadim's mistress offers a half-true interpretation of this connection on the penultimate page of the novel:

He has confused direction and duration. He speaks of space but he means time. His impressions along the HP route (dog overtakes ball, car pulls up at next villa) refer to a series of time events, and not to blocks of painted space that a child can rearrange in any old way...Nobody can imagine in physical terms the act of reversing the order of time. Time is not reversible. (*LATH* 252)

Within the world of the novel, her explanation appears to be perfectly accurate, but what exists at her diegetic level as time exists for readers as the spatial extension of text. Because it takes time to read the text, that spatial extension can take on the appearance of time for readers as well, but that extension does not perfectly equate the passage of time in the world of historical experience.

Space can be traversed in any direction, particular points in space can always be returned to, and journeys—*spatially* speaking—can be repeated. Even the spatial extension of text, which can only be read in a single direction, can be read and reread at will. On the other hand, time moves always and only in one direction, a past moment is always past, and no journey—*temporally* speaking—is ever made twice. In and of itself, this insight is as old and as commonplace as Heraclitus and his dictum that we can and cannot step into the same river twice: spatially, we cross the same river (the Rubicon, for instance), but, temporally, we are as different from our previous selves as the individual molecules of water passing through the river's channel (and, if you are Caesar, the Rubicon cannot be uncrossed). The application of this truth to fiction and its implications for the relationships between the worlds of fictions and the world of historical experience has not been as broadly contemplated, and Nabokov's emphasis on this particular effect of temporality as the link between fiction and the everyday world exposes the ethical

distance between those worlds. Because all “moments” in a novel exist simultaneously, there is no such thing as causation in a novel, and readers can always return to and repeat any portion of a spatially-governed fiction by re-reading a passage. In our everyday world, by contrast, historical events are contingent and subject to causation, and we cannot return to, repeat or relive past moments.

Even before Krug’s epiphanic conviction that he is a fictional character, he shows signs of conflating the non-exchangeable properties of time and space. He imagines his potential escape from Padukgrad not as fleeing from his home but as a paradoxical return to it: “He saw the possibility of escaping from Padukgrad into a foreign country as a kind of return into his own past because his own country had been a free country in the past. Granted that space and time were one, escape and return became interchangeable” (*BS* 180). Krug’s own slippery sophism about the unity of time and space is motivated by his grief and the memory of his wife: the past that Krug wants to escape into—”bliss unvalued at the time, her fiery hair, her voice reading of small humanized animals to her child” (*ibid*)—cannot be recovered no matter how far he runs. When Krug does go mad, he rejects the temporality of his life in favor of the spatial relationships between fictional scenes: Krug believes that he is immortal and that Olga and David are still alive because, on a different diegetic level, they are always present in the novel’s spatial eternity, and he fatalistically accepts the deaths of his friends and colleagues because causality cannot exist without temporality, and his actions at one *place* in a book (as opposed to an earlier *time*) cannot affect events that occur at a different place. Krug’s madness consists of conflating the non-exchangeable properties of time and space: From the perspective of the novel’s readers, Krug’s madness may be divinest sense, but, in the world he inhabits, misreading time and space propels him into insanity and irresponsibility. On the last page of *Bend Sinister*, Krug’s narrator examines the puddle that linked his consciousness to

Krug's and toys with his own thoughts about how the unity of time and space might guarantee some sort of immortality:<sup>60</sup>

I could also distinguish the glint of a special puddle (the one Krug had somehow perceived through the layer of his own life), an oblong puddle invariably acquiring the same form after every shower because of the constant spatulate shape of a depression in the ground. Possibly something of the kind may be said to occur in regard to the imprint we leave in the intimate texture of space. (*BS* 241)

Krug's puddle is described as both a spatial and a temporal phenomenon: the water of the puddle appears at different times because of the shape of the indentation in the ground. In other words, the puddle is actualized from time to time by the presence of water, but its existence is primarily determined spatially (by the position and shape of the depression). Fictional worlds exist in much the same way: they are actualized from time to time by the temporally conditioned readings of human beings, but their existence is essentially spatial. From the dominant diegetic level of the novel, Krug exists in a spatial world of fiction that exists as part of the narrator's temporal world of experience. Krug's puddle exists in numerous places in the novel and seems to appear at multiple points in time because of its multiple *positions*. The puddle's imprint on space (whether in Krug's world or the narrators) is responsible for its actual or apparent reappearance over time. The narrator wonders if our existence in space might provide us with a sort of immortality that lets us reappear from time to time. While this is a real possibility for Krug (whose existence in our world is entirely spatial and for whom every re-reading is a resurrection), time intervenes and calls the narrator's speculation into question. Nabokov's narrator

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<sup>60</sup> Krug's narrator, speaking here outside the diegesis of Krug's world, copies the description of the puddle from opening line of the novel (quoted and discussed above on page 46) almost verbatim: "An oblong puddle inset in course asphalt; like a fancy footprint filled to the brim with quicksilver; like a spatulate hole through which you can see the nether sky" (*BS* 1). The narrator's rendition of the puddle in his world adds the episodic, temporal appearance of water to the original, spatial description of Krug's puddle.

admits, on the same page of the novel, that the immortality he bestowed on Krug was a “slippery sophism,” and, while he ponders his deceptive logical proof that “death is but a question of style,” he is interrupted by a clock sounding the hour: “Some tower clock which I could never exactly locate, which, in fact, I never heard in the daytime, struck twice, then hesitated and was left behind by the smooth fast silence that continued to stream through the veins of my aching temples; a question of rhythm” (*BS* 241). If Krug’s puddle leaves an imprint on space, then the striking bell leaves a corresponding imprint on the texture of time. The clock tower exists as pure temporality (the narrator can never locate it spatially), and even when it ceases to chime, its sounding marks the silence which “continue[s] to stream” through the narrator’s temples (his mind and/or body) as a “question of rhythm.” Note that this rhythm is not left “in” the silence (a spatial metaphor) but “is left behind by” the silence; the narrator feels the rhythm of the chime, but this temporal resonance is followed by silence, and unlike the puddle’s spatial impression, the precise moment of the clock’s sounding is lost irrevocably to the past. While the narrator goes on to wonder about “the imprint we leave in the intimate texture of space,” the very next word returns us from his spatial analogy to the auditory and therefore temporal: “Twang” (*ibid*). The twanging of the moth on the window screen, like the striking of the clock, is a vibration, and its persistence is a question of rhythm “left behind by the smooth fast silence” that follows it. Krug, in his fictional world, leaves a spatial impression that we can return to anytime we crack the covers of a book, but life in the world of historical experience is temporal, and, while the rhythm of a twang or a bell might persist briefly in our perception or somewhat longer in our memory, once a sound is gone it is gone forever.

## THE ETHICS OF TIME AND CAUSATION

The narrative ontology of novels—fiction’s pseudo-temporality based on the spatial extension of text and the fact we read it in only one direction—presents two related ethical challenges for readers and writers of fiction. These challenges go beyond the intentionally manipulative writing of propagandists, like Dr. Shoe and his captive audience of self-deluding society ladies, who turn to fiction for the expressed purpose of supporting their hate-filled or otherwise delusional world views or the well-meaning “serious novels” that provide the illicit entertainment of “human interest.”<sup>61</sup> Nabokov views both propaganda and “human interest” as illegitimate modes of art: neither the propagandist nor the high-minded sensationalist succeeds in creating an independent, artistic world, so, while they are insidious forms of writing, neither propaganda nor “human interest” are, in Nabokov’s opinion, actually fiction. Setting these illegitimate forms of writing aside, Nabokov demonstrates that the absence of time in legitimate works of fiction present well-intentioned readers with two specific risks and challenges whenever those fictions approach the catastrophic.

The first challenge is related to Rorty’s reading of *Lolita* as a book which tells us “to notice what one is doing, and in particular, to notice what people are saying” (Rorty 164). According to Rorty, Nabokov’s fictions remind us to pay attention to the suffering of other people so that, unlike Humbert, we can exercise curiosity, tenderness and kindness. The shortcoming of the moral that Rorty finds in *Lolita* is that the narrative

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<sup>61</sup> “Human interest” stories, fictionalized accounts of human catastrophes, pose certain risks even to the well-intentioned reader: the reader who finds the novel engaging or entertaining risks training his or her sensibilities to find similar real-world catastrophes entertaining. This ethical and emotional slippage resembles an internal tension many people experienced in response to the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001. The spectacular fireballs and collapsing skyscrapers of the actual attacks in New York so closely resembled our action-film fantasies of destruction in American cities (from *The Towering Inferno* and *Earthquake* to *Independence Day* and *Armageddon*) that the desire to see destruction on a grand scale could not be entirely separated from the shock and horror of it actually happening.

ontology of time means that paying attention while reading and paying attention while living are significantly different activities. If I am an inattentive reader, I can always return to the spatial world of the fiction and correct my myopic or solipsistic reading, but if I am incurious or unkind in my time-governed everyday life, I cannot return to, augment or alter the past. In order to apply Rorty's moral about curiosity, we must first contextualize it in the novel's atemporality. In *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (1992), Brian Boyd argues that Humbert's narrative has a split relationship to time and that the "emphasis throughout *Lolita* on the contrast between a forward and a rear view of time is ultimately a moral one" (Boyd 254). The forward and rear view of time are, within the diegesis of *Lolita*, a demonstration of the gulf between the story as Humbert lives it and the story as he writes it—the difference between a temporal/historical and a spatial/textual world. While he agrees with Rorty that Humbert "is brutally indifferent to other lives" and that "One of the marvels of the book is that while it presents such damning facts it also allows Humbert full scope to lure inattentive readers into acquiescence—until Nabokov confronts them with their facile complicity" (Boyd 232, 233), Boyd reads *Lolita* as Humbert's legal or moral defense and notes that Humbert attempts to seduce inattentive readers by concealing the temporal world in which he preyed on Lolita within the spatial world of his "confession."<sup>62</sup> As Boyd notes, Humbert

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<sup>62</sup> Boyd points out Humbert's self-accusatory defense strategy: "he lays charges against himself in order to disarm us with this display of moral scrupulousness...and to encourage us to accept the way he really sees himself. Even some very good readers have seen him just as he wants them to" (230). Boyd insightfully discusses Humbert's self-fashioning as "a poor, sensitive soul, tormented by a love that may seem sordid to an uncomprehending world" (ibid). Humbert, who has certainly mastered the ecstasy of narrative and linguistic composition, wants us to see him as also curious, tender and kind—that is, as a misunderstood artistic soul. Humbert's cruel approximation of art creates what Boyd calls "one of the glories of the novel: that Nabokov creates a style to fit every furrow in Humbert's brain and at the same time startles us from line to line with both the freedom of the human mind and its perverse capacity to entrap itself and others" (229). This trap of the human mind—the capacity of both narrative and language to become prisons—helps make sense of Nabokov's "initial shiver of inspiration" for writing *Lolita*: in his afterword, he claims that he was "somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after months

can include the story of his epiphany above the playground in a convenient and seemingly redemptive *place* in the novel, but the temporal reality of this revelation—it occurs *after* Quilty escapes with Lolita, preventing Humbert from continuing to prey on her—shows how it was “a very selective insight”: “Humbert places that scene at the end to show he can be selfless,” but, in reality, he “demonstrates how easy it is to let moral awareness turn into sincere regret after the fact, but how much more difficult to curb the self before it tramples others underfoot” (Boyd 254). Humbert retroactively fabricates a moral epiphany out of retrospective curiosity and tenderness, and his interest in Lolita’s suffering and her shattered childhood are both too little and, more importantly, too late. As readers, our realization that Humbert’s epiphany is bogus and that we, like Humbert, have misperceived Lolita or have been incurious about the sufferings of characters like the barber of Kasbeam can occur at any time. Nabokov can confront the novel’s readers with their complicity or cruelty and expect that *next time* they will not be as taken by Humbert. After all, Nabokov insists that good readers are re-readers. Nabokov tells his students that “one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it” (“Good Readers” 3 emphasis original), and we can *only* reread a book because reading takes time and time has no place in a work of fiction. Life, on the other hand, is lived inescapably within the bounds of time, and, as Nabokov puts it in the opening chapter of *Speak, Memory*, “the prison of time is spherical and without exits” (*SM* 20). As human beings who share a temporal world with other vulnerable creatures, we do not have the luxury of re-living even a single moment. If we are going to be curious, if we do not want to miss the

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of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature’s cage” (*L* 311). Humbert has, so to speak, sketched the bars of his own cage.

opportunities to practice tenderness and kindness, then we have to get it right the first time. Reading with curiosity and living with curiosity are not and cannot be identical.<sup>63</sup>

The second danger posed by the narrative ontology of time bears a strong resemblance to Krug's madness: narratives that recount historical catastrophes can obscure the reality of time and causation and risk reducing historical catastrophes to literary tragedies. Because narrative worlds have neither time nor causality, narrative fiction can disguise the inherent contingency of unfolding historical events and make a *historical* tragedy—an event that is tragic because it could have been avoided—appear to be a *literary* tragedy—an event that is tragic because it could *not* have been avoided. For instance, Hamlet's death may be sealed from act one, but the same is not true of Anne Frank whose death was neither fated nor unavoidable. Literary tragedy is necessarily fatalistic, and viewing the historical world as tragedy implies that any political or social resistance to the catastrophic is pointless. This shift from catastrophe to tragedy also skews our perspective on the scope and significance of the catastrophic. As readers who inhabit a common, historical world, we should not and must not make the ethical and epistemological mistake made by George Stevens in his 1958 "Preface" to Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*: "Of all the many remarkable things about Anne Frank, I believe

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<sup>63</sup> Ethical judgment shares some important characteristics with artistic judgment, but the two are not identical. Judgment of a book can be suspended, postponed, revised and returned to endlessly, but ethical judgments are subject to the urgency of justice, what Jacques Derrida calls "that which must not wait":

Yet justice, however unrepresentable it remains, does not wait. It is that which must not wait. To be direct, simple and brief, let us say this: a just decision is always required immediately, right away, as quickly as possible. It cannot provide itself with the infinite information and the unlimited knowledge of conditions, rules or hypothetical imperatives that could justify it. (Derrida 255)

The historical agent, unlike the reader or writer of fiction, does not have infinite access to the world and an unlimited amount of time to form and revise judgments. As Boyd notes about Humbert's epiphany, ethical action comes with an expiration date, and retrospective epiphanies may be convenient but they are neither laudable nor practically effective. Derrida's claim that justice is unrepresentable is based in large part on a commitment to the unique individual and the particular moment that he shares with Nabokov: if the particular cannot be subsumed under a general rule (if a commonsense of statistical probability and general ideas does not adequately address reality), then just actions cannot be predicted or represented in advance.

the most important is the fact of her survival—a survival contained between the covers of a small red-checked cloth-covered diary book” (vii). While the character Anne may continue to exist spatially between the covers of a diary book, the living Anne died once and irrevocably, and denying the absolutely singular fact of her violent and unnatural death adds another violence to those she suffered in Amsterdam and at Auschwitz.<sup>64</sup> The world within a book does not follow the same laws as the world of historical experience. When a character—Lolita, Krug, etc.—suffers or even dies, we as readers can always return to a *space* where they have not suffered and restore them, as it were, to wholeness, but living people who suffer cannot return to the wholeness of the past because time moves inexorably forward and, while we can make new gains, we can never recoup past losses. The ethically disastrous potential of assuming an easy, direct or obvious connection between persons and characters (or, more generally, between events and narratives) is evident in Stevens’ gross misinterpretation of Anne Frank’s “survival,” and, if even the autobiographical writings of a historical victim of the Shoah can be misread in this way, then readers of fictional accounts must exercise even more care not to equate the fictional victims of novels with persons who suffer and have suffered in the common, historical world.

The widespread parody of biographical conventions in Nabokov’s fictions warns his readers against reading fiction as biography, but it also reminds us that biographies, like novels, are narratives, and the persons represented in them are not identical to historical persons. For instance, even if the content of Vadim Vadimovich N.’s life were absolutely identical to the content of Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov’s (bracketing for the moment the question of whether or not such fidelity is even possible), the difference

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<sup>64</sup> By presenting *The Diary of a Young Girl* as a compensation for the loss of Anne Frank’s life, Steven’s also places himself precariously close to the position of Nabokov’s Nero in *Bend Sinister* who sees murder as a perfectly acceptable trade-off for the creation of a work of art.

between the worlds they inhabit—the disparate natures of space and time—would make an identical connection between the man and the character impossible. Even Nabokov’s own literary autobiography *Speak, Memory* (1951) elaborately sabotages any attempts to view the Nabokov of the biography as identical to Nabokov the biographer. Nabokov wanted to call his book *Speak, Mnemosyne*, but settled on “memory” as a compromise with his publishers. Mnemosyne, of course, is not only “memory” but the mother of the muses, and Nabokov treats the book less as a historical record than an inspired work of art and argues that, rather than giving a supposedly true account, tracing “thematic designs through one’s life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography” (*SM* 27). In a telling example, Nabokov plagiarizes one of his characters, Sebastian Knight, the subject of another literary biography Nabokov wrote ten years earlier, when describing travel by train. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), Knight’s biographer-brother “V.” gives us Sebastian’s description of the sleeping cars of “Great European Express Trains”: “the soft crackle of polished panels in the blue-shaded night, the long sigh of brakes at dimly surmised stations, the upward slide of an embossed leather blind disclosing a platform, a man wheeling luggage, the milky globe of a lamp with a pale moth whirling around it” (*RLSK* 8). Ten years later, Nabokov cannibalizes Knight’s description to create a scene in which he and his brother are in a sleeping car of “*des Grands Express Européens*”:

The *woodwork gently creaked and crackled*. Near the door that led to the toilet, a dim garment on a peg hung and, higher up, the tassel of *the blue, bivalved nightlight* swung rhythmically...Presently, the train stopped with a *long Westinghousian sigh*...It was marvelously exciting to move to the foot of one’s bed, with part of the bedclothes following, in order to undo cautiously the catch of *the window shade, which could be made to slide only halfway up*, impeded as it was by the edge of the upper berth...Like moons around Jupiter, *pale moths revolved about a lone lamp*. (*SM* 144-6, emphasis added)

While it may not be remarkable that Nabokov would include a favorite childhood memory in one of his novels, it is remarkable that, in his biography, he uses the specific language from that novel to evoke his childhood memory. While Nabokov's life can serve as a source of material for his novels, his novels cannot be a source of material for his already-lived life (inspiration is a one-way street), but his earlier novel very clearly serves as a source for his biography. *Bios* and biography, life and life-story, do not exist in the same type of world: biography, as opposed to everyday experience, comprises a narrative world that shares its structure with fictions, so biography, unlike lived experience, can source its materials either from the world of experience or from other narrative worlds. Biographies, like novels, are spatial; their scenes exist without temporal sequence and can be returned to at any time and in any order. The connections that link biographies to historical experience may not be identical to the connections between experience and fiction, but biographies, whether Nabokov's or Anne Frank's, must be treated as narrative worlds whose connections to other worlds require careful exploration and discovery.

## MEMORY AND ECSTASY

In conclusion, I would like to turn to *Pnin*, a novel that was partially serialized immediately before (1953-5) and published as a novel immediately after (1957) Nabokov's 1956 formulation of "aesthetic bliss" in his afterword to *Lolita*. Pnin, whom Boyd tells us tops Nabokov's list of characters "he admired most as people" (Boyd 237),<sup>65</sup> has a lot in common with Nabokov and, it so happens, with Arendt. Pnin, like Nabokov and Arendt, is a European "Displaced Person," a refugee from totalitarianism

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<sup>65</sup> "Of all the thousands of characters in his work, Nabokov once said, *Lolita* came in second in his list of those he admired most as people. Top of the list came Pnin, another courageous victim" (Boyd 237).

and its crimes against the human condition. Like Nabokov and Arendt, Pnin arrives in the United States as a stateless person (Pnin and Nabokov with Nansen passports, Arendt with an equivalent affidavit of identity) and becomes a naturalized citizen while working at an American university. Also like Nabokov and Arendt, Pnin lost not only a homeland but his friends and family who did not escape the violence of state terror. But, unlike Nabokov and Arendt, Pnin inhabits a fictional world whose narrative ontology makes his experience fundamentally different from European DPs in the world of historical experience. *Pnin* is Nabokov's most explicit fictional encounter with the memory of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, and it serves as his example of how to write after, as Arendt's argues, "[t]otalitarian domination as an established fact, which in its unprecedentedness cannot be comprehended through the usual categories of political thought, and whose 'crimes' cannot be judged by traditional moral standards or punished within the legal framework of our civilization, has broken the continuity of Occidental history" (Arendt "Tradition" 26). Literature can never fill in the gap or bridge the gulf that separates us from a catastrophic past, but it can cultivate our awareness of that gulf and encourage us, in the never-finished task of approaching and reapproaching history, to be guided by curiosity, tenderness, kindness and even ecstasy. Surprisingly, it is ecstasy, the fourth element of Nabokov's definition of art which Rorty singles out as opposed to and perhaps incompatible with ethical action, that Nabokov presents as necessary for appropriately grasping the connection between the cruelty presented in a book (Humbert's or Nero's or Paduk's or Hitler's) and the cruelty that exists in the world of historical experience. Art's knowledge and experience of the catastrophic is parabolic and gestural: at its ethical and epistemological best, literature must recognize that its line can point towards but will never intersect historical events.

*Pnin* is an ecstatic book in two ways. First, Pnin experiences a series of ecstatic (in the sense of a stupor, trance, rapture, etc.) flashes or seizures that closely follow Nabokov's description of artistic inspiration. Second, Nabokov displaces his entire narrative structure in the novel's final pages, forcing it to stand in sharp appositional relief to both its own diegesis and the world of historical experience ("ecstasy" derives etymologically from the Greek for being put out of place or, in more colloquial English, for "standing beside oneself"). Nabokov embeds his theory of inspiration within Pnin's undiagnosed seizures, each of which happens "in a flash" but with "no way of rendering it in less than so many consecutive words" (*Pnin* 21). As with Nabokov's example of inspiration in "The Art of Literature and Common Sense," these flashes collapse the past, present and future into a single timeless moment, allowing long-dead friends to step into Pnin's presence and, for instance, attend his Cremona lecture. Throughout the novel, these flashes correspond to Pnin's memory of people he lost in Europe: "Murdered, forgotten, unrevenged, incorrupt, immortal, many old friends were scattered throughout the dim hall among more recent people...Vanya Bednyashkin, shot by the Reds in 1919 in Odessa because his father had been a Liberal, was gaily signaling to his former schoolmate from the back of the hall" (*Pnin* 27-8). Pnin, unlike Krug, does not take this flash of inspiration as a nullification of death. The victims of genocide and state terror are immortal, but only in Pnin's moments of inspiration and only in Pnin's consciousness. Vanya Bednyashkin does not really visit Cremona, and Pnin would be literally insane if he thought otherwise. Rather than driving him mad, Pnin's flashes of inspiration make it possible for him to both remember and maintain his sanity. In particular, they allow him to remember Mira Belochkin, who sat in the audience at Cremona "shyly smiling, sleek dark head inclined, gentle brown gaze shining up at Pnin from under velvet eyebrows" and who was executed by the Nazis at Buchenwald (*Pnin* 27).

Mira who stands, as Boyd argues, at the “moral center of the novel” (Boyd 279), haunts both Pnin and *Pnin*. She turns up unnamed in oblique references like Pnin’s flash at Cremona, and her surname, a play on the Russian word for squirrel, attaches her to the parade of squirrels that appear thematically throughout the novel.<sup>66</sup> Pnin’s most vivid vision of Mira occurs in another “flash” while he is attending the Russian expatriate retreat at The Pines. The narrator’s description of this flash, the book’s only extended depiction of the violence which pervades its margins, presents Pnin’s ecstatic seizure as the only way he can remember the Shoah and not go insane:

Only in the detachment of an incurable complaint, in the sanity of near death, could one cope with this for a moment. In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin—not because, in itself, the evocation of a youthful love affair, banal and brief, threatened his peace of mind...but because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira’s death were possible. (*Pnin* 134-5)

Shrayer speculates that Pnin teaches himself to resist memory as a response to the “profound if grave truth that a human mind seeks to come to terms even with such incomprehensible disasters as the loss of six million Jewish lives” (Shrayer 85).<sup>67</sup> Coming to terms with the catastrophic—what, in the parlance of pop-psychology is often called “finding closure”—might relieve the mind of pain, but that relief is not an unambiguous good. Pnin believes that he faces a terrible dilemma: either preserve rationality by not remembering Mira, or remember her and go insane. But, as Nabokov insists in his lectures, inspiration is neither rational nor insane, and Pnin’s flashes provide a pathway,

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<sup>66</sup> Boyd says that “It can be no accident that the name ‘Belochkin’ derives from the Russian *belochka*, a diminutive of *belka*, a squirrel” (282).

<sup>67</sup> Kuzmanovich offers a similar analysis of David Krug’s murder: “In the end, such torture cannot make sense in the world of *Bend Sinister* or in any other world. It cannot because it must not” (57).

though not a rational one, for both conscience and consciousness to coexist with his memory of Mira.

The rationality of common sense would reduce Mira's death to its statistical position among the six million murders committed by the Nazis or even the statistical certainty that everyone owes one death. Pnin's flash, while still insisting on the necessity of forgetting, remembers Mira's execution as an irreducibly singular catastrophe:

One had to forget—because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one's lips in the dusk of the past. And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, 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. (*Pnin* 135)<sup>68</sup>

Pnin imagines Mira's death in vivid detail, but, because he does not know exactly how she died, he cannot craft a final narrative of her murder. Rather than offering closure, his flash forces him to return to the fact of Mira's death while realizing that he will never possess an accurate understanding. His lack of factual details highlights the gulf between the reality of her execution and his understanding of it, but accurate knowledge of the particulars would not and could not bridge that gulf because the reality of her death exceeds rational understanding. The catalogue of possible deaths that prevents Pnin from settling in on a closed narrative also reminds readers that tens of thousands of human beings did, in fact, die deaths like these in Buchenwald. At the same time, Pnin's

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<sup>68</sup> The final death Pnin imagines (Mira burned alive on a pile of beechwood), as well as the narrator's immediate turn to the associations of Buchenwald (translated literally as "Beech Forrest") with Goethe, reflect Nabokov's unwillingness to entrust the memory of these victims to art. The influence of literature and culture did not prevent a death camp from operating in the hills above Weimar (with an oak tree dedicated to Goethe inside its gates), and there is nothing about artistic representation that would safeguard the memory of the persons who were killed there.

uncertainty reminds us that those deaths are beyond the reach of our mental apparatus. We will never know what the horror of those deaths was “really” like, and no fictional or historical account can change that fact.<sup>69</sup>

If Pnin’s flashes present the relationship between memory and ecstasy for Pnin, the narrative upheaval at the end of the novel shows that, like Pnin, readers can never possess a finished story. The last chapter of *Pnin* shifts its explicit emphasis away from Timofey Pnin and onto Nabokov’s nameless narrator. The narrator of *Pnin* is not, like the narrators of *Bend Sinister* or *Transparent Things*, a deific figure on a separate diegetic level, nor is he, like Humbert or Vadim Vadimovich, telling his own story. This narrator claims to have grown up around Pnin and encountered him at different points in their émigré travels, but the relationship he purports to have with Pnin does not account for the specific stories, the level of detail or the internal experiences he includes in his narration. Even his own account of the encounters he had with Pnin—stories about which he would conceivably know the details—serve to undermine rather than reinforce his credibility, and Pnin accuses the narrator through whom, paradoxically, we know everything we know about Pnin of fabricating stories about him. As Boyd and others effectively argue, “the *real* Pnin, the poignant inner Pnin, can exist only if we accept the fictionality of the whole story. The novel begins with a thoroughly real world...but we end up forced to

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<sup>69</sup> This reading stands in direct opposition to the claims of readers like Elena Sommers’ who sees this Buchenwald as “a real life illustration to *Bend Sinister*’s ‘experimental station’” where David Krug was murdered (Sommers 37). Buchenwald, unlike Padukgrad, may have a historical correlate, but the camp where Mira Belochkin died exists in the fictional world of *Pnin* and not in the beech forests above Weimar. We cannot locate *Pnin*’s Germany in historical Europe any more than we can place Padukgrad there because both nations exist in fictional worlds created by Nabokov and operating according to the structures of narrative rather than historical space-time. Boyd’s comparison of the two worlds is far more careful and more accurate: “Krug lives within an invented country, a nightmare reflection of the real world. Pnin’s world, on the other hand, seems comfortingly familiar” (277). Pnin’s world *seems* more familiar, but it is no less fabricated than Krug’s.

admit that Pnin can exist as a creature whose inner self we can know and value only so long as we recognize that he is invented” (Boyd 281, emphasis original).

Jack Cockerell’s marathon impersonation of Pnin provides the apparent source for this supposedly “real” Pnin. On the narrator’s first night in Cremona, Cockerell performs distorted versions of most of the stories that appear in the novel during: “Cockerell impersonated Pnin to perfection...Pnin teaching, Pnin eating, Pnin ogling a coed” and so on (*Pnin* 187). This dumb-show version of the novel takes place on February 14, the first night the narrator spends in Waindell. The next morning—February 15, Pnin’s birthday—the narrator (who is presently correcting galleys of another book) narrowly misses Pnin leaving his much-loved house and returns to Cockerell’s. At breakfast, he hears, in Cockerell’s words, “the story of Pnin rising to address the Cremona Women’s Club and discovering he had brought the wrong lecture” (191). This returns us to the first chapter of the novel when Pnin does address the Cremona Women’s Club, but careful readers will notice that Pnin does not, in that chapter, read the wrong lecture.<sup>70</sup> Pnin misses his bus because he is carrying the wrong paper in his pocket, but he retrieves the correct lecture and shoves all of his papers—lecture included—into his pocket before making it to Cremona. Cockerell’s story and the narrator’s story do not line up, but we cannot say that Cockerell gets the story wrong. While we, as readers, have been set up to accept the narrator’s story about Pnin and Cremona as the original and/or “real” story, Cockerell’s burlesque imitation of Pnin over breakfast provides the narrator’s only source for that particular episode in Pnin’s life. The fact that the story which begins the novel is told to the narrator on the morning of Pnin’s birthday indicates that the Pnin we have read about was born in the narrator’s mind over a “depressing” British breakfast in Cockerell’s

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<sup>70</sup> Aslo see Boyd, 277-8.

kitchen and the last sentence of the novel is, narratively speaking, its Ur-text. Whether or not the narrator knew a different version of Pnin is irrelevant; the title character of *Pnin* is an invention, even within the novel's own diegesis. After lovingly and sympathetically creating and presenting Pnin to his readers, Nabokov displaces that version of Pnin from the novel. These stories are highly embellished hearsay, episodes gleaned by a man whom Pnin mistrusts from another man who mocks him mercilessly behind his back; the Pnin who, for the reader of *Pnin*, appears as a concrete personage is then presented as the imitation of an impersonation of an absent figure. The "real" Pnin, whatever that would mean, is inaccessible, and so are his ecstatic seizures, his memories of the Holocaust.

According to Boyd, *Pnin* demonstrates that "none of us can know directly another's pain. But if we cannot *know* the pain our actions cause others, we can and should try to imagine it" (Boyd 287, emphasis original). The same limitation applies to pain we have not caused personally. We cannot imagine the painful history of totalitarianism in order to get closer to it, understand it, comprehend it. We imagine the pain of others *because* we cannot know it. Nabokov presents Mira's death at Buchenwald as an ongoing and never-ending challenge to the imagination: we must imagine her death and simultaneously know that, on the one hand, our imagination will never reach the truth and, on the other, that we must not stop imagining. Nabokov warns readers against confusing his novels with the world of historical experience, but conflating a book with the world is not the same thing as thinking of them together. While they cannot represent a set of truths or facts as a testimony to the horrors of Nazism and Stalinism—any testimony is *a priori* insufficient to represent the unthinkable (that is, unschematizable, beyond both reason and apperception)—Nabokov's American novels invite readers to think about the horrors of a violent century, and they do so while simultaneously self-theorizing the links between fictional and historical worlds in a detailed schema that

remains consistent throughout Nabokov's American oeuvre. Because art cannot close the fundamental gap between the reality of suffering and our capacity to understand it, literature must, when it draws our attention to those historical catastrophes, also direct us to its own limitations. These limitations are only found by sharing with the artist in the joys and difficulties of creation, in the ecstatic moment of inspiration and the world it calls into existence. It takes a flash of ecstasy or inspiration, as Nabokov's novel's appositionally demonstrate, to recognize both the horrors of the catastrophic and our distance from it, to approach a historical catastrophe without flattening it into an unavoidable tragedy, a pseudo-redemptive delusion, or a thrilling bit of illicit entertainment. The catastrophic past, like Shade's fountain or the two missing pages from Nabokov's proof of immortality, can only be presented as unrepresentable, as that which we must, and must continually, imagine, something "akin to the vibrating outline of verses you know you know but cannot recall" (*Pnin* 134).

**The Shared Present:  
Philip Roth, Nathan Zuckerman and Narrative Structures of  
Hospitality**

It's irrelevant to say I don't trust him when the maneuvering is the message, I know, but I don't.

— Zuckerman to Maria, *The Facts*

An implausible solution to an intractable conflict would compromise my integrity no less than yours.

— Zuckerman to Roth, *The Facts*

*Occupatio*. It's one of those Latin rhetorical figures...A rhetorical device whereby you mention something by saying you're not going to mention it.

— Maria to Zuckerman, *The Facts*

The title of Philip Roth's *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (1988) lays claim to a narrative simplicity that is not supported by either the internal or external framing of the autobiographical novel. *The Facts* is preceded by an epigraph from *The Counterlife* (1986), Roth's labyrinthine follow-up to the *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy, that it attributes to Nathan Zuckerman—"And as he spoke I was thinking, *the kind of stories that people turn life into, the kind of lives that people turn stories into*" (italics original)—and it begins with a letter to Zuckerman soliciting his editorial advice and signed, "Sincerely, Roth" (*Facts* 10). Following a prologue and five chapters which appear to be

relatively straightforward autobiography, Zuckerman answers Roth and encourages him not to publish the autobiographical text. This second letter contains critiques not only from Zuckerman but also from Maria Freshfield, his English novelist wife who appears, as differing versions of herself, in various sections of *The Counterlife*. *The Facts*'s signals its entanglement with the thorny diegesis of *The Counterlife*, and it is also the first of four books that Roth published over five years that focus on a character named Roth. Two of those four, *The Facts* and *Patrimony* (1991), are often listed as autobiography or memoir, while the other two, *Deception* (1990) and *Operation Shylock* (1993), are generally accepted as novels with a character who happens to share a name, and other distinguishing characteristics, with his author.<sup>71</sup> *The Facts*, then, is simultaneously Roth's sixth "Zuckerman book"—following *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), *The Prague Orgy* (1985) and *The Counterlife*—and the first of his "Roth books" (as Roth's books between 1988 and 1993 are collectively labeled in recent editions of his work). As *The Facts*' construction and publishing history demonstrate, the distinction between fiction and life is neither as simple nor as clear as "Roth" (the signatory of the book's opening letter) pretends: "If in one way *The Counterlife* can be read as a fiction about structure, then this is the bare bones, the structure of a life without the fiction" (*Facts* 6). The relationship between the stories that we read and the stories that we live is also too complex to support the simplistic distinction between types of judgment from Zuckerman's reply: "What one chooses to reveal in fiction is governed by a motive fundamentally aesthetic; we judge the author of a novel by how well he or she tells a story. But we judge morally the author of an

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<sup>71</sup> The Library of America, for instance, follows its standard nomenclature for the volume containing *Operation Shylock*—*Philip Roth: Novels 1993-1995*—but changes the title of volume containing *The Facts* and *Patrimony* (along with *The Counterlife* and *Deception*) to *Philip Roth: Novels and Other Narratives 1986-1991*.

autobiography, whose governing motive is primarily ethical as against aesthetic” (*Facts* 163). Zuckerman attempts to draw a clear line between the aesthetic and ethical responsibilities of writers, but, as his recognition that “the maneuvering is the message” acknowledges, narrative forms operate simultaneously in both ethical and aesthetic registers (*Facts* 192).

Zuckerman plays the role of recipient and critic of *The Facts* because he occupies a privileged position in Roth’s metafictional forays. Nathan Zuckerman both writes and is written into fiction that pushes against the limits of fiction and anxiously assesses the relationship between the imagined world of art and the imagined world of reality, and he regularly calls into question the willing suspension of disbelief that seemingly serves as the portal between those two worlds. Zuckerman also plays an outsized role in Roth’s fictional engagement with questions of narrative representation in both the biographical sense of representing facts and events from Roth’s life and in the sociological sense of being a representative of Jewish people and Jewish-American life. Zuckerman, who at times seems to embody a pun on the concept of artistic license, both writes and is written into fiction that challenges the possibility of ethical representation and continuously calls the responsibility of his own writing into question. As a fictional writer who is frequently mistaken both for his author Roth and his character Carnovsky, Zuckerman plays on the urge to read fiction biographically, and Zuckerman, like Roth, writes about the Jewish Diaspora in ways that make some Jewish readers uncomfortable or angry.

While the claims of biography and sociology are often placed together in the single category of “facts” and understood in opposition to fiction, Roth’s fiction, and his Zuckerman novels in particular, perform an extended interrogation of fiction’s relationship to identity (the self’s relationship to itself) and hospitality (the self’s relationship to others) as distinct but inseparable aspects of sharing a common world.

Both identity and hospitality present, in the language of Zuckerman's response to Roth, "intractable conflicts" that cannot be resolved with "implausible solutions" (*Facts* 195). Rather than attempting to represent resolutions to the conflicting claims of identity and hospitality, Roth uses narrative structure to perform a kind of *occupatio* in which the explicit failure of tentative solutions provides a potential way forward. Roth's narratives negate the solutions they represent and, in their place, incite readers to exercise judgment: identity and hospitality are enacted by, rather than represented in, his fictions. While Roth has been actively engaging the narrative problematics of identity and hospitality since the publication of his first short stories and *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), his most fully-realized use of narrative apposition as an alternative to representation and representativeness appears in *The Counterlife*, his remarkable, self-referentially inconsistent "fiction about structure" (*Facts* 6).

This chapter begins with Roth's understanding of the challenges facing identity and hospitality in twentieth-century America, and I turn, first, to close-readings of several of Roth's important essays and interviews from the years immediately following his initial success and contentious reception. As David Brauner notes in his monograph *Philip Roth* (2007), recent markers of Roth's privileged status in American letters—his inclusion in the Library of America series, the publication of the journal *Philip Roth Studies*, etc.—indicate that Roth is no longer an author in need of defense. Following Brauner's argues that "the task of the Roth critic should no longer be to defend the embattled author but rather to recognize and examine the ambiguities, ambivalences and paradoxes that make Roth's fiction demand and amply repay repeated readings" (Brauner 7), I approach Roth's early apologies for fiction (and especially his own fiction) not to defend Roth from his detractors but to outline his poetics of fiction, representation and contested identity. I will begin with Roth's critical examination of Jewish-American

identity through each of its hyphenated terms, and I will argue that Roth's sometimes paradoxical relationships to both Jewishness and Americanness (for instance, claiming that he is not a Jewish-American writer while he writes novel after novel about American Jews) signifies a commitment to local particularity in tension with universal ethical concerns. This tension underlies Roth's suspicion of narrative representation and his interest in narrative forms that frustrate presumptive, end-centered answers and demand active, participatory judgment from his readers. The chapter ends with an extended reading of *The Counterlife*, a novel that Brauner calls "the beginning of Roth's second coming" and which Deborah Shostak's *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives* (2004) treats as emblematic of Roth's entire career (Brauner 3). Shostak argues persuasively that "Roth's books 'converse' with one another in a mutually illuminating fashion" and that "Roth's compulsion to contradict and counterimagine drives the logic within each narrative as well as the juxtaposition of one novel to the next or to some previous work in his career" (*Countertexts* vii, 4). *The Counterlife* has direct connections to a surprisingly large number of Roth's other books—Nathan appears in all of Roth's early and late Zuckerman books and, through the paratext of *The Facts*, invades his "Roth" books as well—and those connections extend the narrative instability of this particular novel into Roth's broader oeuvre. Shostak's reading of the inter-textual conversations between Roth's novels extends its reach even farther. While occupying a major node of Roth's canon, *The Counterlife*'s structural call for hospitality embodies his most forceful rejection of narrative representation and offers an appositional instigation to find ourselves not-at-home within our own identities.

This chapter also positions Roth as an unlikely transitional figure between Vladimir Nabokov and Toni Morrison in four important ways. First, and most obviously, Roth is a contemporary of both writers, publishing works as early as 1958 and as late as

2010. I am focusing my investigation of Roth primarily on his Zuckerman novels published between 1979 (*The Ghost Writer*) and 1986 (*The Counterlife*), a time-frame that links Nabokov's late novels, published before his death in 1977, and Morrison's work in the 1990's that is the primary focus of the next chapter.

Second, Roth also serves as a transitional figure between Nabokov's and Morrison's characteristic struggles with representation and misreading. Roth's Zuckerman novels push back against the biographical reading of fiction that Nabokov lampoons in works like *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974), in which the writer Vadim Vadimovich N. worries that he is a character in another author's story, and they also confront the group-representative readings that Morrison explicitly rejects under the label "sociological." While the assumptions that Roth is Alexander Portnoy and a "self-hating Jew" have often gone hand in hand, they are not the same claim, and while both biographical and sociological readings misconstrue the nature of prose fiction, the first is a mis-identification of an author with a fictional character, and the second is a mis-identification of a fictional character with an entire class of people. Each, in the end, attempts to short-circuit both the specific power of imaginative narrative and the responsibilities of readers by reducing the complexity of fiction to a much more simple representation.

Third, Roth's fiction transitions geopolitically from the refugee status of "Displaced Persons" like Nabokov and Arendt to what, borrowing on the language of human rights and international law, we might call the Internally Displaced Person (IDP) status held by many of Morrison's characters. Sethe's flight from Kentucky to Ohio, the migrations of Violet, Joe, Dorcas and others from the South and the Midwest to Harlem, and the multiple displacements that Ruby's citizens suffer on their journey from the post-Reconstruction South to Oklahoma mark them as refugees within the borders of the

United States, as people who cannot claim to be simply “at home” even in their place of birth. Roth’s characters are also never simply “at home,” though the circumstances of their internal displacements vary drastically from the experiences of Morrison’s characters. Roth’s Jewish-American protagonists are more assimilated and more accepted than most of Morrison’s African-American characters, but their assimilation is, almost invariably, a challenge to their identities as well as their positions within Jewish and Gentile communities. Nathan and Henry Zuckerman, Eli Peck and other characters in Roth’s fiction frequently come face-to-face with Jews displaced from a Nazi-ravaged Europe, and the challenges of American assimilation and Jewish identity cause social, cultural and familial friction, but the greatest ramifications of their own displacements are often psychological rather than geographical. Nathan Zuckerman, as an American and as a Jew, is internally displaced from himself: his is an uncanny not-at-home-ness.

Finally, Roth’s fiction falls between Nabokov and Morrison in relation to Hannah Arendt’s chronological framing of worldliness. While Nabokov’s fiction struggles with remembering the past and Morrison’s strives to imagine a future, Roth’s oeuvre primarily faces the challenges of filling the gap between past and future, of forging and maintaining a livable now. The present in which we necessarily live is, in Roth’s work, no more present—that is, no less distant—than the past and future that limn its horizon.<sup>72</sup> The present is fragmented, contested, self-contradictory and irreducibly plural, and yet it is home. As the only time and space in which we can live, the present in Roth’s fiction is necessarily a home in which we are never simply at home.

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<sup>72</sup> Arendt describes the “now” of the late twentieth century as an “odd in-between period which sometimes inserts itself into historical time when not only the later historians but the actors and witnesses, the living themselves, become aware of an interval in time which is altogether determined by things that are no longer and by things that are not yet” (“Gap” 9). Arendt describes this distance as the uncanny experience of watching one’s own actions as a witness or historical observer. The individual is displaced from her present moment by the act of observation.

## A NICE POSITIVE SAMPLING

In perhaps the most literary-historical anecdote in *The Facts*, Roth shares the stage with Ralph Ellison and Pietro di Donato for a 1962 symposium on “The Crisis of Conscience in Minority Writers of Fiction” held at Yeshiva University in New York. The writers’ brief talks are followed by a question and answer period that ends, according to Roth, with Ellison inserting himself between Roth and the hostile audience to defend the young author of “Epstein” and “Defender of the Faith,” published a few years earlier in *The Paris Review* and *The New Yorker*, respectively. That “trial,” as Roth refers to his interrogation by the audience, begins with a telling question: “Mr. Roth, would you write the same stories you’ve written if you were living in Nazi Germany?” (*Facts* 127).<sup>73</sup> The implications of this question could hardly be clearer: the audience demands that Roth, a Jewish writer publishing fiction after the Holocaust, use his fiction to disseminate positive, pro-Semitic, politically and culturally utilitarian representations of Jewish people. Anything else, the question implies, supports anti-Semitism, bolsters would-be oppressors and exculpates the industrialized extermination of six million Jewish lives. Roth’s address that evening seems to have anticipated the question. In “Writing About Jews” (1963), an essay that began as Roth’s address to Yeshiva University and was published the following year in *Commentary*, Roth addresses the “assumptions about the art of fiction” expressed by David Seligson, a rabbi who attacked Roth and other Jewish fiction writers in a sermon reported in the *New York Times*: “In his sermon Rabbi Seligson says of Myron Kaufmann’s *Remember Me to God* that it can ‘hardly be said to

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<sup>73</sup> Roth goes on to connect this question to one posed to the young Zuckerman: “a question that was to turn up some twenty years later in *The Ghost Writer*, asked of Nathan Zuckerman by Judge Leopold Wapter” (*Facts* 127).

be recognizable as a Jewish sociological study.’ But Mr. Kaufmann, as a novelist, probably had no intention of writing a sociological study, or—for this seems more like what the rabbi really yearns for in the way of reading—a nice positive sampling” (“About Jews” 199). The rabbi demands that Kaufmann (and by extension Roth and other Jewish novelists) serve as a vicar for the Jewish people, acting as their representative in the broader world.

The demand for representativeness or sociological accuracy in fiction is one side of a universalizing burden placed on power-minority authors writing in the United States, and, as such, Roth shares the fight against these universalist demands with Morrison. While the next chapter will address Morrison’s argument against the “sociological” in greater depth, briefly discussing Morrison and Roth together clarifies the specific stakes of each author’s resistance to “representative” readings of their narratives. First, minority writers like Roth and Morrison face a minoritizing demand for universality that, following the language used by Rabbi Seligson and by Morrison in her non-fiction prose, we can call a demand for “sociological” accuracy. Referring to “sociology” as a reading strategy, not an academic discipline, Morrison argues that “Since the discussion of Black literature in critical terms is unfailingly sociology and almost never art criticism, it is important for me to shed those considerations from my work at the outset” (Morrison 214).<sup>74</sup> Morrison rejects the assumption that her characters, because they are black, serve as representatives of what black people or black lives are like. Similarly, Roth argues that Sheldon Grossbart, the antagonist of “Defender of the Faith,” is “not meant to represent The Jew, or Jewry, nor does the story indicate that the writer intends him to be understood that way by the reader. Grossbart is depicted as a single blundering human

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<sup>74</sup> “Memory, Creation, and Writing” (1984).

being” (“About Jews” 201). According to both Roth and Morrison, fiction *as fiction* does not serve as a study of black life or Jewish life, and its characters must not be read as character sketches. According to the minoritizing universality of “sociological” readings, the unmarked, white fiction of the United States can take on the universal themes of human experience or of art for art’s sake, but any marked, non-white, or ethnically-specific literature is supposed to represent the characteristic nature of its particular group. In other words, every representation of a character from a power-minority is universalized as a claim about the sociological reality of that minority.<sup>75</sup> Roth responds that “what fiction does and what the rabbi would like it to do are two entirely different things. The concerns of fiction are not those of a statistician—or of a public relations firm” (“About Jews” 200).<sup>76</sup>

The easily assumed universality of white, unmarked characters presents minority writers in the United States with a second universalizing demand: Morrison and Roth have each faced and refused calls to stop writing about black or Jewish characters and write, instead, about unmarked, white-majority characters. While the calls for Morrison to write about white characters instead of black Americans comes largely from the majority community—as she frames it, white readers and critics demand that she write about white people in order to be taken seriously—Roth faces calls from within the Jewish minority to stop representing them and write about the white majority instead.

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<sup>75</sup> Roth points out the peculiarity of this demand by reminding readers like Rabbi Seligson that “*Madame Bovary* is hardly recognizable as a sociological study either, having at its center only a single, dreamy, provincial Frenchwoman, and not one of every kind of provincial Frenchwoman, too” (“About Jews” 199).

<sup>76</sup> Roth turns for support against the rabbi’s call for statistical accuracy to one of the most quintessentially Jewish stories: “Literary works do not take as their subjects characters and events which have impressed a writer primarily by the *frequency* of their appearance. For example, how many Jewish men, as we know them, have come nearly to the brink of plunging a knife into their only son because they believed God had demanded it of them? The story of Abraham and Isaac derives its meaning from something other than its being a familiar, recognizable, everyday occurrence. The test of any literary work is not how broad its range of representation...To confuse a ‘balanced portrayal’ with a novel is finally to be led into absurdities” (“About Jews” 199).

Morrison faces white readers asking “When will you write about me,” and Roth faces Jewish readers asking “When will you stop writing about me?” The differences between these requests are tied to the complicated positionings and histories of race and assimilation in America, but each request relies implicitly on a sociological or statistical understanding of minority fiction as representative of a minority and majority fiction as universal. While Morrison and Roth both insist that their fictions should not be read as representative of black or Jewish Americans, they also reject the call to write about the unmarked universality or whiteness, and each author continues to write about the communities that they insist they are not representing.

Roth’s choice of characters walks a narrow line of particularity. On the one hand, Roth lays claim to a certain universal applicability of his fiction. In response to a letter asking if Epstein’s marital infidelity is “a Jewish trait,” Roth points to Anna Karenina’s disastrous affair with Vronsky and wonders, “Who thinks to ask, ‘Is it a Russian trait?’ It is a decidedly human possibility” (“About Jews” 196).<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, he insists on approaching that universality through his own specific thrownness and his own patch of Jewish-American soil. Describing the pains that Grossbart causes Nathan Marx as “problems for most people,” Roth insists that “though the moral complexities are not exclusively a Jew’s, I never for a moment considered that the characters in the story should be anything other than Jews. Someone else may have written [a similar story]...and had at its center Negroes or Irishmen; for me there was no choice” (“About Jews” 200, 201). For Roth, writing about Jews and representing Jews are not coextensive.

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<sup>77</sup> As Roth’s choice of Tolstoy (like his choice of Flaubert) indicates, the assimilation of Russians as white in an unmarked American universality explains why Roth and Morrison, but not Nabokov, face problematic sociological readings of their novels. Russian-Americans may form a minority community, but they are not a racially/ethically-marked minority, so Russian literature has fewer hurdles to jump in order to be read as universally human. Conversely, Morrison’s tendency to write historical fiction accounts, in part, for her exemption from biographical readings.

While Grossbart and Epstein are not representative figures of “Jewishness,” they are specifically Jewish, and Roth takes that specificity seriously. Roth readily admits that his readers have “every right to expect that I be close to the truth as to what might conceivably be the attitudes of a Jewish man of Epstein’s style and history toward marriage, family life, divorce, and fornication,” but he links the appropriateness of this expectation to Epstein’s particularity rather than any supposedly universal traits of Jews: “The story is called ‘Epstein’ because Epstein, not the Jews, is the subject” (“About Jews” 198).<sup>78</sup> Roth argues that, as a novelist, he can write fictions about Jews without making his fictions representative of “The Jews,” but, as the half-dozen letters Roth cites in “Writing About Jews” and the response to it at Yeshiva show, escaping or preventing sociological mis-readings of fictional narratives is not as easy as announcing that your stories should not be read as representations. Few listeners in the audience in 1962 were convinced, even after Ellison’s attempt to deflect the blows.

Along with his claim that fictional portrayals of Jewish characters should not be read as representative samples, Roth argues that such representations can be dangerous. In “Some New Jewish Stereotypes” (1961), a speech delivered at Loyola University one year before his appearance at Yeshiva, Roth roundly condemns two Jewish-American writers for their claims to Jewish representativeness in the years immediately following the Holocaust. The stereotypes in question come from Leon Uris’s novel *Exodus* (1958) and Harry Golden’s essay collection *Only in America* (1958), both published one year

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<sup>78</sup> Roth’s comments on Epstein indicate the fine line he is trying to walk. On the one hand, he does not want readers to see Epstein’s actions as characteristic of Jews or Jewishness—he is not a Jewish emblem—but he simultaneously insists that Epstein’s character is grounded in the particularities of Jewish-American life. These potentially contradictory desires are each rooted in Roth’s concern for particularity: Epstein cannot stand in universally for the Jews, but he also cannot be taken from a stock of universal humanity. Roth’s contentiousness and tendency towards the hyperbolic often result in him making statements in different places that appear to contradict one another—about the sociological verity of *Madam Bovary* and Epstein, for instance—but his commitment to specific locales and particular individuals does not vary.

before *Goodbye, Columbus*. Roth accuses Uris and Golden of fabricating and popularizing conveniently digestible representations of “The Jew” to replace both the “old” stereotypes of anti-Semitism and the historical realities of Jewish ostracization and oppression. Uris takes the brunt of Roth’s attack in the essay, which begins with a sardonic reference to a Pat Boone song from the film adaption of *Exodus* and the observation that “the image of the Jew as patriot, warrior, and battle-scarred belligerent is rather satisfying to a large segment of the American public” (“Stereotypes” 184). Referencing a *New York Post* clipping mailed to him by a woman “demanding some explanation for the ‘anti-Semitism and self-hatred’ she found” in *Goodbye, Columbus*, Roth notes that Uris “claims that his image of the Jewish fighter is a good deal closer to the truth than images of Jews presented by other Jewish writers. I take it that I am one of the others to whom Mr. Uris is referring” (ibid). Uris argues, to the apparent satisfaction of the woman who forwarded the *Post* interview to Roth, that his novel achieves a greater verisimilitude in representing Jews than other, Roth-like Jewish-American writers “who spend their time damning their fathers, hating their mothers, wringing their hands and wondering why they were born” (quoted in “Stereotypes” 184). Uris tells the *Post* that he “wrote *Exodus* because I was sick of apologizing—or feeling that it was necessary to apologize,” and that, while researching and writing his novel, he had a revelation about Jewish history and the Jewish people: “we Jews are not what we have been portrayed to be. In truth, we have been fighters” (ibid). Roth rejects Uris’s revelation as “so bald, stupid and uninformed... that it is not even worth disputing” (ibid). Roth accuses Uris of attempting to fabricate a stereotypical Jewish fighter to replace the old stereotype of Jewish passiveness: “One has the feeling that, single-handed, Uris has set out to counter with his new image of the Jew, the older one that comes down to us in those several stories, the punch line of which is, ‘Play nice, Jakie—don’t fight.’ However, there is not

much value in swapping one simplification for the other” (“Stereotypes” 184-5). The last sentence of that critique indicates the asymmetry of Roth’s disagreement with Uris. Uris dislikes the representations of Jews he perceives in Jewish-American writing, so he develops an alternative representation in his own fiction. Roth disagrees with Uris about the content of his Jewish-fighter image, but he lodges his main objection against the presence of any image: rather than offering a supposedly more accurate image as a substitute, Roth rejects the entire project of representative images.<sup>79</sup>

Roth follows the same line of argumentation in his critique of Harry Golden, “that famous optimist and cracker-barrel philosopher” whose *Carolina Israelite* essays about Jewish successes from Manhattan’s Lower East Side are collected in *Only in America* (“Stereotypes” 186). As opposed to the “battle-scarred belligerent” that Uris presents, Golden’s Jewish stereotype overflows, in Roth’s critique, with nostalgia and sentimentality (“Stereotypes” 184). Playing with a *Commentary* review in which Ted Solotaroff describes Golden as garnishing “the perplexed banalities of the middle class” with “a little Manischewitz horseradish” and presenting it “as the wisdom of the ages,” Roth adds that “in matters Goldenian, I am a schmaltz man myself” (“Stereotypes” 186).

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<sup>79</sup> Roth’s stance carries something of the Second Commandment’s prohibition against graven images. While the iconoclastic command from Sinai has long been interpreted as forbidding idolatry, there is also a strong twentieth-century tradition of reading the injunction against representational images in the context of remembering and memorializing human catastrophes, especially the European Holocaust. Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer offer a compelling meditation on the relationship between the Second Commandment and the Shoah in *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation* (2001). Bernard-Donals and Glejzer argue that “the disaster of the Shoah—in which the victim and the survivor find it impossible to know, or put words to, the experiences in which they find themselves—is located at the junction of the compulsion to speak and the failure of speech...The witness, confronted with the sublime object, is rendered both speechless and is compelled nonetheless to speak” (xi). Zuckerman’s numerous encounters with the literary image of Anne Frank throughout *Zuckerman Bound*, his mother’s senile scribbling of “Holocaust” in the place of her name in *The Anatomy Lesson*, Eli Peck’s entanglement with the DP’s of the Woodenton yeshiva, Jimmy Lustig’s campaign against Yad Vashem, and the nightmare counter-history of *The Plot Against America* (2004) comprise only a small sampling of Roth’s struggle to speak about the historical reality of the Holocaust without creating a false image of it.

Roth argues that the schmaltzy sentimentality of Golden's middle-class reflections of life in ghettoized New York obscure the historically real hardships of immigrant life and of social and economic marginalization. Roth ties the popularity of Golden's happy-ghetto stereotype to a "fascination these days with the idea of Jewish emotionalism" ("Stereotypes" 187). According to Roth, "People who have more sense than to go up to Negroes and engage them in conversation about 'rhythm' have come up to me and asked about my 'warmth.' They think it is flattering—and they think it is true. I do not believe that they think it is complicated" (ibid). As with his critique of Uris, Roth's disagreement with Golden hinges on the substitution of a supposedly positive stereotype for an explicitly negative one. As the parallel to "rhythm" illustrates, the problem with a stereotype is found not only its negative content but, more tellingly, in the belief that a simplified image is representative for a class of people. While Uris and Golden want to generalize positive representations of Jewish people in place of negative representations, Roth wants to do away with representation all together.

Roth argues that Uris and Golden experienced immediate popularity among both Jewish and Gentile readers because their books paste over difficult, complicated histories of Jewish-Gentile relations and offer easily digestible stereotypes in their place: "Golden and Uris burden no one with anything. Indeed much of their appeal is that they help to dissipate guilt, real and imagined. It turns out that the Jews are not poor innocent victims after all—all the time they were supposed to be being persecuted, they were having a good time being warm to one another and having their wonderful family lives" ("Stereotypes" 189). Roth argues that Golden provides "a kind of escape hatch for Gentiles" who might experience pangs of guilt over the history of anti-Semitism, and he offers Jews a collective history free from pains and distortions of ghetto life. Uris provides the same service along a more militant line: "Mr. Uris' discovery that the Jews

are fighters fills him with pride; it fills any number of his Jewish readers with pride as well, and his Gentile readers less perhaps with pride than with relief” (“Stereotypes” 192). *Only in America* and *Exodus* contradict the post-Holocaust image of Jews as powerless victims by challenging, on the one hand, the image of Jews as victims and, on the other, the image of them as powerless: “there is Golden to assure us that even ghettoized Jews were really happy, optimistic, and warm (as opposed to aggrieved, pessimistic, and xenophobic), and there is Uris to say that you don’t have to worry about Jewish vulnerability and victimization after all, the Jews can take care of themselves. They *have* taken care of themselves” (“Stereotypes” 191). In response to a long history of Jewish persecutions culminating in the Shoah, Uris and Golden offer alternative visions of Jews who are anything but victims; Jews can be pugnacious fighters or they can be successful immigrants, but they cannot be victims and certainly not helpless ones. Roth goes so far as attributing the tremendous commercial and popular success of Uris’s novel to the amnesiac functionality of its militant stereotype: “So persuasive and agreeable is the *Exodus* formulation to so many in America that I am inclined to wonder if the burden that it is working to remove from the nation’s consciousness is nothing less than the memory of the holocaust itself, the murder of six million Jews, in all its raw, senseless, fiendish horror” (“Stereotypes” 191). Golden and Uris each obscure the history of victimization, shame, violence and alterity that has marked Jewish-Gentile relations—and particularly the post-Holocaust universal awareness of Jewish suffering—through the anodynes of their happy and/or militant representative Jews.

While Roth’s critique of Golden’s and Uris’ “not victims” content bears some resemblance to the accusations that Roth misrepresents the Jews—and would seem to put him in the same accusatory position as readers like Rabbi Seligman—Roth rejects, rather than calls for, any attempt to correct the image or to present a more accurate sample. The

difference between the two positions stands out even more distinctly in “Imagining Jews” (1974), an essay published in the *New York Review of Books* five years before the publication of *The Ghost Writer*. In the essay, Roth addresses the accusations that he is an anti-Semitic, self-hating Jew, accusations that originally targeted “Defender of the Faith” and “Epstein” but resurged after the publication of *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969). Roth cites Marie Syrkin’s attack on that novel in the pages of *Commentary*, a diatribe in which she predictably but viciously compares *Portnoy* to Nazi propaganda and name-drops Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels and Julius Streicher: “the anti-semitic indictment straight through Hitler is that the Jew is the defiler and destroyer of the Gentile world” (quoted in “Imagining” 278). In his reply, Roth slyly argues that the propagandistic connection to Nazi anti-Semitism lies in the *form* of her critique rather than the *content* of his fiction: “Now, arguing as she does for what a Jew is not and could not be, other than to a pathological Nazi racist, Syrkin leaves little doubt that she herself has very strongly held ideas as to what a Jew in fact is, or certainly ought to be. As did Theodor Herzl; as did Weizmann, Jabotinsky, and Nahman Syrkin; as did Hitler, Goebbels, and Streicher” (“Imagining” 279).<sup>80</sup> Roth draws attention away from the specific content of Syrkin’s assumption of what a Jew is or is not and interrogates the certainty with which she holds her definition. Roth’s scandalous pairing of historical figures—Zionist founders of Israel and Nazi designers of the final solution—emphasizes the danger of Syrkin’s assumption that some definition of Jewishness or of Jews-in-general is possible. Syrkin criticizes Roth’s content, but he answers that, regardless of content, any fixed definition of “The Jew” shares its *structure* with Nazi anti-Semitism. Roth’s reply to Marie Syrkin is exactly

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<sup>80</sup> Herzl is generally considered the founder of modern political Zionism. Chaim Weizmann was, among other things, the first president of the State of Israel. Ze’ev Jabotinsky and Nahman Syrkin are central figures in Revisionist Zionism (the precursor to the Likud party) and Labor Zionism, respectively. Nahman Syrkin was also the father of the Marie Syrkin who found *Portnoy* so offensive.

homologous to Arendt's claim that Adolf Eichmann's crime originated not with a specific hatred of the Jews but with his content-neutral "thoughtlessness." Arendt argues that, because the root of Eichmann's crime lay in his acceptance of the party line without exercising his capacity for judgment—i.e. without thinking from the position of everyone else—the appropriate response to Eichmann cannot be an equally unthinking acceptance of a different party line. In the same fashion, Roth argues that, to stringently oppose anti-Semitic propaganda, we must go beyond reflexively supporting pro-Jewish boosting and exercise our indispensable faculties of judgment.

At the end of "Imagining Jews," Roth argues that the real goal for the Jewish writer is not to imagine representative Jewish characters but, on the contrary, to imagine Jews who are not representative. In a reversal of Stephen Dedalus's famous (and famously presumptive) artistic program, Roth suggests that "the task for the Jewish novelist has not been to go forth to forge in the smithy of his soul the *uncreated* conscience of his race, but to find inspiration in a conscience that has been created and undone a hundred times over in this century alone" ("Imagining" 279-80). Roth sees no shortage of collective identities available for Jewish writers (or readers), and he argues that the real challenge is discovering an individual identity in the midst of so many pre-fabricated options: "out of the myriad of prototypes, the solitary being to whom history or circumstance has assigned the appellation 'Jew' has had, as it were, to imagine what *he* is and is not, must and must not do" ("Imagining" 280). Roth insists that individual Jews in America are responsible for discovering and living out an individual, rather than a collective, Jewish-American identity, a task that he describes, in reference to his Jewish-American students at the Iowa Writing Workshop, as learning "the burdensome contradictions of their own predicament" ("Stereotypes" 189). Roth also insists that

Jewish-American writers must address the particular burdens that the predicament of identity presents Jews in America in the second half of the twentieth century.

As part of his response to Rabbi Seligson's charge of defamation, Roth notes that "the success of the struggle against the defamation of Jewish character in this country has itself made more pressing the need for a Jewish self-consciousness that is relevant to this time and place, where neither defamation nor persecution are what they were elsewhere in the past" ("About Jews" 208). If, in the past, a collective isolation from and opposition to Gentile majorities provided a useful and perhaps necessary kernel of identity for individual Jews, the fading of overt anti-Semitism in America (not to mention the blending of Jewish and Gentile workplaces, homes, etc.) robs that existential shortcut of its effectiveness. While progress against anti-Semitic defamation and discrimination is rightly celebrated, Roth points out that, for Jewish-Americans, being an American also complicates the business of being a Jew: "The cry 'Watch out for the goyim!' at times seems more the expression of an unconscious wish than of a warning: Oh that they were out there, so that we could be together in here!" ("About Jews" 209). If "we" cannot be simply identified over and against "them," then how should we identify ourselves? Roth's response is Williams-esque in its call for a self-consciousness "relevant to this time and place": while history and tradition are part of what form the present, they cannot offer, in advance, an identity or a consciousness that will meet the demands of the moment.

Roth's response also sheds light on his two-pronged deconstruction of the binomial nomenclature "Jewish-American." First, Roth argues that the division between Jewish and American does not survive close scrutiny because for someone of his upbringing and background being Jewish and being American are one and the same. This is a problem for the out-group limits on identity or the "them" side of the equation: how

can it be “us vs them” if we are them. Second, Roth simultaneously argues that neither Jewish nor American identities—the in-group definitions on the “us” side of the equation—are as coherent as an “us” vs “them” model would have us believe. Roth’s resistance to Jewish stereotypes, whether old or new, and his rejection of definite ideas about who a Jew is, whether from Herzl or Hitler, indicate his commitment to the “burdensome contradictions” of Jewish identity. He is equally committed to recognizing the burdens of *American* identity. Roth’s critique of Golden, for instance, targets his sunny representation of America along with his schmaltzy portrait of Jewishness: “Golden assures them [Gentiles] (as he assures the Jews) that we [Jews] are a happy, optimistic, endearing people, and also that we live in a top notch country...Only—Golden tells them—in America! (“Stereotypes” 189-90). For Roth, Golden’s saccharine portrayals of Jewish-American life distort both Jewish and American histories, and Roth rejects convenient American stereotypes just as adamantly as their Jewish counterparts. American identities, Jewish or otherwise, must be built from the ground up as responses to the particular accidents of time and place.

### **ONLY IN AMERICA**

For Roth, Jewish-American identity is complicated by both centripetal (tending toward the center) and centrifugal (tending away from the center) forces. The centrifugal forces operating on Jewish identity are often the easiest to see in Roth’s work because of his long-standing debate with a certain strain of Jewish critics. In “Writing American Fiction” (1961), an essay that originated as a contribution to Stanford University’s 1960 symposium on “Writing in America Today,” Roth responds to “a statement attributed to Malamud which goes, ‘All men are Jews’” by insisting that “in fact, we know this is not

so; even the men who are Jews aren't sure they're Jews" ("American" 174). In the same essay, Roth examines the homologous centrifugal force at work in American identity. Roth begins "Writing American Fiction" by outlining the major developments of a 1957 Chicago murder case as it was reported and eventually taken over by the tabloid press. The story of Pattie and Babs Grimes begins as a tragedy—two sisters, missing for months, found dead under a melting snow bank—but quickly turns into a farce of staged photo-ops, essay contests, kitchen renovations and parakeets named after the dead girls. Roth uses the outlandishness of the case as evidence, along with the spectacle of America's first televised presidential debates between Nixon and Kennedy, to demonstrate the challenge to narrative representation posed by everyday occurrences in twentieth-century America: "the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination" ("American" 167). The unbelievable character of everyday experience presents a two-part challenge to the American fiction writer: first, an author has to imagine something striking enough to compete with unbelievable reality, and, second, he has to make that something appear plausible. Roth notes that this conflict between imagination and reality carries a peculiar temptation to escapism. Referring to the Nixon-Kennedy debate, Roth claims that, while he found himself "beginning to wish I had invented it," a viewer "need not have been a fiction writer to wish that *someone* had invented it, that it was not real and with us" ("American" 168, emphasis original). In other words, characteristically American experience in the twentieth-century alienates the Americans who experience it.

"Writing American Fiction" presents the centrifugal force in American identity as a kind of dislocation or expatriation: "When Edmund Wilson says that after reading

*Life* magazine he feels he does not belong to the country depicted there, that he does not live in this country, I understand what he means” (“American” 169). While Wilson’s misrecognition could be taken as a narrow critique of *Life* magazine or the post-war consumer culture for which it stands metonymically, Roth extends Wilson’s statement to include American experience that does not pass through that particular media lens: “for a writer of fiction to feel that he does not really live in his own country—as represented by *Life* or by what he experiences when he steps out the front door—must seem a serious occupational impediment” (ibid). Roth argues that this internal exile—a mental Siberia, if you will—presents a particular challenge to American writers: “For what will his subject be? His landscape?” (ibid). For a writer as introspective as Roth, we might easily read “subject” as both topic and subjectivity. Having multiple and conflicting claims on your identity is not, for Roth, a narrowly Jewish or even necessarily a minority position. By pointing towards the mass media projections of ideal identities, Roth indicates that the mythical American prerogative of self-invention is always and already in contention with (or even conspiring with) the simplified, leveling ideations of identity that circulate independently of any individual subject and define her or him from the outside. Roth touches the same note in “After Eight Books,” a 1974 interview with Joyce Carol Oates, when he argues that “Defying a multitude of bizarre projections, or submitting to them, would seem to me at the heart of everyday living in America, with its ongoing demand to be something palpable and identifiable” (Oates 86). As he does in his 1960 address, Roth describes these conflicting demands of American identity as including but not limited to the projections of mass culture: “Everyone is invited to imitate in conduct and appearance the grossest simplifications of self that are mercilessly projected upon them by mass media and advertising, while they must, of course, also contend with the myriad expectations that they arouse in those with whom they have personal and immediate

associations” (Oates 86-7). Americans, like Jews, are internally displaced people whose individual experiences cannot be represented by a sociological study or a nice positive sample. We should, of course, note that universalizing some aspects of this predicament does not, in any way, preclude the real existence and substantial impact of specific external stereotypes or internal constraints of immigrant or minority populations. At the same time, Roth insists that neither America nor American identity are fixed, stable, or internally coherent ideas.

The inherent fracturing of American identity is a major subject of Roth’s long career. Aimee Pozorski offers an extended analysis of Roth’s always-already fractured American landscape in her 2010 study *Roth and Trauma: The Problem of History in the Later Works (1995-2010)*. In *Roth and Trauma*, Pozorski seeks, in her words, “to interpret the moments in Roth’s fiction where the birth of the American project reveals turbulence and unpredictability right down to our present moment, rather than the stability and freedom we have been promising our children for the last 235 years” (Pozorski x). Focusing on Roth’s works from *Sabbath’s Theater* (1995) to *Nemesis* (2010), Pozorski argues that Roth’s fiction portrays an internal division in American identity that reaches all the way back to the founding of the nation: “In place of a fall from innocence, Roth’s late fiction shows us that we should not have been surprised at the vexatious state of our union in the new millennium” (ibid). Pozorski makes the important point that Roth’s turn to the past is oriented towards the present: he is not writing about the past as an exercise in history or memory but as strategy for interpreting the present. Pozorski is also careful to distinguish between ontological and epistemological claims about American identity in Roth’s fiction, and she argues that twentieth-century challenges to monolithic American culture have taken place in the realm of epistemology: “Roth sees American society not as damaged after World War II,

but rather as more self-conscious about wounds that have always been present” (Pozorski 9)<sup>81</sup>. For Pozorski, Roth’s engagement with historical crises like the Vietnam War, in *American Pastoral* (1997), or McCarthyism, in *I Married a Communist* (1998), point back past the twentieth century to the trauma of the nation’s founding. Rather than destroying a previously intact American culture, the catastrophes of the twentieth century reveal the ways in which that the culture was already fractured.

Pozorski argues that Roth’s later oeuvre portrays the crises of the twentieth century as revealing, rather than causing, the division between American history and American ideals. Her portrayal of Roth is remarkably consistent with Arendt’s argument that twentieth-century catastrophes revealed an already-existing break in the tradition of Western culture. While she does not explicitly reference Arendt’s argument about the modern break with tradition, Pozorski does look to Arendt’s *On Revolution* (1963) as a source for her “traumatic foundation” model of American history.<sup>82</sup> Pozorski bases much of her claim for the traumatic status of the American Revolution on “Arendt’s reading of the birth of a nation and political ideologies, not in terms of strategies and hoped-for events, but rather as violent surprises that only seem to take on coherent meaning after the fact” (Pozorski 13-4)<sup>83</sup>. While Pozorski uses Arendt’s study of the revolution to pivot

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<sup>81</sup> Pozorski continues, “His real question here, then, isn’t what has damaged American society after World War II, but rather, given everything we know about American history, ‘why do we believe so passionately that our society has *only* been damaged since then?’” (Pozorski 9).

<sup>82</sup> “I propose that, in each of these cases [*American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, *The Plot Against America*, *Exit Ghost*] the catastrophic event that drives the plot and the whole of American history is the founding of the nation itself—a founding, a war, we have never quite possessed—a gesture toward democracy that we have never fully grasped” (Pozorski 11).

<sup>83</sup> At times, Pozorski’s treatment of Arendt reads like a direct refutation of the “Tea Party” style of conservative originalism that dominated the American political scene the year Pozorski’s book was published: “Arendt’s point is well taken. Although part of the American mythic imagination proposes that the country’s founders had an ideal in mind and set out to fight for it with neither fear nor worry about its consequences, Arendt speculates that meaning emerges in the making of the act. So, in Arendt’s model, you start clueless, but then ‘the innermost meaning of its plot [becomes] manifest’ in an event that was actually an accident... To rethink the revolution in terms of trauma would mean to understand why and how

towards a trauma-theory reading of the nation's founding, I want to stay with Arendt's own understanding of the revolution in terms of her own political thought. For Arendt, because the American Revolution was a beginning rather than an end, the direction of the American project and the content of an American identity are and have always been both necessarily contestable and historically contested. To paraphrase Roth's refutation of Malamud, even people who are Americans are not sure they are Americans (an uncertainty stretching from Thomas Paine to Thomas Pynchon).

As Pozorski notes, Roth's interest in the centrifugal forces of American national identity has gone largely unmarked in Roth criticism: "Roth's consistent representation of twentieth-century American history as retroactively exposing a trauma at the heart of the American project has, to date, been met with critical silence" (Pozorski 1). This relative lack of attention to Roth's engagement with traumatic American history can be attributed, at least in part, to the considerable attention critics have given to Roth's treatment of traumatic Jewish history and the claims of Jewish identity. That critical attention was driven, in turn, by the public reception and controversy of Roth's early work among some Jewish and Jewish-American readers. Pozorski's project helps us to see that Roth's work constitutes a radically fractured, uncertain crisis of identity for Americans broadly and not only for Jews or Jewish Americans.<sup>84</sup> She also indicates how Roth's fiction challenges the national tendency for self-congratulations and complacency that Roth locates in the title of Golden's *Only in America*. For Roth, the business of being Jewish or of being American always implies a lack of identity, an internal fracture or displacement that unsettles individual Jews and Americans.

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characters in history and literature were forever going back to that originary moment in an attempt to find some meaning" (Pozorski 17).

<sup>84</sup> This present chapter adds to the work Pozorski has begun by extending this focus to the books immediately preceding her selected period in Roth's career and by connecting Roth's interest in American identity to Roth's formal developments and narrative experimentations in the late-1970s and 1980s.

If, for Roth, Jewish-American identity is marked by two parallel but distinguishable centrifugal forces, it is further complicated by a centripetal force that binds the two identities together. In *The Facts*, Roth claims that, for someone of his background, being Jewish and being American are very nearly the same thing: “Not only did growing up Jewish in Newark in the thirties and forties, Hebrew School and all, feel like a perfectly legitimate way of growing up American but, what’s more, growing up Jewish as I did and growing up American seemed to me indistinguishable” (*Facts* 122). In a 1981 interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Roth describes his childhood as characteristically American by virtue of being distinctly Jewish: “I lived in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood and attended public schools where about 90 percent of the pupils and teachers were Jewish. To live in an ethnic or cultural enclave like this wasn’t unusual for an urban American child of my generation” (Finkielkraut 106). Roth is not arguing that Jewish life and American life are synonymous. On the contrary, Roth notes that the Jewish neighborhood of his childhood existed side-by-side with German, Irish, Italian and other immigrant communities and that, while those “neighborhoods became rivalrous, competing, somewhat xenophobic subcultures within the city,” each particular location and community “came to have an Americanized style all its own” (Finkielkraut 107). American identity cannot be synonymous with Jewish identity—or Irish or German or Russian, for that matter—because the plurality of communities precludes any proprietary claim on Americanness, but, Roth argues, growing up in the particularity of the Jewish community, rather than in an imagined America-in-general, constituted his specifically-American upbringing. Roth presents American identity as something experienced from the ground up, and, as such, it can only be claimed through the particularities of one’s own individual experience. Put simply, rather than checking his Jewishness at the door of collective American experience, Roth claims the

particularity of being a Jew from Weequahic as the ticket which guarantees his entrance into public participation: “I hadn’t any doubts that we Jews were already American or that the Weequahic section was anything other than a quintessentially American urban neighborhood...I was exhilarated to feel in contact with the country’s much-proclaimed, self-defining heterogeneity” (*Facts* 37). In Roth’s estimation, any generalized American identity that is not grounded in the local soil will lack the substantial reality of his Jewish-American, heterogeneous childhood. The local and the particular trump the universal and the general.

Roth’s embrace of local particularity helps explain Roth’s at times contradictory statements about his position in the American or Jewish-American literary canons. In his 2007 book on Roth, Brauner marks an apparent evolution in Roth’s sense of himself as an American writer. Citing a 2005 interview of Roth published in the *Guardian*, Brauner argues that “if, earlier in his career, Roth saw (or claimed to see) no tension between the identities designated by the adjectives ‘Jewish’ and ‘American,’ here they seem to have become almost mutually exclusive” (Brauner 15). The “here” Brauner refers to is an answer Roth gives to the interviewer’s assertion that *The Plot Against America* (2004) was Roth’s “great Jewish history”: “It’s my most American book. It’s about America. About America. It’s an American dystopia. You would never tell Ralph Ellison that *Invisible Man* is his most Negro book, would you?” (Krasnik).<sup>85</sup> Brauner parses the significance of Roth’s repetition of “America,” arguing that it “is clearly intended to negate, rather than simply refine or qualify, the word ‘Jewish,’ and Roth’s distaste for the idea that the two identities might be yoked together to form a hyphenated, hybrid genre—‘Jewish-American’ fiction—is unequivocal” (Brauner 15). While Brauner correctly notes

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<sup>85</sup>“It no longer feels a great injustice that I have to die” (Interview with Martin Krasnik). The Guardian (G2) 14 December 2005: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/dec/14/fiction.philiproth>

Roth's dissatisfaction with the hyphenated Jewish-American label, he mischaracterizes the relationship between the two hyphenated terms. Roth's emphasis of "American" does not negate the novel's specifically Jewish content—a content that is too obvious to allow a straight-faced denial—but it does reject the claim that its Jewish content places the book in a subset of American literature or makes it less universally American. Roth's immediate reference of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, a reference Brauner omits from his citation of the interview, indicates that Roth is defending the universal Americanness of novels marked with racial or ethnic specificity.<sup>86</sup> Roth goes on to tell Krasnik that questions of whether or not a particular writer is representative of a minority group "are newspaper cliches. Jewish literature. Black literature. Everyone who opens a book enters the story without noticing these labels" (Krasnik). Roth emphasizes the particular story over the sociological representations, and he connects the particularity of the writing with the particularity of lived experience: "You can't talk about this without walking straight out into horrible cliches that say nothing about human beings. America is first and foremost ... it's my language. And identity labels have nothing to do with how anyone actually experiences life" (Krasnik, ellipsis original). While Roth's reference to America

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<sup>86</sup> Antiquated racial language aside, Roth's choice of Ellison as a comparison is interesting, in part, because he is a problematic choice. Ellison, after all, only published one book, so comparatives and superlatives do not apply to his literary oeuvre. Beyond the singularity of *Invisible Man*, Roth is well aware that Ellison's book was, as a matter of historical fact, received contentiously by a number of readers precisely because of its racial politics. Roth is, or should be, well aware of that history because *Invisible Man*'s reception was responsible for Ellison's presence at Yeshiva University the night he intervened for Roth during a particularly contentious question-and-answer session. While there are dozens of African-American writers who would have better fit with Roth's rhetorical purposes—Toni Morrison is perhaps the most obvious example—Roth chooses Ellison, whose defense he recalls with gratitude in *The Facts* and whose novel provides the final moment in "Writing American Fiction": "For here too the hero is left with the simple, stark fact of himself. he is as alone as a man can be. Not that he hasn't gone out into the world; he has gone out into it, and out into it, and out into it—but at the end he chooses to go underground and live there and to wait. And it does not seem to him a cause for celebration either" ("American" 182). Roth's particular interest in Ellison shows up frequently in unexpected corners of Roth's writing, but, while it certainly deserves further inquiry, the connection Roth feels between his work and Ellison's falls outside the scope of this particular project.

as “my language” offers many potentially fruitful avenues of interpretation, for now we should notice that America-as-language works against the notion of American-as-identity, further complicating any supposed attempt to swap an American identity for a Jewish one. We should also note that, if America is a language, then it must be as varied and pluralistic as the communities that speak it.

Roth insists that his language is universally American not in spite of but precisely through its connection to a particular time and place. When Alain Finkielkraut, the interviewer for Roth’s 1981 interview with the *Observateur*, tries to place Roth in a “New York-Jewish school” with Bellow and Malamud, Roth rejects all three aspects of the label—New York, Jewish, school—before noting that each of them has found his own way of “transforming what once had been the imaginative property of anecdotal local colorists...into a fiction having entirely different intentions, but which nonetheless remains grounded in the colorful specificity of the locale” (*Observateur* 108). Locale is, for Roth, the reason that his fiction must be Jewish and must be American, and, at the same time, it prevents his fiction from representing either Jews or America. Because of the specificity of Roth’s locale, he writes about an America that is specifically Jewish, an America in which “each [neighborhood] came to have an Americanized style of its own...Rather than growing up intimidated by the monolithic majority—or in defiance of it or in awe of it—I grew up feeling a part of the majority composed of the competing minorities” (Finkielkraut 106-7). Simultaneously, and for precisely the same reasons, Roth presents his local Jewishness as inescapably American: “What I still can recall from my Hebrew School education is that whatever else it may have been for my generation to grow up Jewish in America, it was usually entertaining. I don’t think that an English Jewish child would necessarily felt that way and, of course, for millions of Jewish children east of England, to grow up Jewish was tragic” (*Facts* 122). Roth’s fiction

demonstrates a profound and lasting commitment to what William Carlos Williams, another New Jersey-born author with strong immigrant ties, refers to as the local soil. For Williams, the universal appeal and success of a work of art relies on the work's grounding in the particulars of its own time and place, and any attempt to transcend the local by jumping straight to universal truths or forms will fail. Roth offers a very Williams-esque description of his literary project when he argues that "America has the only literary audience that I can ever imagine taking any sustained pleasure in my fiction. America is the place I know best in the world. It's the *only* place I know in the world. My consciousness and my language were shaped by America" (Finkelkraut 110). Roth's local America, as is clear from his fiction as well as his essays and interviews, is inescapably Jewish, and his Jewishness, rather than transcending his culture or nationality, remains resolutely American. Roth's particularity ties his fiction to Jews and to America as surely as it prevents him from claiming to represent all Jews or all Americans.

Roth's outright rejection of "Jewish-American" as an identifying label for his fiction appears to be motivated, as Brauner notes, by "what he sees as the narrow dogmatism of identity politics operating in contemporary American literary studies, and in the larger society" (Brauner 15). In a section of the *Guardian* interview cited by Brauner, Roth dismisses identity labels as narrowly political and therefore illegitimate as tools for literary analysis: "I don't accept that I write Jewish-American fiction. I don't buy that nonsense about black literature or feminist literature. Those are labels made up to strengthen some political agenda" (Krasnik). Roth's resistance to politics based in a narrow conception of pre-determined identities is consistent with his insistence on the

particularity of fiction.<sup>87</sup> In his interview with the *Observer*, Roth responds to the charge, leveled at him by *The Village Voice*, that he hates women. Roth ironically locates the charge of misogyny in the universalizing “discoveries” of a problematically identitarian feminism: “in 1974 the world had just recently discovered that women were good and only good, persecuted and only persecuted, exploited and only exploited, and I had depicted a woman who was not good, who persecuted others and who exploited others” (Finkielkraut 101). As with his defense of Epstein from Rabbi Seligson, Roth insists that the only acceptable criteria for judging either fiction or people are specific to individuals. He had depicted *a* woman, but she was read and judged as a representative of *all* women. But, as a host of responses by readers and critics of Roth’s work from the late 1950s through (at least) 2005 indicate, denying that his work is representative will not prevent people from reading his narratives as representations of Jews, of women, of himself. If it were that easy, then all of critical theory could be summed up in the first axiom of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*: “People are different from each other” (Sedgwick 22). The claim of particularity is, as both Sedgwick and Roth demonstrate, not sufficient in itself. Sedgwick may, at first glance, seem to be a strange correlate for Roth, but her unyielding commitment to that deceptively challenging axiom and its elevation of individual experience and embodiment over the simplifying labels of identity politics has more than a little in common with Roth’s fiction. Her recognition that specific statements about human beings, even when they explicitly distance themselves from universalizing pronouncements, tend to carry “a hidden underpinning of the categorical imperative” helps explain the longevity of Roth’s struggle against

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<sup>87</sup> A less charitable reading of Roth might interpret his apolitical stance as conservative foot-dragging or outright obstruction. While Roth may, at times, be guilty of this convenient blindness to certain types of privilege enjoyed by members of unmarked groups (white heterosexual men, etc.), this chapter argues that his narrative structures provide a third-way forward that is neither proscriptive identity politics nor reactionary dismissal of political bodies.

oversimplified identity politics (Sedgwick 59).<sup>88</sup> Roth's long-term commitment to the local soil of his inescapably Jewish-American experience makes his novels especially vulnerable to being read as universalized, categorical representations of Jews in America.

### **THE PROBLEMS THEMSELVES AND THE NEED FOR JUDGMENT**

The last five decades of unbroken critical conversation about Roth's representation of Jews indicates the tendency of readers, even careful readers, to universalize his individual characters into representatives of all Jewish people. An equally long and remarkably productive literary career indicates that, while Roth rejects the notion that his works represent all Jews, he has no intention of not writing about Jews. Roth's body of work, published in every decade from the 1950s to the 2010s, overwhelmingly consists of narrative worlds that are specifically, but neither exclusively nor definitively, Jewish. Roth argues that this specificity makes his work characteristically American: American identity is necessarily pluralistic and cannot be reduced to a pure form that excludes the Jewish (or Japanese or Jamaican) particularity of lives through which Americans experience their Americanness. Roth's fiction presents a necessary connection between his characters' Jewish and American identities, but, no matter how inextricable those identities may be, their coexistence is never a simple correspondence. Claiming that being Jewish is one way of being American resolves neither the internal contradictions of being either individually nor the compounded challenges of being both simultaneously.

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<sup>88</sup> Sedgwick argues, "Realistically, what brings me to this work [antihomophobic theory] can hardly be that I am a woman, or a feminist, but that I am this particular one" (ibid). Roth is a particular American author who writes about America through his particularly Jewish experience, and, to paraphrase Sedgwick, we cannot possibly know in advance what will result from that particular positioning.

While he rejects the “sociological” demands of readers like Rabbi Seligson who want a nice, positive sampling of Jewish characters or of writers like Golden and Uris who present Jews as collectively triumphant, Roth does not claim that artistic license frees him from any and all responsibilities to concerned Jewish readers: “What makes it problematical is that Jews who register strong objections to what they see as damaging fictional portrayals of Jews are not necessarily philistine or paranoid. If their nerve endings are frayed, it is not without cause or justification” (Finkelkraut 108). Roth confesses that, even in the self-described security of his Jewish childhood, he grew up understanding that being Jewish connected him to a history of risk and oppression that he could not escape: “This was the definition of the Jew as sufferer, the Jew as object of ridicule, disgust, scorn, contempt, derision, of every heinous form of persecution and brutality, including murder. If the definition was not supported by my own experience, it surely was by the experience of my grandparents and their forebears, and by the experience of our European contemporaries” (ibid). Roth understands and sympathizes with the legitimate concerns that Jewish people express about both the threat of anti-Semitic violence and the physical, mental and emotional scars borne by victims that violence, but he does not accept the prescriptions for fiction writing that his detractors advocate as a response:

In the aftermath of the horrors that have befallen millions of Jews in this century, it isn't difficult to understand their concern. In fact, it's the ease with which one understands it that presents a problem of conflicting loyalties that's difficult to solve. For however much I may loathe anti-Semitism...however much I might wish to console its victims, my job in a work of fiction is not to offer consolation to Jewish sufferers or to mount an attack upon their persecutors or to make the Jewish case to the undecided. (Finkelkraut 109)

Roth does not deny that Jewish people, in America and elsewhere, in the twentieth century and before, have faced and still face threats to their economic and physical well

being, and he acknowledges that some of those threats exist specifically because they are Jews (that is, in addition to a general human vulnerability). Roth does not deny the historical reality of Jewish suffering, but he does argue that fiction should not present presumptive solutions to the complex historical problems of anti-Semitism, exclusion, and oppression. Comforting Jewish victims, attacking anti-Semites and persuading neutral gentiles are all foreclosed and foreclosing solutions, and Roth explicitly rejects them as potential aims for narrative fiction.

Towards the end of his argument against Golden's and Uris's treatments of Jewish victimization, Roth offers a particularly effective illustration of the dangers of representing presumptive solutions to complex problems. Roth points to coverage from three subsequent weeks of *Life* magazine from November 28 to December 12 of 1960: "One week *Life* magazine presents on its cover a picture of Adolf Eichmann; weeks later, a picture of Sal Mineo as a Jewish freedom fighter." ("Stereotypes" 191). Roth misspeaks about the magazine covers—the November 28 and December 5 covers feature Carroll Baker and the Baltimore Colts, respectively—but those two issues of *Life* carry a two-part "confession" written by Eichmann himself and published along with photographs of Eichmann's life from childhood to Argentina and photographs documenting Nazi extermination camps and the rail cars that transported European Jews to their deaths.<sup>89</sup> The cover of *Life* on December 12, immediately following the second week of Eichmann's confession, features Sal Mineo and Jill Haworth in publicity photograph for Otto Preminger's adaptation of *Exodus*. Roth argues that the easy turn in coverage from Eichmann to *Exodus* presents a false closure to the open wounds of the Shoah: "A crime to which there is no adequate human response, no grief, no compassion, no vengeance

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<sup>89</sup> The piece carries this title in the November 28 issue: "The Editors of Life Present a Major Historical Document: Eichmann Tells His Own Damning Story." (49:22, page 19).

that is sufficient seems, in part then, to have been avenged. And when the scales appear at last to begin to balance, there cannot but be a sigh of relief” (“Stereotypes” 191-2). Roth criticizes *Life* magazine for the same major reasons that Arendt criticizes Eichmann’s trial of the following year. For Arendt, the theatrical nature of the Eichmann trial—which, no matter how legitimate, was also clearly a show trial—obscured the nature of Eichmann’s crimes through its insistence on retribution. The prosecution in the Eichmann case presented the trial as a settling of accounts, but Arendt questions whether the crimes that together constitute the Shoah can, in fact, be settled. Arendt claims that the trial never “arrived at a clear understanding of the actual horror of Auschwitz” which she argues lies in the unprecedented “crime ‘against the human status,’ or against the very nature of mankind” (Arendt *EJ* 267-8). She argues that, by charging Eichmann with crimes against the Jewish people and trying him in the Jewish state, the Israeli justice system unintentionally reduced the significance of his monstrous actions. In Arendt’s estimation, Eichmann’s prosecutors failed to think seriously about the problem that Eichmann presented them, and that accusation of thoughtlessness constitutes her most damning critique of the trial (a critique indicated by her book’s much-abused subtitle): “That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together...that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem. But it was a lesson, neither an explanation of the phenomenon nor a theory about it” (Arendt *EJ* 288). Eichmann’s prosecutors shared, to an extent that troubled Arendt, the same thoughtlessness that allowed Eichmann himself to participate in the “Final Solution.” The desire for closure or relief or an end to the catastrophic—indicated by Roth’s invocation of an involuntary sigh of relief—provides a powerful motivation for thoughtlessness.

Instead of foreclosing, end-centered solutions to the complex challenges of being Jewish and being American, Roth's fiction offers problems. In an often-cited 1984 interview published in *The Paris Review*, Hermione Lee asks Roth what he knows about his books before he starts writing. Roth answers by emphasizing the importance of problems over solutions: "What matters most isn't there at all. I don't mean the solutions to problems, I mean the problems themselves. You're looking, as you begin, for what's going to resist you" (Lee 120). The problems themselves need to be located and, as Roth's mention of resistance implies, the problems that interest him require a struggle rather than a facile solution. Attempting to provide any predetermined solution is premature, dishonest and potentially dangerous. In "Writing American Fiction," Roth criticizes his fellow American novelists circa 1960 for moving reflexively from being "sufficiently horrified with the landscape" to providing solutions: "they just don't imagine the corruption and vulgarity and treachery of American public life any more profoundly than they imagine human character—that is, the country's private life. All the issues are generally solvable, suggesting that they are not so much awe-struck or horror-struck as they are provoked by some topical controversy" ("American" 169). Roth's criticism echoes Nabokov's disdain for "topical trash" or "serious" literature: the so-called "serious" is frequently a shallow attempt to solve a problem that has not been adequately confronted as a problem. Roth also echoes Nabokov's insistence that fiction must address world-historical problems through a "shimmering go-between" when he excoriates writers who have "tried to meet these phenomena head-on" (Nabokov 5, "American" 172): "It seems to me I have read several books or stories in the past few years in which one character or another starts to talk about 'The Bomb,' and the conversation usually leaves me feeling less than convinced, and in some extreme instances, with a certain amount of sympathy for fallout" ("American" 172). The

supposedly serious, straightforward approach to worldly problems is prone to backfire because fiction that pretends to encompass a problem belittles its complexity and magnitude. Perhaps more troubling, narratives that present problems as eminently solvable have a tendency to represent them as already solved, and, by encouraging readers not to exercise their individual capacities for judgment, they enable the same type of dangerous, irresponsible thoughtlessness that Arendt identifies in her report from Jerusalem.

By making the intractable tractable, literature-as-tract misses its real-world targets, and, as Roth's occasional sympathy for fallout implies, the literature of solutions also frequently fails as literature. For Roth, as for Nabokov, novels must approach the former problem through the latter: Roth locates the real political potential of novels in their status as narrative fiction. Also like Nabokov, Roth intentionally, and perhaps necessarily, plays coy with the politics of form. In his *Paris Review* interview, Roth offers a deceptively indirect answer to Lee's direct question about the political aspirations of his fiction:

If you ask me if I *want* my fiction to change anything in the culture, the answer is still no. What I want is to possess my readers while they are reading my book—if I can, to possess them in ways that other writers don't. Then let them return, just as they were, to a world where everybody else is working to change, persuade, tempt, and control them. The best readers come to fiction to be free of all that noise, to have set loose in them the consciousness that's otherwise conditioned and hemmed in by all that *isn't* fiction. This is something that every child, smitten by books, understands immediately, though it's not at all a childish idea about the importance of reading. (Lee 147-8 italics original)

Roth begins by rejecting any overt attempt at giving his writing an illocutionary or perlocutionary force: his fiction does not intend to change the world or its readers. In this, he sounds very much like Nabokov's rejection of "serious literature" and the problems of his day: readers should read fiction for the experience of fiction, not to become better

persons or to be mobilized in political movements. But, as with Nabokov, Roth's reflexive distancing from "serious literature" becomes a *de facto* political stance given the everyday realities of the world in which his novels circulate. The hard line Roth draws between literature, on one hand, and didacticism or self-improvement, on the other, turns literature somewhat unexpectedly into a vehicle for liberation: while countless other external forces are trying to manipulate and reform our subjectivities, fiction is a space free from attempts at persuasion and control. The freedom of consciousness that Roth positions as an objective good—a good so objective that it needs no defense or thought of being defended—is an escape from social and political claims, but it also returns readers to those worldly claims (it is not an endless liberation or escapism). In a context where, as Roth puts it, "everybody else" and "all that *isn't* fiction" place constraining claims on the individual, a fiction-mediated freedom from those claims constitutes a significant form of political action. While he phrases it in the passive voice—"have set loose in them"—Roth claims that fiction frees up or sets loose a human consciousness that is not pre-determined by the noise of worldly pressures, and freeing up a mind that is responsible for its own self-determination and returning it to the inescapable claims of the messy world is not, as Roth implies, doing nothing. Facilitating self-determination, like establishing democracies, cannot be an imperial or imperious game. The novel cannot know *in advance* what a reader's self-determination will look like, otherwise it would not be *self*-determination. Roth's deceptively ambitious fictional project requires an openness to the individual judgments of readers, an invitation to read and think in ways that the text has not and cannot authorize in advance.

In contrast to both the partisan writings of Golden and Uris and the topical posturing of serious literature, Roth argues that fiction should not try to change its reader's mind or solve the problems of the everyday world. For Roth, the political and

ethical potential of fiction does not lie in the content it represents but in its engagement with readers *as readers of fiction*. Roth tells Lee that “Novels provide readers with something to read. At their best writers change the *way* readers read. That seems to me the only realistic expectation. It also seems to me quite enough” (Lee 147 italics original). Rather than diminishing the importance of novels, Roth’s claim that changing how people read is “quite enough” insists on the importance of reading. In particular, Roth prioritizes the ways people read—their reading practices—over the content of what they read. Because, as Roth indicates, fiction can facilitate self-awareness and individual judgment in a world that is filled with ready-to-hand solutions and external overdeterminations, changing “the *way* readers read” has profound implications for how people live and how they live together.

Rather than claiming a privileged authorial perspective on either the shared world or his own novels, Roth acknowledges and embraces the fact that he cannot control how his books will be read. In an interview about Nathan Zuckerman following the publication of *Zuckerman Bound* (1985), Roth stresses the necessarily uncontrollable and unpredictable nature of reading: “That novelists serve readers in ways that they can’t anticipate or take into account while writing doesn’t come as news to someone who spent eight years with *Zuckerman Bound*. That’s the story told on nearly every one of its 800 pages” (Milbauer and Watson 150). While Roth’s reactions to his early critics—and Zuckerman’s reaction to readers like Alvin Pepler and Milton Appel—might suggest open hostility towards wayward readers, Roth responds to Milbauer’s and Watson’s question about “misreadings” by recuperating and lionizing readings that depart from an author’s own interpretation: “Every other reading is something of a surprise—to use your word, a ‘misreading,’ if what’s meant isn’t reading that’s shallow and stupid but that’s fixed in its course by the reader’s background, ideology, sensibility, etc.” (Milbauer and

Watson 151). Rather than rejecting readings that are conditioned by a reader's unique subjectivity and, as a result, cannot be predicted, Roth accepts and celebrates readings by "skillful, cultivated, highly imaginative, widely read misreaders" as "instructive, even when quite bazaar" (ibid). The difference between shallow misreadings like Rabbi Seligson's and the skillful misreadings that Roth praises lies in their differing relationships to representation and judgment. Seligson demands a narrow representation that cuts off the need, or even the possibility, for readers to exercise their individual judgments. Skillful misreading, by contrast, requires readers to cultivate their capacity for judgment by reading widely and thinking creatively. Skillful misreaders must be able, in Arendt's language, to think from the position of everyone else, to make imaginative inferences about the particular text at hand by drawing on other readings and other readers. In order to change how people read for the better—to cultivate readings that rely on individual judgments rather than determinate representations—Roth's fictional project requires narratives that can welcome a reader without interpolating her, that can present problems without appearing to have solved them. It requires fiction that can replace the determining hail of settled authority with the political potential of self-disclosure. In other words, reading demands the same exacting responsibilities of individual judgment and hospitality that come with sharing a pluralistic world.

#### **NARRATIVE AND HOSPITALITY**

Roth's thematic concern with hospitality and the responsibilities of host and guest appears in his earliest stories. Roth dramatizes the temptation of ready-to-hand answers about identity and hospitality in "Eli, the Fanatic" (1959), first published as part of *Goodbye, Columbus*. Roth's novella and collection of short stories is preoccupied with

conflicts in the self, the family and the community, and his characters frequently find themselves unexpectedly entangled in the Gordian responsibilities of host and guest. Neil Klugman's extended stay with Brenda Patimkin's family in *Goodbye, Columbus*, Lou Epstein's problems with weekend guests and couch-surfing folk-singers, and even Nathan Marx's confrontation with Sheldon Grossbart in "Defender of the Faith" all contribute to Roth's extended, sometimes tortuous engagement with hospitality. Eli Peck, the titular hero of the collection's final story, presents the clearest example of the difficult relationship between hospitality and identity in Roth's early fiction, and his story indicates the often-overlooked importance of hospitality in Roth's oeuvre. Hospitality is a necessary virtue in Roth's pluralistic America of immigrant communities, but hospitality can also intrude on individual identities or lay claim to an overly comfortable at-homeness. As Derrida reminds us in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (1999), "To dare to say welcome is perhaps to insinuate that one is at home here, that one knows what it means to be at home, and that at home one receives, invites, or offers hospitality, thus appropriating for oneself a place to *welcome [accueillir]* the other" (Derrida 15 italics original). The offer of hospitality can be a grab for power or an attempt to simplify the complicated not-at-homeness on which Roth's fiction insists. If welcoming the other is approached as a preemptive solution to the complicated problems of living out a split identity in a shared world, then hospitality becomes a substitute for, rather than an expression of, judgment. Eli's story illustrates the need for and difficulty of an open, responsive welcome of the other that is more than a cover for thoughtlessness.

Eli finds himself in the unenviable position of trying to resolve a community conflict that has spilled over into his home life and his psyche. Eli, a Jewish American lawyer, represents a Jewish clientele from the New Jersey suburb of Woodenton in their conflict with the Yeshivah of Woodenton, a school opened by and for a group of Jewish

refugees from Europe. His clients are worried that the arrival of these refugees will threaten their newly gained acceptance in the otherwise-Anglo suburb. To prevent the European Jews from upsetting the balance of Woodenton and bringing trouble to all its Jewish inhabitants, Eli's clients—who are also his friends and neighbors—charge him with invoking a zoning ordinance against the boarding school. When Eli's wife becomes concerned about his “fanatical” investment in the conflict between their suburb and the immigrant headmaster Tzuref, Eli risks the stability of his marriage rather than simplify the problem: “He'd allowed her no access to him, but still, he was sure, for good reasons: she might tempt him out of his confusion with her easy answers. He could be tempted all right, it was why he fought so hard” (“Eli” 274). Eli risks his place in the community, his marriage and, eventually, his sanity to defend the complexity of the problem itself.

The first easy solution that Eli rejects is the legal prohibition of schools in residential zones. The community members that Eli represents have the law on their side, but the story questions the connection between law and justice from its first few pages. In his first interview with Tzuref, Eli argues that laws, including zoning laws, “protect us...the community” (“Eli” 251). Tzuref momentarily agrees that “The law is the law” before questioning, “When is the law that is the law not the law?” (ibid). Tzuref, who has escaped with his students and assistant from the perverse legality of the Third Reich, enigmatically presses a point that Eli already knows: legality does not guarantee justice. Eli has the challenging realization that, while the legal solution is readily available, it fails to address the complexity of the dispute between the displaced Jewish refugees and the established Jewish-American community: “Too often he wished he were pleading for the other side; though if he were on the other side, then he'd wish he were on the side he was. The trouble was that sometimes the law didn't seem to be the answer, law didn't seem to have anything to do with what was aggravating everybody” (“Eli” 254). Eli

suspects that, whatever the law says, his clients have the weaker claim, but that realization places Eli, the spokesman, in a difficult position: he wants to be hospitable, to find a way of welcoming Tzuref, but he has not been authorized to extend such a welcome. Dropping the case and simply welcoming Tzuref would be another easy solution, but Eli does not have a proprietary claim on Woodenton—it is not simply his home—so he cannot legitimately offer hospitality to the yeshiva (or rewrite zoning ordinances) all on his own. His neighbor Ted reminds him, “When we put our faith and trust in you, is that what we were asking?...We just don’t think this is the community for them. And, Eli, we isn’t me. The Jewish members of the community appointed me, Artie, and Harry to see what could be done. And we appointed you. And what’s happened?” (276). By welcoming the strangers, Eli is betraying the trust of his neighbors. While Ted readily accepts the role of representative and claims to speak for the community, Eli will not accept his appointment as an excuse to either press the legal case or welcome the yeshiva. Eli wants to offer hospitality, but he faces a contradictory set of responsibilities to both the law and his neighbors.

In response to these contradictory claims, Eli, who cannot unilaterally welcome the refugees to Woodenton, tries to bring their plight within the bounds of his personal responsibility—and so within the reach of his personal authority—by figuratively changing places with Tzuref’s assistant. The assistant, referred to most often in the story by the synecdoche of his black hat, represents the conflict feared by the American Jews of Woodenton: the man’s dress marks him as unmistakably foreign and unmistakably Jewish, a combination that Woodenton’s established Jewish community fears will make all Jews appear foreign in the eyes of their Anglo neighbors. After shallowly requesting that the man change his black hat and suit for contemporary American attire and learning that this is the man’s only suit—the only thing, including family, friends, home and

synagogue that he did not lose to the Nazis—Eli stumbles upon a kind of exchange or substitution. If the man in the hat will sacrifice his suit, the outward marker of his identity, then Eli will sacrifice his. In an act as hospitable as narrative can represent, Eli gives the man his own suit (his best suit, besides) as a way of sharing in the sacrifice necessary to welcome the Yeshivah to Woodenton. Eli's wife does not understand the motivation behind Eli's gift: "Why does it have to be *your* suit? Who are you even to decide to give a suit? What about the others?" (272). But, according to Eli's logic, it must be *his* suit precisely because the others have not authorized him to make this deal. The man in the black hat is not welcome in Woodenton, but Eli is: he is part of the community, and if he can give his identity to Tzuref's assistant, then the assistant will be welcomed *as Eli*. Eli welcomes the man by opening his self to the stranger and giving his identity to him. This, in part, is what happens. The man changes his black hat for Eli's best green suit and goes wandering through the streets of the suburb, and Eli's neighbors take him, at least momentarily, to be Eli: "he looked as if he belonged. Eccentric, maybe, but he belonged" (283). Unfortunately for both men, the assistant's appearance of belonging comes at a high price.

Eli's act, though motivated by the desire to offer hospitality, does not really welcome the man in the black hat and the yeshivah refugees that he represents. The exchange of suits makes the man acceptable, but it only makes him acceptable *as Eli*: it negates the man's own identity and requires, in exchange for belonging, that he be remade in the form of Eli. The assistant, wearing Eli's suit, encounters Eli on the street and salutes him, trailing his fingers over his own face, and, "To Eli the fingers said, *I have a face, I have a face at least...The face is all right, I can keep it?*" (283 italics original). The exchange has been a violent act, literally divesting Eli's counterpart of his own person, leaving him with only the barest trace of who he was. Eli responds to this

encounter by trying, once again, to share in his guest's sacrifice. He dons the assistant's cast-off black suit, adopting the stranger's identity through the radical empathy of actually walking a mile in the man's shoes. Eli walks in the suit through Woodenton's busy commercial center, crisscrossing the street, blocking traffic, and drawing attention to his performance of the DP's Orthodox identity. At the end of his walk, Eli remembers that his wife has gone into labor at the hospital, and he makes the conscious decision to wear the suit to the hospital to see his newborn son. When Eli's wife Miriam sees him, she interprets his clothing as a sign of guilty feelings for forcing the refugee to change into American attire: "*He's not your fault,*" she explained. "Oh, Eli, sweetheart, why do you feel guilty about everything. Eli, change your clothes. I forgive you" (298 italics original). Eli's response—"Stop forgiving me. Stop understanding me" (ibid)—once again rejects the easy answer that he is not responsible for the suit or the zoning laws or the other losses suffered by the refugee whose clothes he wears. The story ends when Eli, watching his son and imagining that one day he will force the boy to wear the black suit, is pinned by hospital orderlies, stripped of his new jacket and injected with a tranquilizer. Eli's attempt to find a hospitable solution to the conflict between Woodenton's Jewish groups effaces the identity of the immigrant "greenie," and Eli's attempt to right that wrong ends in a breakdown that threatens both his marriage and his sanity.<sup>90</sup>

As Eli's breakdown demonstrates, Roth refuses to cut the proverbial knot and represent a prescriptive solution to the complex challenges of immigration, assimilation and identity. Eli faces what Derrida describes as the permeable, imperfect boundary

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<sup>90</sup> While Roth's narrator generates a significant amount of sympathy with Eli by focalizing the story almost entirely through Eli's perspective, the narrator also tells us that Eli has had two prior "breakdowns." We are not told much about these previous incidents, but Eli's self-cohesion is, like the cohesion of the Jewish community in Woodenton, presented as fragile throughout the story. The ending contains a significant amount of ambiguity as to whether Eli was, in fact, in need of medical attention, but, whether or not the orderlies intervention was justified, both Eli's actions and his neighbors' reactions indicate the potential violence involved in hospitality.

between hosts and guests (both *hôte* in French) that complicates the too-simple conception of a host, who is at home, receiving a guest who is not at home: following Levinas, Derrida notes that “the *hôte* who receives (the host), the one who welcomes the invited or received *hôte* (the guest), the welcoming *hôte* who considers himself the owner of the place, is in truth a *hôte* received in his own home...The *hôte* as host is a guest” (Derrida 41). The host, in other words, is never simply the owner of his home, is always “receiving hospitality in what he takes to be his own home” (Derrida 42). In the plurality of American experience Roth describes in his fiction and other writings, no individual community can claim ownership over American identities or American landscapes, so his Jewish American characters, like all other Americans, are always receiving hospitality at home. The same characters experience the same phenomenon within their Jewish communities. Eli’s tenuous position as spokesman for Woodenton’s established Jewish community and that community’s anxiety about its position in the Gentile suburbs reflect Eli’s host-as-guest position and complicates the welcome he extends to the newly arrived DPs. His transformation into Tzuref’s assistant (and visa versa) indicates that the offer of hospitality, because it implicitly claims to be at-home, is inseparable from a claim to identity. By offering his own suit to the stranger, Eli offers his identity as if it were a stable, fixed marker of at-home-ness in Woodenton, but Eli’s subsequent breakdown undermines the presumed solidity of both his position in the community and his grasp on his self.

Both Eli and “Eli, the Fanatic” lean sympathetically towards the yeshiva’s side of the zoning dispute, but Eli’s attempts to act on that sympathy appear in the story as violent and self-destructive. Because strangers, even strangers with claims on our identities, appear unexpectedly and always as the other, we cannot determine in advance how to respond to their appearance; hospitality requires timely, individual responses to

the specific needs of strangers. Because a truly hospitable response to the newcomer must be, to use Arendt's language, always a beginning and never an end, Roth cannot present a picture of hospitality that would serve as an example of how to welcome strangers. Because narrative fiction always functions as a kind of prediction, a projection of realized possibilities, it cannot represent solutions that cannot be predicted. As Roth's objections to "representative" characters shows, fiction tends to universalize its particular representations, so the given details of any story run the risk of obscuring the complicated and often contradictory claims of identity and hospitality behind the accidents of its own characters and plot points. Solving Eli's dilemma, showing him successfully arbitrating the community's dispute and welcoming the yeshiva, would mimic the "serious" literature Roth rejects by presenting Eli's problem as too eminently solvable. The story Roth tells may not offer much hope for a successful welcome of the other in a shared and disputed common world, but its picture of hospitality as a violence to both Eli and Tzoref's assistant avoids the dangerous pretense that welcoming strangers is easy or safe.

The same conflicts between hospitality and fiction surround Nathan Zuckerman from his first appearance in Roth's fiction. The opening sentence of *The Ghost Writer* (1979)—Zuckerman's inaugural words in Roth's oeuvre—brings Nathan to E. I. Lonoff's front door as an admirer and a protégé but, first of all, as a guest. In Nathan, Roth fuses his concerns about hospitality and identity with a meditation on the ethical status of fiction itself. Both Nathan's use of private details he hears while eavesdropping atop a stack of books in Lonoff's study—"the unaccountable uses of art" (117)—and the fiction he extemporaneously creates around Amy Bellette, another guest in the Lonoff home, picture fiction as violations on either side of the host-guest relationship. The first instance, standing on Henry James to listen through the ceiling, breaks the trust placed in Nathan as a guest; he is welcomed into the home, fed, instructed, sheltered, and in return,

he forces himself into the reserved spaces of the home so that he can later broadcast its tragic conflicts in his writing. The latter violation, imagining Amy to be Anne Frank, is a violent, self-serving fantasy in more than one respect. He takes a girl, a refugee from the European Holocaust, and fictionally transforms her into Anne Frank, another victim of the Shoah, in order to serve a selfish need and justify himself before his father: “Oh, marry me, Anne Frank, exonerate me before my outraged elders of this idiotic indictment! Heedless of Jewish feeling? Indifferent to Jewish survival? Brutish about their well being? Who dares to accuse of such unthinking crimes the husband of Anne Frank!” (170-1). Nathan, both as an American welcoming Amy Ballette as a refugee in his country and as a reader welcoming Anne Frank’s book, violates hospitality by abusively twisting his guests into tools for his own gain. Granted, he only does so in his fiction, but his fiction is already responsible for the rift between himself and his father that he is trying to justify; it was his public, fictional use of private details that brought about his need for justification in the first place.

Roth’s exploration of fiction and hospitality through Nathan’s life and writings continues in *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981)—in which *Carnovsky* splits Nathan’s marriage, increases the rift between him and his family and draws the attention of Alvin Pepler, a reader whose certainty that Nathan stole the details of his life ends in his own abusively masturbatory fantasy—through Nathan’s turn as incapacitated host in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983) to *The Prague Orgy* (1985) where Nathan serves as both surrogate and interloper, standing in for another Jewish author in a foreign land. *The Counterlife* (1986) extends Roth’s interest in hospitality into the structure of his fiction. As Shostak notes in her influential essay on the novel, while fiction about fiction is a familiar trope in Roth’s canon, “not until *The Counterlife* does Roth fully explore the theoretical implications that exist for the *structure* of fiction or the self in the uneasy equations between art and life”

(“Reinvention” 197 italics original). *The Counterlife* turns theoretical questions about art and life into immediately practical questions of how the book can be read, confronting readers with conflicts of form that parallel the thematized conflicts faced by its characters. In an echo of Eli’s concern that his wife will tempt him out of confusion, Nathan imagines his newlywed English wife accusing him of fostering a perverse interest in conflict: “Why isn’t it okay for us to be happy? Can’t you imagine that? Try for a change confining your fantasies to satisfaction and pleasure. That shouldn’t be so hard—most people do it as a matter of course...it’s high time you imagined life *working out*. Why this preoccupation with irresolvable conflict?” (*CL* 313 italics original). Readers of *The Counterlife* might be tempted to pose a similar question to Nathan’s author. Roth’s masterpiece of metafictional play is undoubtedly preoccupied with conflict; conflict dominates the novel’s presentation of everything from self-construction to family life to historical geopolitics. Even the chapters in which these conflicts multiply come into conflict with each other and engage in a struggle for control of the basic facts of the novel’s plot. The novel addresses the problematic relationship between writing fiction and practicing hospitality and, in a novel act of hospitality, strains against the conventional forms of narrative fiction.

### **BOTHERING READERS**

In his interview with Milbauer and Watson immediately prior to the publication of *The Counterlife*, Roth argues that the intricate, self-contradictory structure of that novel aims at a particular type of realism: “We are writing fictitious versions of our lives *all* the time, contradictory but mutually entangling stories that, however subtly or grossly falsified, constitute our hold on reality and are the closest thing we have to truth”

(Milbauer and Watson 161 italics original). Notwithstanding Roth's denial that there is anything "the least bit avant-garde" about the novel, *The Counterlife* exploits the limitations of narrative form to push his readers into directly engaging, rather than merely observing, the "contradictory but mutually entangling" demands of living with others who variously share and disrupt our identities. The novel itself exists as a broken, irreconcilable collection of narrative threads, each of which clamors for the belief and the loyalty of its readers. Because the central facts presented in the five chapters of *The Counterlife* cannot be reconciled to one another, the novel's readers are presented with an implicit choice: which thread do we find most compelling, most interesting, most believable? Which story or stories will we accept? At the level of plot and theme, *The Counterlife* presents us with a similar set of problems facing Nathan Zuckerman and his brother Henry. From Nathan's marginal position in the Zuckerman family to his place as a diaspora Jew in the occupied West Bank or as an American Jew confronting the genteel antisemitism of his English in-laws, Zuckerman faces contradictory, mutually entangling claims on his identity as an American, a Jew, a brother, a husband, and his responses to and responsibility for the various individuals and communities that place these claims on him cannot be resolved by a prescriptive solution or a judicious compromise. In his *Paris Review* interview, Roth indicates the depth of these fractures in Zuckerman:

The thing about Zuckerman that interests me is that everybody's split, but few so openly as this. Everybody is full of cracks and fissures, but usually we see people trying very hard to hide the places where they're split. Most people desperately want to heal their lesions, and keep trying to. Hiding them is sometimes taken for healing them (or not having them). But Zuckerman can't successfully do either, and by the end of the trilogy has proved it even to himself. What's determined his life and his work are the lines of fracture in what is by no means a clean break. I was interested in following those lines. (Lee 123)

Following the *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy, *The Counterlife* extends these fractures from the thematic level of *what* we read about Nathan to the narrative level of *how* we read about Nathan. The novel's fractures, which are anything but clean breaks, place its readers in a position parallel to Nathan's. Every novel, we could say, is full of cracks and fissures, but few so openly as *The Counterlife*, and, as with Nathan's lines of fracture, Roth is explicitly interested in exploring rather than resolving those contradictions. Honestly and effectively exploring the cracks and fissures of *The Counterlife*, like exploring the divisions that structure Zuckerman's identity and his worldly responsibilities, requires ongoing vigilance and the continual exercise of judgment. The novel requires the open-ended participation of its readers along with the ability and the willingness to read without forcing a resolution. In other words, the novel's readers become active participants rather than passive observers; we are, to use Arendt's terms, moved or seized by a novel that invites us to recognize and exercise our capacity for judgment. As the rest of this chapter contends, Roth's ambitious narrative project depends on the novel's particular type of attention to itself and its own construction. The narrative structure of *The Counterlife* acts as an Arendtian self-disclosure that invites us to practice reading as a form of hospitality, to offer the novel a genuinely open welcome. *The Counterlife* invites, rather than represents, hospitality; it creates a relationship with its readers that is oppositional to, rather than representative of, the needed welcome of the stranger.

The complex structure of *The Counterlife* makes it notoriously difficult to read or even to summarize. Bonnie Lyons says that "[even] to summarize the plot is difficult, because the novel deliberately keeps the reader off balance" (119); Derek Parker Royal warns, "If readers expect a linear narrative, the form of most of Roth's previous novels, they will be sorely frustrated. Every attempt at ferreting out a clear story from the labyrinthine plot proves futile" (425). In Roth's own words from a 1988 interview with

Katherine Weber, “What you’re left with are five mutually entangled, somewhat contradictory narratives that sometimes appear to be joined and then are not, and then there’s the outright contradiction” (216). The novel’s five named and numbered chapters—“1. Basel,” “2. Judea,” “3. Aloft,” “4. Gloucestershire,” “5. Christendom”—do not tell the same story, but they also do not tell different stories; they tell a single story, but a single story marked by internal difference and self-interruption.

“Basel” opens the novel with a false start. Ten pages into the chapter we learn that we have been reading a eulogy that Nathan wrote, but did not deliver, for his brother Henry’s funeral, one that the chapter’s third person narrator, speaking solidly within Nathan’s voice zone, refers to understatedly as “not the three thousand words Carol [Henry’s wife] had been expecting” when she asked Nathan to speak at the funeral (*CL* 13). Henry died during heart surgery, and Nathan’s eulogy implies that Henry opted for the technically unnecessary operation because his beta blockers had interrupted the affair he was having with his dental assistant. The chapter continues with a relatively conventional meditation on identity as biography: throughout the chapter various members of the Zuckerman family offer different versions of Henry as they narrate some aspect of his unnaturally shortened life. Nathan returns frequently to his brother’s affair with a Swiss woman named Maria—the chapter is named after her hometown of Basel—and wonders if the earlier loss of that apparently fulfilling relationship had motivated Henry’s decision to risk the surgery. “Judea” follows through on several of the themes and plot points of “Basel,” but it departs from the first chapter in significant ways.

“Judea” is narrated in the first person by Nathan, and it tells a version of Henry’s life in which he survives the risky heart surgery and becomes a radicalized Israeli settler. Nathan goes to Israel and locates his brother in the West Bank, but he is unable to convince him to return to his secular life in New Jersey. While in Jerusalem, Nathan

visits the Wailing Wall and meets Jimmy Lustig, a young Jewish man from West Orange who has adopted the surname Ben-Joseph. Nathan tags his young fan as “Jimmy the Luftyid, the High-Flying Jew,” and, true to his name, Jimmy shows up on Nathan’s El Al flight in the third chapter (*CL* 93).

“Aloft” continues Nathan’s first person narration and begins with a series of letters he writes on his flight out of Israel. He writes to Henry (the militant Israeli settler), recalls a phone call to Henry’s Jewish wife Carol (an equally militant American secularist) and is beginning a response to his politically moderate friend Shuki Elchanan when Jimmy Lustig highjacks both the plane and the chapter. Nathan’s efforts at sorting out his brother’s and his own Jewish identities—identities shaped by the histories they claim as their own—are interrupted by Jimmy’s attempt to impose a clean break from history: his manifesto calling for the abolition of Holocaust museums is titled “FORGET REMEMBERING!” (165). The chapter ends with El Al security interrogating both Nathan and Jimmy as the plane returns to Israel.

The final two chapters of the novel are more complex than the first three and are each broken into distinct subsections. “Gloucestershire” returns to and reshuffles the thematic and factual elements of “Basel.” Like “Basel,” “Gloucestershire” takes its name from the European hometown of a woman named Maria, but the Maria in this chapter is Nathan’s lover, a married woman who lives upstairs from Nathan and for whom Nathan undergoes a technically unnecessary operation (those pesky beta blockers). The chapter begins with Nathan’s autodiegetic narration, but it shifts from first to third-person narration when Nathan dies on the operating table. Nathan’s final narrated words—“I now must move beyond the words to the concrete violence of surgery” (205)—are followed by a short gap before the chapter resumes with a third person focalization, and occasional vocalization, of Henry: “So long as Nathan was alive, Henry couldn’t write

anything unself-consciously, not even a letter to a friend” (ibid). Nathan’s publisher asks Henry to write a eulogy for his brother, but, like Nathan in chapter one, Henry declines the request. After the funeral, Henry breaks into Nathan’s apartment and finds, among other things, the false eulogy from “Basel” and a copy of the eulogy delivered at Nathan’s own funeral. Henry steals and trashes a number of Nathan’s notebooks along with what appears to be a draft copy of *The Counterlife* before the narration shifts once again to a dramatic dialogue between Nathan’s Maria and an unnamed interlocutor who is, at some level, Nathan’s ghost.

“Christendom,” the fifth and final chapter, brings Nathan back to life in the same fashion that “Judea” resurrected Henry. It also returns to both Nathan’s first-person narration and, apparently, an alternate version of both the Judea-Aloft thread and the first section of “Gloucestershire”: “At six in the evening, only a few hours after leaving Henry in Agor and arriving in London with the notes I’d amassed on the quiet flight up from Tel Aviv...I was seated in a church in London’s West End. With me were Maria, Phoebe, and some three or four hundred others” (CL 255). Nathan’s immediate plunge into a Christmas carol service provides a brief dumb-show for stakes of the chapter in which Nathan confronts the overt anti-Semitism of Maria’s mother and sister. In this chapter, Nathan has convinced Maria to leave her husband and moves with her and her young daughter back to their home country, but the stress of being a Jew in “Christendom” encroaches more and more on Nathan and the now-pregnant Maria until she storms out during an argument, suggesting that Nathan should “Go back to America, please, where everybody loves Jews—you think!” (306). In a move similar to the two section breaks in “Gloucestershire,” a short break separates Maria’s exit from a single-worded imperative sentence: “Imagine. Because of how I’d been provoked by Sarah in the church and then affronted in the restaurant, it was conceivable that my marriage was about to break up”

(ibid). Nathan frequently repeats the directive to imagine in a six-page dramatic monologue (directed both at himself and, on a different diegetic level, at his readers) before he begins imagining Maria's response:

I'm leaving.

I've left.

I'm leaving you.

I'm leaving the book.

That's it. Of course. The book! She conceives of herself as my fabrication, brands herself a fantasy and cleverly absconds. (*CL* 312)

Nathan's realization is immediately followed by a "Dear John" letter written either by Maria or by a Maria that Nathan imagines writing: "I'm leaving. I've left. I'm leaving you and I'm leaving the book and I'm taking Phoebe away before anything dreadful happens to her" (*CL* 312). Because she mimics almost exactly the phrasing of Nathan's monologue, this Maria appears at first to occupy a narrative level nested within the "Christendom" chapter, but as her letter develops Maria demonstrates an extensive knowledge of *The Counterlife* as a whole. She even references specific page numbers from previous chapters: "What I'm saying is that all the way back on page 73 I saw where you were preparing to take us, and should have got myself up and out before your plane even landed" (*CL* 314). Page 73, back in "Judea," contains a conversation between Nathan and Shuki Elchanan about Nathan's unborn child and the prospect of circumcision: "Still, it's been a unifying custom among Jews for rather a long time now. I think it would be very difficult for you to have a son who wasn't circumcised. I think you would resent a woman who insisted otherwise" (*CL* 73). While Nathan, in "Judea," insists that circumcision doesn't matter to him, the metafictional version of Maria in

“Christendom” sees the marker of culture and identity as a conflict waiting to happen and, knowing Nathan’s abiding interest in conflict, chastises herself for not seeing it coming. Maria ends her letter on a note that anticipates Nathan’s rebellion against Roth in the paratext of *The Facts*: after noting that “Maria is a nice enough name for other people, but not for me,” she argues that at “the point where ‘Maria’ appears to be most her own woman, most resisting you...she is least real, which is to say *least* her own woman” (CL 319 italics original). The chapter and the novel end with Nathan’s epistolary reply to Maria.

As this painfully abridged yet still-ungainly summary of *The Counterlife* demonstrates, Roth’s novel resists the typical set of strategies for reading novels. We might attempt a kind of inventory of themes and questions—impotence and sexual identity, Jewishness and ethnic identity, life and representation, death and mourning, brothers, fathers and sons, flight and escape, to name only a few—or of events in the novel—heart disease and impotence (Henry then Nathan), surgery and death (Henry then Nathan), inappropriate eulogies (Nathan then Henry), Henry’s figurative flight to Israel, Nathan’s literal flight from Tel Aviv to London, Henry’s affair with Swiss Maria, Nathan’s affair with English Maria—but, as Royal says, we cannot discover or reconstruct any unified linear plot in which all of these events take place. We also cannot disassemble the novel and read each chapter as its own solitary tale, as a short story in a book of similar but separable short stories. As Roth notes, the challenge to reading presented by *The Counterlife* is rooted in an implicit breach of contract: “Normally, there is a contract between the author and the reader that gets torn up only at the end of the book. In this book the contract gets torn up at the end of each chapter: a character who is dead and buried is suddenly alive, a character who is assumed to be alive is, in fact, dead, and so on” (Milbauer and Watson 160-1). Roth recognizes that this breach of contract is,

on some level, in bad faith. The novel takes advantage of its readers' willing suspension of disbelief—a suspension that is necessary for fiction to function as fiction—and frustrates the good faith they extended towards the novel and its author: “In many ways, it’s everything that people don’t want in a novel. Primarily what they want is a story in which they can be made to believe; otherwise they don’t want to be bothered. They agree, in accordance with the standard author-reader contract, to believe the story they are being told—and then in *The Counterlife* they are being told a contradictory story” (Milbauer and Watson 161). Roth imagines his readers asking “Which is real and which is false? Which are you asking me to believe in? Why do you bother me like this?” (ibid). “Bothersome” is an apt term for describing the novel’s structure. *The Counterlife* bothers its readers by using its own structure as a narrative gadfly. The broken form bothers (moves or seizes, in Arendt’s terminology) its readers rather than comforting them, confirming their beliefs, or providing them with an equally digestible explanation. It irritates us while keeping us engaged, and it uses that engagement to irritate us further. The novel’s serial violation of author-reader contract continually courts our belief in the novel even while it disrupts our ability to form one story from its disparate parts.

Roth has written a novel of remarkable complexity, a novel that invites us to think self-consciously about *how* we read. The relationships among the five chapters of *The Counterlife* resembles Nathan’s description of his relationship to Henry in “Judea”: Nathan says that they are brothers

about as unlike as brothers come, but each has taken the other’s measure and been measured by the other for so long that it’s unthinkable that either could ever learn to remain unconcerned by the judgment his counterpart embodies... therefore the discrepancies are irreconcilable: the challenge is there merely in their being. (*CL* 137)

*The Counterlife*'s five chapters are full of irreconcilable discrepancies, and they challenge each other's version of the novel simply through their presence. The chapters also seem to know each other, to borrow from another of Nathan's descriptions of brothers, "as a kind of deformation of themselves" (CL 80). Each chapter embodies in its very existence a challenge to and a judgment on the other chapters whose presence returns judgment. The first three chapters primarily challenge the others "merely in their being." Because they present relatively complete, realistically portrayed stories in themselves, each chapter possesses an aesthetic wholeness that asserts its claim to "truth" within the novelistic world of *The Counterlife*. Their comment on the wider structure of the novel is limited to this claim of artistic veracity, this call to the reader to take their story as *the story*. Paul Gray comments that the "individual scenes inspire absolute belief; Roth's art is such that he can make events seem not only plausible but inescapable even while announcing over and over that they never occurred" (204). Or, in Lyons's words, "Most novels rely on the reader's willingness to believe, because that belief enables the reader to care about the characters and their fates. In *The Counterlife*, however, Roth has it both ways: he puts the reader to sleep, wakes him up, and then puts him back to sleep" (120). Each chapter has sufficient means to capture the belief and concern of a reader, but the moments of waking between sections challenge the ability of the book as a whole to present itself as believable.

The narratives of "Gloucestershire" and "Christendom," like the first three chapters, each offer stories that court the reader's willingness to believe their realities for as long as the section lasts. While they claim their own veracity "merely through their being," they also argue for their believability on a broader diegetic level by explicitly addressing the novel as a whole. Both "Gloucestershire" and "Christendom" contain specific information from and about the other four chapters of the novel, and each one

offers its readers an immanent strategy for reading the novel as a whole. By making explicit claims about how they are related to the rest of the novel, the final two chapters attempt to make sense of Roth's conflicting counter-narratives. As readers, we are presented with two mutually exclusive keys to the puzzle-like plot of *The Counterlife*. The novel reads itself and models two strategies for interpreting it as a whole. It presents us with the choice of reading like "Gloucestershire" or reading like "Christendom."

### **TWO WAYS OF READING THE IRRESOLVABLE**

*The Counterlife* offers its readers a very complicated invitation. The book originally presents itself as a novel with the conventions and expectations that accompany that genre. When Roth shatters those expectations, the reader is left with the responsibility of deciding how to read the book or even if it can be read. We are not, however, left without any guidance. The novel—it is, with all its metafictional ploys and challenges to the genre, still a novel—models two distinct strategies for its own reading. The first strategy, embedded in "Gloucestershire," clings to the traditional mode of reading novels and wants to force *The Counterlife* into a framework that can be read in that mode. By offering itself as a stable frame narrative, the penultimate chapter attempts to understand the novel by controlling or having power over the thing understood. This style of reading welcomes the novel only to claim the space of reading as its own, as a space in its possession and under its control. It insists that the problems presented by the disparate chapters must be solvable, and, ultimately, its procrustean insistence on resolution effects a violent reading of the other chapters. By contrast, "Christendom" invites a reading that undermines resolution and leaves its readers responsible for adjudicating all of the novel's disparate elements. Rather than forcibly subsuming the

novel's internal disparity into a coherent interpretation, this hospitable reading attempts to welcome all of *The Counterlife's* irresolvable contradictions on their own terms. That task is, strictly speaking, impossible within the conventional approaches to reading novels: it threatens our ability to see the novel as a single book, its flat contradictions in plot and character passes well beyond complexity or ambiguity, and its lack of any internal continuity resembles some type of insanity. By ruling out resolution, the final chapter invites its readers to perform a hospitality informed by judgment, to offer a welcome without predetermined limits. While the novel's final chapter never attempts to represent this type of open-ended hospitality, the fragmented form structurally invites the type of welcome it cannot represent. While *The Counterlife* cannot guarantee such a reading, the possibility of misreading and abuse are necessary risks for both political action and a hospitality that does not attempt to coerce and control the guest it welcomes.

"Gloucestershire," the penultimate chapter of the novel, follows three chapters that contradict one another but offer no clues for resolving the contradictions. The chapter is internally divided into three sections, the first of which is narrated autodiagetically by Nathan and effectively restarts the novel at an altered but recognizably repeated beginning. "Basel" began with a detailed description of Henry's diagnosis, prognosis and treatment for heart disease, with particular attention paid to the sexual side-effects of his prescribed beta-blockers. "Gloucestershire" begins, "A year after being put on the drugs" (182), and proceeds in accelerated fashion to recapitulate the details of Henry's medical condition and reinscribe them into the body of Nathan. Like "Judea" and "Aloft," "Gloucestershire" makes use of information found in "Basel" to build its own diverging narrative thread, but it also uses those chapters to present itself as the frame narrative for the novel as a whole. In the chapter's second section, Henry leaves his brother's funeral and immediately bribes his way into Nathan's apartment with the intention of recovering

any passages from Nathan's notebooks—passages that we read in “Basel”—that mention Henry's affair with his Swiss patient Maria. While in Nathan's apartment, Henry finds an untitled second draft of a manuscript with the chapter titles “Basel,” “Judea” and “Christendom,” and, while “Aloft” is not mentioned by name, it is alluded to as “a chapter about an attempted skyjacking” (230). Henry appears to discover the manuscript copies of the three previous and one following chapter, and here, in the middle of *The Counterlife*, we find a character reading *The Counterlife*.

This seemingly unorthodox metafictional trick turns out to push a very conservative prescription for reading the novel. The minor vertigo caused by finding a character reading the novel in which he is found quickly subsides, leaving behind a stable ground for reading *The Counterlife* as a whole in a very traditional way. “Gloucestershire” claims to be the ground for reading the entire novel, the frame tale in which each of the stories finds an explainable origin and in which all contradictions are resolved into a greater unity through Nathan's creative imagination. Nathan was sick; Nathan projected his illness onto Henry, cannibalizing certain details of real life along the way; Nathan wrote these fictions, then he died. Henry's discovery solves the problem of narrative contradiction by placing “Gloucestershire” on a different diegetic level than the other four chapters, granting it ontological priority over all other versions of Nathan and Henry. Read this way, *The Counterlife* only has one story after all. The seeming variations are, like “Femme Fatale,” the third chapter of *The Ghost Writer*, fantasies in which Nathan indulged himself, further proof that Nathan “was continually drawn back into the fiction I had evolved” (*Ghost Writer* 157). We know, after all, that Nathan cannot control the urge to make life more interesting.

“Gloucestershire” presents a surprisingly convincing reading of *The Counterlife*—convincing, in large part, because it allows the reader to approach Roth's novel with a

conventional set of reading skills and master the originally challenging structure. Roth's innovation was clever; it provided an amusing game to play for three chapters, but now we get to the bottom of things and can walk away unscathed from what was at first an unsettling book. With the practical joke over, the firm ground reestablished, the reader watches Henry dispose of the chapters that would have caused problems for him and his family, and the problems posed to the reader by those same chapters are just as neatly eliminated. We are still in control; we retain our mastery over the novel. The solution is compelling, even seductive, but, on closer reading, it does not work.

Despite its ambitious claims to provide the onto-narratological ground of the novel, "Gloucestershire" remains only one counterfactual possibility. Structurally, it is neither the first nor the last nor the central story, and its penultimate position undercuts its attempt to be the *final* word on Nathan and Henry. By placing "Christendom" *after* "Gloucestershire," Roth weakens the persuasive impact of the fourth thread even while changing the way that we approach the final chapter. On the one hand, "Gloucestershire" confronts the reader with the final chapter's fictionality (and its problematic and parasitic relationship with reality), but "Christendom"'s aesthetic persuasiveness leads the reader once again to suspend her disbelief as she has done at the beginnings of the other four threads. The reader accepts "Christendom" on its own terms, displacing "Gloucestershire" and its claim to preeminence.

Evidence within "Gloucestershire" also calls its hierarchal reading into question. While Henry destroys most of the "Draft #2" he finds in Nathan's apartment, his moral sensibility will not allow him to destroy Nathan's final novel in totality. Henry leaves the final chapter, which makes no obviously problematic references to Henry or his family, in the apartment, but he wonders "if leaving the box half full and the manuscript starting at page 255 might not arouse suspicion" (229). That specific page number, the exact page

on which “Christendom” begins in the full, real-world version of *The Counterlife*, calls the frame of “Gloucestershire” into question. While only fragments of “Gloucestershire” are mentioned in Henry’s description of “Draft #2,” the fact that the final chapter of that draft begins on the appropriate page presumes the presence of the fourth chapter *in its entirety*, and “Gloucestershire” cannot be the ground of the novel, cannot be the box containing all the disparate chapters, if it is also inside the box on Nathan’s desk. Unlike Henry’s original discovery of the manuscript that quickly settles down into a fundamentally conservative position, the passing reference to page 255 destabilizes the chapter’s ambitious claim in the very midst of its formulation. “Gloucestershire” does not occupy a privileged diegetic position; it is one narrative among five.

The most compelling evidence against reading “Gloucestershire” as the frame of *The Counterlife* comes as the end of “Christendom” (and therefore also at the end of the novel). While the fourth thread’s claim to ascendancy relies primarily if not exclusively on its unique awareness of the other four threads *as stories*, the imagined “Dear John” letter from Maria blames Nathan for, among other things, making her suffer through his death in the previous chapter: “You weren’t beyond killing your brother, you weren’t beyond *killing yourself*, or grandiosely amusing yourself on the plane up from Israel by staging a lunatic hijacking attempt” (313 emphasis added). If “Christendom” knows about the other stories as stories, and especially if it knows about “Gloucestershire,” then “Gloucestershire” cannot provide a stable frame for any novel that contains “Christendom.”

Though it fails to effectively master *The Counterlife*, reading like “Gloucestershire” remains a powerfully seductive temptation. Readers as insightful and attentive as Shostak and Royal fall back into readings of the novel that attempt to subsume its radically divided internal tension within a single, unified interpretive

position. Shostak does note that *The Counterlife* “denies the reader the comfort of a recognizable central self or central set of events from which the alternatives develop” (“Reinvention” 198), but her analysis simultaneously posits a central organizing principle that allows her to ground the novel’s speculations in a single authority: “‘Nathan,’ the characteristic narrative voice, imagines a scenario, fleshes it out into fully realized episodes, and then drops or reverses it” (ibid). Shostak places scare-quotes around Nathan to “emphasize the character of Nathan as the self- and other-creating collocation of voices and possible life stories that together narrate the events of the novel” (“Reinvention” 198 footnote), but the distance between the narrating “Nathan” and the narrated Nathan collapses in her later analysis, leaving Nathan in complete authorial control of his own life story. For example, she claims with reference to Henry’s death in “Basel,” the “emplotment of desire thickens when the reader later realizes that the narrative has been Nathan’s fantasy. It is in fact Nathan’s desire that propels the narrative speculations” (“Reinvention” 201). Royal falls into the same pattern of assuming that Nathan lies behind the novel as a whole. He argues that, when reading “Judea,” it is “important to keep in mind that, according to the self-reflexive narrative structure that Roth establishes, the voice of Henry is the voice of Zuckerman. As we learn (or assume we learn) in ‘Gloucestershire,’ Zuckerman has placed his own physical circumstances within the context of Henry, the latter never having retreated to Israel” (432). Both Shostak and Royal accept the deceptively offered frame of “Gloucestershire” and use it to bring the novel’s irreconcilable differences under control. They tame the novel, they domesticate it out of its radical strangeness, and they cite its fourth chapter as justification.

Shostak’s reading demonstrates the interpretive dangers of accepting one particular chapter as *The Counterlife*’s stable frame. While she attempts to argue that the

novel's structure avoids privileging any of the individual accounts, her acceptance of Nathan or "Nathan" as the author of the five stories—a reading supported by the manuscript Henry discovers in Nathan's apartment—imposes a limiting frame on the novel and gives Nathan an undue amount of authorial control: "Nathan invents his counterstories to test his erotic desires, his death, and the decentering of his self" ("Reinvention" 201). Shostak nominally places "Gloucestershire" on the same diegetic level as the other chapters, but she leaves Nathan in authorial and authoritative control of the variations. In fact, by shifting authorship from the fourth chapter's Nathan to a more general "Nathan" behind all Nathans, Shostak has *increased* the scope and power of his authority. While "Gloucestershire" places limits on Nathan—the limit, death itself—Shostak claims that "Nathan, unlike Henry, cannot die. As author of his own text, he cannot disappear from the text without the text itself disappearing" ("Reinvention" 201 footnote). By attributing the novel's creation to a Nathan who is sometimes within the text and sometimes standing aloof (after his death in "Gloucestershire," for instance), she reads Roth's book as a powerfully optimistic portrayal of a world and self that exist "not only as what we perceive but also as what we imagine," a world where "the speculative narrative, by its resistance to interpretation, opens the self up to its own power of self-creation" ("Reinvention" 213, 214). In this reading, Nathan's speculations exercise a seemingly limitless control of existence: "Indeed, Roth insists that freedom exists in the capacity to invent counterlives. Although it is a freedom that is literally fictitious, our knowledge that the fiction replaces no prior 'truth,' no transcendent presence, makes the freedom it offers authentic" ("Reinvention" 208). If Nathan is the author of his own counterstories, if he is the speculative force behind all five chapters, then he does indeed exercise a radical freedom for self-creation.

Apart from the lack of textual evidence to support her speculative attribution of the novel to Nathan (an attribution that would require us to usurp the role of author and write a separate fiction about Nathan at his writing desk hovering over *The Counterlife*), the unqualified optimism of this conclusion does not fit easily within a book obsessed with abandonment, miscommunication, sexual impotence, ideological oppression and, above all, death. Treating the chapters as if they were all written by Nathan also obscures what may be the most important lesson of *The Counterlife*'s radical structure. These are not, as Shostak optimistically interprets them, creative choices that Nathan playfully explores in the process of constructing an identity. "Basel" and important sections of "Gloucestershire" are heterodiagetic, and even when Nathan is the narrator we have no textual grounds for also claiming him as the author of that section's *events*. To do so would be, like the *Carnovsky* fans from *Zuckerman Unbound* or the "down to brass tacks" Milton Appel from *The Anatomy Lesson*, to confuse the writer with what he has written. The assumption that Nathan has written the life of Zuckerman is the mirror image of the assumption that he lives the life of Gilbert Carnovsky. More importantly, if we assume that Nathan has freely created the separate chapters as "alternative counterlives" from which to choose, then we miss seeing the stubborn inescapability of each chapter's claims on Nathan and Henry. The varying chapters of *The Counterlife* are not freely projected life-worlds of Nathan Zuckerman, neither are they his compulsive reinventions of the real. The book's five chapters are, according to all the evidence at hand in the text, five sets of concrete circumstances that make uncompromising claims on the persons and identities of the Zuckerman brothers. Each thread stands individually, absolutely, as *the* world in which Nathan and Henry find themselves and through which they must find their way. These incongruous histories do not offer themselves sequentially so that the Zuckermans could take them one after another and avoid the

contradictions; Nathan's and Henry's respective deaths eliminate that possibility. The threads also undermine the possibility of choosing one to the exclusion of the others; "Gloucestershire" attempts to raise itself above the other narratives as *the* story of the novel, but its failure confirms the impossibility of picking a single dominant thread to unify the plot. These are the facts of the novel. They may be contradictory in ways that make Nathan's life and our reading impossible, but they are the facts.

While "Gloucestershire" tempts its readers to subject the novel's disparate chapters to an overarching unity that resolves all contradictions either in its own frame tale or in some version of a Nathan behind all Nathans, "Christendom" suggests reading all five chapters simultaneously *without resolving the contradictions*. In his imagined reply to Maria's imagined letter at the end of "Christendom," Nathan says, "The burden isn't either or, consciously choosing from possibilities equally difficult and regrettable—it's and/and/and/and/and as well. Life is and" (CL 306). Royal notes that "there are five repetitions of 'and,' one for each chapter of the book" (Royal 427). Still reading "Gloucestershire" as the frame of the novel, Royal questions the significance of this repetition in "Christendom": "If indeed Zuckerman dies without completing his novel, obviously unable to insert the fourth chapter, is the appearance of five 'ands' merely a coincidence?" (ibid). Having already seen that the fourth chapter's claim to preeminence falls short, we can read this fivefold repetition as an alternative to that hierarchal reading strategy. Royal lights on the possibility that Roth "does not require that we answer the question" of how these "ands" relate to "Gloucestershire," but that claim is only true in so far as the question has already been answered for us (ibid). The reader does not choose between, on one hand, an "either/or" decision that privileges one chapter over the others and, on the other, the multiple "ands" of a contradictory and never finalized reading. Nathan follows the five "ands" by asserting, "Life is and: the accidental and the

immutable, the elusive and the graspable, the bizarre and the predictable, the actual and the potential, all the multiplying realities, entangled, overlapping, colliding, conjoined—plus the multiplying illusions! This times this times this times this” (*Counterlife* 306). If life *is* and, then Nathan has no choice but to live with all of its impossibilities and contradictions. *The Counterlife* is also *and*, and its readers must take all five chapters and their multiplying contradictions as we find them. The novel does not present its five chapters as possibilities for Nathan’s life (as a series of possible *counterlives*) but as a single novel, a single account of Nathan’s life that makes inescapable and irreconcilable claims on Nathan, Henry, Maria and the novel’s other characters (an impossibly single *counterlife*). The metafictional flourishes that end “Christendom” leave the novel’s readers on the hook by insisting that, contrary to the principle of non-contradiction, we accept all five stories at once.

While “Christendom” successfully derails “Gloucestershire” as the frame-narrative of the novel—because the final chapter had information only available after Nathan’s death in “Gloucestershire,” it cannot be only another chapter in the novel written by that thread’s Nathan—it also undercuts any attempt to read the final chapter as the coherently frame-tale of a unified *Counterlife*. The letter that Nathan imagines Maria writing points to the fictionality of the other four variants—just as “Gloucestershire” does—but it also explicitly refers to “Christendom” as one among many fictions and places itself on the same epistemic and diegetic level as the novel’s other four threads. “Maria” accuses Nathan of inventing Sarah’s antisemitic rant in the church crypt (“Christendom”), Lippman’s zealous outbursts (“Judea”) and Nathan’s impotence (“Gloucestershire”), blending the last chapter’s “reality” with the “realities” of its competitors in a way that prevents the reader from constructing a coherent *Counterlife* on

the foundation of this final section. “Christendom,” unlike its immediate predecessor, acknowledges but does not claim priority over the novel’s other chapters.

Accepting the metafictional play of “Christendom” disrupts its own coherence and undermines its authority. While referencing Nathan’s “preoccupation with irresolvable conflict” (313), the chapter produces a conflict that cannot be resolved by attributing the novel to Nathan. There is no path from its contradictory awareness of the other chapters to a coherent reading of the novel as a whole, yet “Christendom” demands that we embrace all five sections without covering over their contradictions. “Christendom” models a radical way of reading all five threads—an aporetic choice of and/and/and/and/and. *The Counterlife* is not a “choose your own adventure” story in which Nathan or the reader can pick which version is most satisfactory or entertaining and leave the rest behind. To choose one of them, to begin to read Roth’s novel, is to welcome them all, to invite and be invited by “all the multiplying realities, entangled, overlapping, colliding, conjoined” (*Counterlife* 306). Roth has written Nathan into a book of irreducible contradiction, and it demands a reading that does not flatten out the novel’s complexity for the sake of a single, unified understanding. The novel resists the mastery of prescriptive answers or end-centered solutions. It demands a difficult but hospitable reading; it invites us to practice reading as hospitality and to treat both acts as beginnings rather than ends.

#### **READING AS HOSPITALITY**

We may be tempted to imagine reading as hospitality only in terms of the welcome we offer a book and not the other way around. After all, the reader seems to be the active party in the relationship: we pick the book up, bring it often literally into our

homes and give it varying degrees of attention. As readers, we can be “hostile” or “charitable,” “attentive” or “negligent”—terms that certainly connote a presence or a lack of hospitality. But, as Derrida reminds us, we only offer hospitality from a place where we are not at home, from an at-home where we dwell “as a refugee or an exile, a guest and not a proprietor” (Derrida 37). Any reader’s act of welcoming a novel always follows an invitation offered by the novel, the invitation to read and to take up residence temporarily within its pages. A number of structures have been developed to perform this textual welcome explicitly: forwards, prefaces and introductions all welcome a reader to a book, attempt to orient her within its pages and invite her to continue reading. Even when these “formal” welcomes are absent, a book’s genre (a novel, a memoir, a cookbook) consists of formal conventions that introduce a book as a certain kind of writing and invite the reader to read in a particular way. Every word presupposes a hearer, the person to whom it is addressed, even if that person is only potential (the prayer, the message in a bottle) or another version of the author (the diary, the shopping list). Every book, with its prefaces, genres and other conventions, presupposes a reader and predetermines the ways that she is invited to read the work at hand. Any hospitality that we offer a novel takes place where we have already received hospitality, in a space opened by the novel’s word of welcome, and that position fundamentally calls into question our mastery over the book and even our control of our own interpretations. If we host a novel, we host it as guests, as readers who are ourselves not at home and not in control of what and how we read. A hospitable reading, then, cannot pretend to own the space of reading. The reader’s responsibilities as host are conditioned by her position as guest. A reader can only read a novel hospitably, can only practice reading as hospitality, because the novel already invites her to begin a reading. We read and interpret only after being welcomed; we only offer hospitality as its recipients.

Practicing reading as hospitality prevents us from treating the novel as though we were its proprietors, as though we have the authority to make of it whatever we will. We cannot, as Shostak and other critics attempt to do, reconstruct Roth's fragmentary novel into a unified whole by claiming that the separate chapters are all Nathan's creations. This reading would require us to write a sixth storyline beneath the five we are given, but that act of authorship lays claim to an authority only possessed by a proprietor, by one who is at home and not a guest herself. A reading of this sort violently seizes control of the space of reading, only welcoming the novel "in order to appropriate for oneself a place and then speak the language of hospitality" (Derrida 15-16). This appropriation is concerned primarily with securing the reader's sense of being-at-home with all the comfort and authority bestowed on the master of a house. If a reader claims to be at home where she was originally welcomed, then she attempts to dominate the novel rather than welcome it. Every hospitable reading rests on the recognition that we, as readers, welcome the text in response to the original invitation to read. We do not own the ground of interpretation; we dwell there as guests, but as guests responsible for hosting the novel that we read.

Books form their own readers; they call us into being *as their readers* through the invitation to read. In other words, the welcome offered by a novel determines our identities as its readers. The fragmented structure of *The Counterlife* offers its readers a very peculiar welcome. The impossibility of collecting *The Counterlife* into a single, unified and thereby finalized reading prevents us from finishing the work of reading and setting the book aside: we are trapped in our endless interpretations, held hostage by our responsibility as attentive hosts of Roth's labyrinthine novel. We are invited to read the novel. We pick it up and become its host. Simultaneously, because the work of reading, of welcoming the book as responsible interpreters, has no end, we become its hostages.

We cannot put it down. While this is true to some extent for any book, the metafictional structure of *The Counterlife* foregrounds its own unresolvable complexity and the reader's resulting position as its host-hostage. Roth's novel resists the strategies we normally use to finalize our interpretations, at least temporarily, and escape the readerly responsibilities of judgment and interpretation. The novel exposes the inadequacy of every attempt we make to gather it neatly into a manageable interpretation, and that is why it is so difficult to summarize and why it evades our conventional strategies for reading novels. The reader cannot construct a single, coherent reading of the book and must alter her way of reading to welcome the and/and/and/and/and of its appearance, to practice the radically hospitable method of reading proposed by "Christendom." We have to read the book without possessing it, to welcome the diverging threads without imposing a resolution on their collective incoherence.

By tearing up the contract with his readers at the end of each chapter, Roth may seem to violate their good faith, but this act of transgression, the tearing of the conventional "hospitality" offered by a novel to its reader, invites a more radically hospitable way of reading. Undermining the standard contract between reader and writer removes the conventional crutches that make reading comfortable and easy and pushes Roth's readers back on their individual capacities for judgment. Derrida argues that just this type of aporia or hiatus necessarily conditions any genuine welcome: without "the necessity of a leap at the moment of the ethical, political, or juridical decision, we could simply unfold knowledge into a program or course of action. Nothing could make us more irresponsible; nothing could be more totalitarian" (Derrida 117). The hiatus between each chapter of *The Counterlife* requires a leap of faith, a degree of openness that is not required by the continuity of a traditional narrative—or, rather, an openness that is required by every narrative but is easily, even immediately, covered over by our everyday

comfort within the received conventions of the novel. *The Counterlife*'s intervening caesuras hold open the void in which the reader can welcome its deeply contradictory story. At its most profound level, Roth's novel engages its readers not with a representation of hospitality but with an appositional experience of hospitality, and the concurrence of that experience with the novel's thematic content invites readers to approach the irresolvable conflicts of collective and individual identity with an equally hospitable judgment. It invites us to practice reading as hospitality and, in multiple senses, to *practice* hospitality through reading.

While *The Counterlife* refuses to present programmatic solutions to the various crises that arise in the lives of Nathan and Henry, its structure invites us to imagine the possibility of an unforeseeable solution in the form of hospitality. The Zuckerman brothers's crises can be roughly divided into internal and external conflicts; both sets of conflict have to do with identity and self-formation, but the first focus on the private realms of sex and family while the latter are more social or political. Henry's private, sexual crisis appears as the dominant concern of "Basel," in which his impotence presses him to try escaping the limits of family life. "Gloucestershire" mirrors this scenario by imagining Nathan fleeing from his own sexual impotence into the dream of fatherhood. Each of these chapters is set in the immediate vicinity of New York and Newark, but each bears the name of the foreign homeland of a woman never fully possessed, the representative location of a desire that is never attained. "Judea" and "Christendom," on the other hand, are set in the locations designated by their titles, but those titles, rather than the banal names of cities, present ideological interpretations of geography. Both "Judea" and "Christendom" lay claim to a certain location as the rightful, exclusive homeland of a particular community; in particular, they represent the respective belonging and foreignness of Jews *as Jews*. These divisions are by no means clean. The

personal and political continuously intermingle and inhabit the same space, but the distant/banal or present/ideological geographies do correlate with the perspective or direction from which identity in community is approached in each chapter.

The funereal “private” chapters with banal city names have their own sets of irresolvable conflicts that call for the exercise of radical hospitality, but, because they constitute a direct response to the claims of Jewish identity and Jewish history forwarded by Jewish-American writers and readers like Golden, Uris and Seligson, I will limit the present discussion to the “political” chapters and their ideological locations. Each of these chapters places Nathan alongside and in conversation with a character who, unlike Nathan, is at home in the location and ideology of the place. In “Judea,” Nathan converses with a number of Israelis representing a wide swath of the political spectrum, but his primary foil is his brother Henry. Nathan and Henry share a number of characteristics: they are both American Jews from the same Newark family with an identical religious and cultural upbringing. There is no discernible difference in the raw material available to each brother to construct a narrative of his familial and cultural past, but the histories they embrace could hardly be more different.

When Nathan arrives in Agor, the settlement outside Hebron where Henry has apprenticed himself to the militant Mordecai Lippman (a Jewish commando-settler to warm Uris’ heart), he asks for Henry and finds, instead, his American dentist brother bearing the name Hanoch. Henry/Hanoch’s fellow settlers all speak English with American or British accents, but they deny any connection to their countries of extraction. Nathan guesses from one woman’s speech that she was born in New York and receives the abrupt answer, “I’m Jewish by *birth*” (97). While Nathan sees Henry and finds himself recalling their “boyhood summers at the rented cottage on the Jersey shore” (ibid), Henry has, like his companions at Agor, rejected his personal history for a

particular ideological vision of Israel: “You *still* don’t get it. The hell with *me*, forget *me*. *Me* is somebody I have forgotten. *Me* no longer exists out here. There isn’t time for *me*, there isn’t need of *me*— here Judea counts, not *me*!” (105). Henry has effaced his identity as *Henry* and taken on the persona of Hanoch who, as far as he has a history, has only the history of the Jewish people, a history that begins in the shadow of Abraham’s tomb: “We are Jews, this is Judea, and the heart of Judea is Abraham’s city, Hebron” (109). Nathan, only half joking, questions if Jewishness might not have started with their own immigrant grandparents in Newark: “In other words, it didn’t all begin up that outside flight of wooden stairs where Grandma and Grandpa lived on Hunterdon Street... Jews didn’t begin in Newark, after all” (ibid). Nathan is only half joking because, as he tells Henry later, *their* Jewishness, Nathan and Henry as Jewish Zuckermans, did begin with that domestic scene: “The kitchen table in Newark happens to be the source of your Jewish memories, Henry” (138). Nathan expands this thought in an unspoken plea for Lippman to send Henry back to New Jersey:

the fact is that in our family the collective memory doesn’t go back to the golden calf and the burning bush, but to ‘Duffy’s Tavern’ and ‘Can You Top This?’ Maybe the Jews begin with Judea, but Henry doesn’t and he never will. He begins with WJZ and WOR, with double features at the Roosevelt on Saturday afternoons and Sunday doubleheaders at Ruppert Stadium watching the Newark Bears. Not nearly as epic, but there you are. (133)

For Nathan, the personal, situated history of his brother as an *American* Jew and a Zuckerman hold more reality than the ethnic and historical claims of Jewishness and Judaism. The chapter, though narrated by Nathan, does not let us complacently accept Nathan’s point of view. Henry’s self-association with Jewishness and a particular version of Zionism are given a legitimate voice, and what Shostak calls Henry’s “historical logic” (“Reinvention” 204) does not ring entirely hollow. In a rebuttal that ends the chapter, Henry tells Nathan, “you can’t explain away what I’ve done by motives...Beyond all your

profundities, beyond the Freudian lock you put on every single person's life, there is another world, a world of ideology, of politics, of history— a world of things larger than the kitchen table” (140). Henry and/or Hanoch storms out after this speech, leaving the question of his own identity as well as the conflict between the idiosyncratic and ideological claims on his person unresolved. Hebron or Hunterdon Street, Hebron and Hunterdon Street— each point of origin lays claim to Henry, and therefore also to Nathan, in ways that cannot be simply resolved into a single narrative of identification.

While in Jerusalem, before meeting with Henry at Agor, Nathan makes a nighttime visit to the Wailing Wall and feels the distance between himself and the devout Jews gathered there for prayer: “I think that I would have felt less detached from seventeen Jews who openly admitted that they *were* talking to a rock than from these seventeen who imagined themselves telexing the Creator directly” (86). He is repeatedly invited to join in prayer by a man who “simply needed another pious Jew in the world the way someone who is thirsty needs a glass of water” (90), but he refuses the invitation and remains a distanced observer, albeit one who was bar mitzvah.

At the beginning of “Christendom,” one possible continuation of “Judea,” Nathan finds himself in a strikingly different situation. He returns from Israel and finds himself almost immediately in a Christmas carol service in a West End London Church:

It never fails. I am never more of a Jew than I am in a church when the organ begins. I may be estranged at the Wailing Wall but without being a stranger— I stand outside but not shut out, and even the most ludicrous or hopeless encounter serves to gauge, rather than to sever, my affiliation with people I couldn't be less like. But between me and church devotion there is an unbridgeable world of feeling, a natural and thoroughgoing incompatibility—I have the emotions of a spy in the adversary's camp. (256)

The “Judea” thread of *The Counterlife* examined Nathan's problematic relationship with his own Jewishness among other Jews, within the ideological space of an energetic

Jewishness that claims him as much as it does the West Bank. But here, in “Christendom” he encounters a more drastic alienation, but an alienation to which he has grafted himself through his marriage to Maria. They make, Nathan admits, an incongruous pair, but he imagines that they share a deeper connection that disarms the apparent contradictions: “I wondered if it wasn’t a mutual taste for the incongruity— for assimilating a slightly untenable arrangement, a shared inclination for the sort of unlikeliness that doesn’t, however, topple into absurdity— that accounted for our underlying harmony” (257). Nathan’s optimistic speculation about an “underlying harmony” does not measure up to the challenges that face him and Maria as their incongruities do, by the end of the chapter, topple into absurdity.

Nathan’s background differs from Maria’s almost as much as it aligns with Henry’s. Her upperclass childhood among England’s declining gentry was not only non-Jewish but positively anti-Semitic. Immediately following the carol service, Maria’s sister Sarah informs Nathan of the lack of tolerant acceptance he can expect from her, her mother and England in general. While Sarah does exaggerate the family penchant for anti-Semitism, a significant amount of xenophobia does intervene in his relationship with Maria’s mother— the grandmother of his unborn child— and even in his life with Maria. Like Lippman who insists repeatedly that the Jews “*do not give ground!*” (122), Maria’s family “hasn’t given up an inch of land in Gloucestershire since the seventeenth century” (274). The English allergic reaction against Nathan’s encroachment on a little slice of Christendom appears in the restaurant where he takes Maria for her birthday dinner; an old woman, recognizing the visible signs of Nathan’s Jewishness and imagining that a noxious odor accompanies them, pleads for someone to open a window “before we are overcome!” (292). The perceived Jewish invasion of English soil takes on a more literal character in Maria’s feelings about predominantly Jewish neighborhoods in London: “I

don't like going to north London, to Hampstead or Highgate, and finding it like a foreign country, which it really does seem to me" (301). Nathan answers Maria's confession by questioning why she thinks that Hampstead and Highgate feel like "a foreign country. Because they're heavily Jewish? Can't there be a Jewish variety of Englishman?" (302). If Nathan has problems holding off the claims made on his person in "Judea," he finds it near impossible to hold on to any acceptance as a Jew in "Christendom."

The added pressure of their child's imminent birth and the looming choice of christening or circumcision push Nathan's and Maria's argument about their incongruities into the realm of absurdity. In her last speech in this chapter—just before Nathan leaves and imagines the letter that bends this final section into its metafictional climax—Maria declares the failure of the optimistic "underlying harmony" that began the chapter: "The irony is, of course, that she's the one who's turned out to be right—not you and me with our enlightened blather but my bigoted mother. Because it's obvious that you *can't* have people from such different starting points understand each other about *anything*" (305). Nathan, who was not Jewish enough for the likings of Judea, proves far too Jewish for Christendom; the claims of ideological territories wreak havoc with his identity whether he is inside or outside the community that calls that space home.

"Aloft," the other possible continuation of "Judea," considers a third relationship to these ideological spaces. This central chapter takes place entirely aboard Nathan's flight from Tel Aviv to London, en route from "Judea" to "Christendom," a place both literally and ideologically up in the air, but, Royal notes, "as a third possibility for Zuckerman, one of straddling the fence...it seems just as (un)promising as any within the text" (436). While Henry and Maria serve as foils for Nathan's Jewish-American identity in the "Judea" and "Christendom," "Aloft" places Nathan in explicit juxtaposition with Jimmy Lustig/Ben-Joseph, the "High-Flying Jew" (93) whose identity rapidly oscillates

between a harmless kid from New Jersey with a bad sense of humor and a dangerous ideological terrorist. Jimmy's protean lack of stable identity is rightly seen as insanity (not unlike Eli's breakdown). The life-threatening beating he takes at the hands of El Al security shows the kind of reaction a *luftmensch* can expect from those who take identity and ideology seriously, and it demonstrates the practical impossibility of being all things to all people. Neither Jimmy nor Nathan can suspend the world's claims on them for the sake of choosing whatever identity or identities present themselves as attractive or useful at the moment. Nathan comes to terms with this reality late in the final chapter, between his fight with Maria and his composition of "her" farewell letter: "she came from somewhere and so did I... We couldn't just be 'us' and say the hell with 'them' anymore than we could say to hell with the twentieth century when it intruded upon our idyll" (308). No one lives aloft.

During his hijacking attempt, Jimmy Lustig tries to enlist Nathan in a broader project of historical amnesia that echoes the anti-historical subtext that Roth attacks in Golden's and Uris's representations of Jews. After presenting Zuckerman with his Marinetti-esque manifesto "FORGET REMEMBERING!," Jimmy calls for the destruction of Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust memorial:

We are torturing ourselves with memories! With masochism! And torturing goyisch mankind! The key to Israel's survival is no more Yad Vashems! No more Remembrance Halls of the Holocaust! Now what we have to suffer *is the loss of our suffering!*...We have reminded them enough, we have reminded *ourselves* enough—*we must forget!* (CL 165, 166, italics original).

Nathan has just left the West Bank settlement where he confronted Lipmann (whose militancy is, among other things, a satiric homage to Uris's "Jewish fighters") over Henry/Hanoch's Jewish identity, and, while Nathan struggles to locate his own identity in some version of Jewish history, Jimmy offers him a perverse escape from Jewish

stereotypes into universal humanity. Jimmy proposes a fresh start free from the burdens of history and the collective markers of identity shaped by historical pressures. He acts as if we are all free to invent ourselves from scratch, to rewrite our lives however we will. Near the end of “Christendom,” Nathan describes this urge to escape from history into a universal humanism as “the pastoral myth of life before Cain and Abel, of life before the split began” (CL 322). The pastoral attempts to close the divisions that separate us from others, including and especially the other in the self, by effacing history and escaping into “the womb-dream of life in the beautiful state of innocent prehistory, the appealing idyll of living ‘naturally,’ unencumbered by man-made ritual” (CL 323). The pastoral attempts to escape from the thrownness of life, to evade the challenge of living-after the catastrophic facts of human history. Nathan, like Roth, does share the pastoral’s rejection of historical determinism and the social prescriptions of *Das Man* in what is, at base, an existential view of self-creation: “Being Zuckerman is one long performance and the very opposite of what is thought of as *being oneself*. In fact, those who most seem to be themselves appear to me people impersonating what they think they might like to be, believe they ought to be, or wish to be taken to be by whoever is setting standards” (CL 319 italics original). On the other hand, Nathan insists that this free performance of the self always takes place on the stage of a common world over which we have little or no control.<sup>91</sup> In Arendt’s terms, we can only act in the shared, public world that we inherit from other actors.

Roth illustrates the inescapable and irreconcilable claims of history and culture by ending *The Counterlife* with the anticipated birth of Maria’s and Nathan’s child. Their

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<sup>91</sup> In Heideggerian terminology, authentic being-in-the-world requires Dasein to project possibilities for being within the context of worldly thrownness. Human being-in-the-world requires both the free projection of possibilities and the situation of those projections within the limits of particular circumstances, and rejecting either the freedom of projection or the limits of thrownness results in inauthentic being.

unborn child is claimed in advance by his mother's Christian family as well as his father's Jewish heritage in a conflict that cannot be simply resolved by having both a bris and a baptism. Nathan argues,

The pastoral stops here and it stops with circumcision...Circumcision makes it clear that you are here and not there, that you are out and not in—and also that you're mine and not theirs. There is no way around it: you enter history through my history and me. Circumcision is everything that the pastoral is not and, to my mind, reinforces what the world is about, which isn't strifeless unity...To be born is to lose all that. (*CL* 323).

Like Arendt, Nathan insists that we cannot escape the plurality of human existence. The path to universal humanity always passes through the local particularities of an individual human life. Individual identities are neither comprehended by nor free from the claims of collective histories, and those histories conflict with one another and with the existential claims of the individual. Living-after the catastrophes and conflicts of human history cannot be an easy, liberal-minded matter of us all just getting along. At the same time, because life "is and," living requires hospitality for others and for the other in the self. While Roth never presents us with a resolution of the crisis embodied by Nathan's and Maria's child, the structure of his novel, its invitation to read hospitably, to practice reading as hospitality, calls for a welcome it cannot represent. *The Counterlife* cannot show us how to resolve the conflicts inherent in forming our own identities and living with others who would claim or disown us, with others whom we would claim or disavow, but its structure invites us to imagine and to practice the kind of welcome that cannot be represented because it cannot be known in advance. The novel remains disjointed and incoherent, but, precisely through its incoherence, it invites a style of reading that is more than resolution, a hospitality that welcomes the incongruous as a host who is never safely at home.

## **Unsettling Language: The Unsatisfying Future of Toni Morrison's Oppositional Fiction**

You're not in control. It was this assumption of control, the reader's control, the book's control—all of these had to be displaced, so no one's in control.

— Toni Morrison, Interview with Angels Carabi (1993)

Toni Morrison begins her essay “Home” (1997) by reflecting on language and its relationship to mastery: “From the beginning I was looking for a sovereignty—an authority—that I believed was available to me only in fiction writing” (“Home” 3).<sup>92</sup> Morrison describes that sovereignty available through writing as, among other things, “the pleasure of nestling up ever closer to meaning” and “the seduction of origination” (ibid). Language, and narrative language in particular, offers a mastery that is both pleasurable and seductive because it seems to offer the writer godlike powers of creation and omniscience: stories put both origins and meanings within the writer's grasp. While she is drawn and “from the beginning” was drawn by that sense of control, Morrison recognizes that language's promise of sovereignty is duplicitous: “It became increasingly clear how language both liberated and imprisoned me. Whatever the forays of my imagination, the keeper, whose keys tinkled always within earshot, was race” (ibid). Morrison finds that language which seems to liberate can also imprison her, first, because America's history of racial slavery and apartheid has left its legacy in the asymmetrical racial coding of American language, and, second, because language itself, when used to pin down meanings and assert control, comes to dominate both the subject and the

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<sup>92</sup> <sup>92</sup> “Home” is the initial essay in *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, US Terrain* (1997), a collection of essays on race in America edited and introduced by Wahneema Lubiano. Lubiano's book is a product of the “Race Matters Conference” held at Princeton University in 1994.

speaker. In Morrison's judgment, as long as she holds onto the dream of mastery through language, her language will master her. At the same time, Morrison sees language as the path to evading that mastery and accepts the responsibility for finding a way to make language work against its own racist constraints: "eliminating the potency of racist constructs in language is the work I can do. I can't wait for the ultimate liberation theory to imagine its practice and do its work" ("Home" 4). Morrison recognizes that, in order to free language from its racist accretions, her project cannot imagine a non-racist future as only an ideal, entrench itself in a counter-racism, or pretend to have done its work by hiding in an easy multiculturalism.<sup>93</sup> While she recognizes that her project risks "charges of encouraging futile attempts to transcend race or pernicious efforts to trivialize it," Morrison aims "to take what is articulated as an elusive race-free paradise and domesticate it...to concretize a literary discourse that (outside of science fiction) resonates exclusively in the register of permanently unrealizable dream" ("Home" 8). Her goal, then, is enunciating a vision that recognizes the ingrained racism of the past and present but still presents a raced but non-racist world as an achievable, non-utopian future.

In order to realize her goal, Morrison has to answer the question of how an American author can narrate our catastrophic history without foreclosing on the possibilities of a non-racist, non-sexist future. Morrison acknowledges that it "is difficult to sign race while designing racelessness," but that is the task she sets for her fiction. She

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<sup>93</sup> Morrison laments that, almost universally, "the race-free world has been posited as ideal, millennial, a condition possible only if accompanied by the Messiah or situated in a protective preserve—a wilderness park" ("Home" 3), she insists that "Counterracism was never an option" ("Home" 4), and she admits the temptation of settling for nominal diversity: "I was tempted to convert it [the racist house] into a palace where racism didn't hurt so much; to crouch in one of its many rooms where coexistence offered the delusion of agency" (ibid), and "We need to think about what it means and what it takes to live in a re-designed racial house and—evasively and erroneously—call it diversity or multiculturalism as a way of calling it home" ("Home" 8).

formulates the problem even more clearly in one of the most frequently quoted passages from “Home”: “How to be both free and situated; how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home. How to enunciate race while depriving it of its lethal cling?” (“Home” 5). The less-quoted passage that follows gives us an indication of her strategy and, in particular, it indicates her rejection of linguistic or conceptual mastery: “They are questions of concept, of language, of trajectory, of habitation, of occupation, and, although my engagement with them has been fierce, fitful, and constantly (I think) evolving, they remain in my thoughts as aesthetically and politically unresolved” (ibid). This chapter argues that Morrison’s lack of resolution should not be read as a failure or as the absence of a strategy. In fact, Morrison employs political and aesthetic irresolution as her chief methods for undermining the racist cling of American language and articulating the imminent possibility of a non-racist future. As she insists in her Nobel lecture, only an arrogant, destructive language pretends to “pin down” the catastrophic and offer final resolutions: “Language can never ‘pin down’ slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so” (21). In place of that certainty and the control it seems to offer, Morrison employs narrative strategies that strip the illusion of control away from the author, the book, and its readers. Perhaps counter-intuitively, Morrison presents the rejection of sovereignty, omniscience and control as not only liberating and empowering but as the condition necessary for the possibility of imagining a future in which people are free and self-determined.

The primary reason Morrison privileges both political and aesthetic irresolution is the collaborative relationship it establishes between a narrative and its readers: “Unlike the successful advancement of an argument, narration requires the active complicity of a reader willing to step outside established boundaries of the racial imaginary” (“Home” 8-9). Because Morrison wants her readers to step outside the racist constraints of their

inherited language, this particular requirement should not be read as a weakness in narrative fiction relative to propositional logic.<sup>94</sup> Active participation without the comfort of control is also necessary for what Morrison describes as “race without dominance—without hierarchy” (“Home” 11). Like Hannah Arendt’s politics of public action, Morrison’s vision of a non-catastrophic future depends on human beings appearing together and embracing both the complex plurality of human existence and the necessarily uncontrollable potential of human action.<sup>95</sup> No single individual can dictate the contours of a non-hierarchical future: in order to imagine a future free from racism

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<sup>94</sup> Morrison highlights the different phenomenal experiences of giving your attention to a propositional argument and giving attention to a narrative. Propositional argumentation requires a limited exercise of assent and cooperation. At minimum, reading an argument in good faith requires treating the argument as something that could be true and then weighing its merits. For Plato, and to a lesser degree Descartes, Locke and Kant, truth discovered through logical dialogue even bears an internal persuasiveness of assent (“anamnesis” or “clear and distinct ideas”). Nevertheless, logical assent is phenomenally different from the experience of narrative participation that Wayne Booth, in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988), refers to as occupying or being occupied by a story: “When a story ‘works,’ when we like it well enough to listen to it again and to tell it over and over to ourselves and our friends...it occupies us in a curiously intense way. The pun on ‘occupy’ is useful here. We are occupied in the sense of filling our time with the story—its time takes over our time. And we are occupied in the sense of being taken over, colonized: occupied by a foreign imaginary world” (139). Booth goes on to argue that “even when we resist a story, even when we view it dispassionately, it immerses us in ‘the thoughts of another,’ unless we simply stop listening... We escape ‘occupation’ completely only if we refuse to conjure up any sort of picture...only if we see nothing but blank, meaningless words on the page” (139-40). Morrison’s “active complicity” of readers should be read, at a minimum, as Booth’s “occupation” by the words of an author—that is, by the world of a narrative. Unlike propositional argumentation, which requires us to be cool headed and distant, narrative requires us to give ourselves over to it, at least momentarily. If we refuse that level of complicity, then we have not actually encountered the text.

<sup>95</sup> Morrison’s descriptions of language and politics bear a striking resemblance to the key components of Arendt’s political thought. Morrison’s multi-generational, historical narratives, including the parable of the old woman and her young interlocutors from her Nobel Lecture, demonstrate Morrison’s concern with what Arendt calls the fundamental human condition of natality: each of us inherits a world we did not make and which we are responsible for passing on to those who follow us. Morrison’s thick descriptions of her characters and her resistance to racial or sexual essentialism demonstrate her concern with what Arendt calls human plurality: while we are all human beings, each of us is human in a unique, distinct way—generalities do not and cannot apply. For Arendt, these two characteristics underlie the possibility for *action*, an appearance in the world made possible by our original, natal appearance (our births) and that discloses our own particular human “being” in front of our fellow creatures. Because Arendt defines power as the potential that exists when human beings act together and sets appearing to one another as the prerequisite to enacting political power, Arendt places this public self-disclosure at the very core of politics. As this chapter will demonstrate, Morrison views the recognition of human plurality and natality as conditions necessary for speaking a living language that breaks free of the systemic hierarchies of race, sex, religion and class and makes it possible to imagine a non-catastrophic future.

and sexism, Morrison and her readers must work together. Because imagining a race-specific but nonracist future requires the participation of her readers (because any picture of a non-catastrophic future must recognize and respect the plurality of human being), Morrison's narratives must remain unresolved. Her fictions are not descriptions of or how-to guides for constructing "a-world-in-which-race-does-*not*-matter," and they refuse to satisfy our desire to see that work represented ("Home" 3). Morrison's appositional works do not *describe* action, they *perform* it, and their performances (like all actions) invite responsive actions from her readers.

In this chapter, I am primarily interested in Morrison's insistence on her readers' participation or co-creation and how that participation exists simultaneously as both aesthetic and political action. In particular, I focus on nailing down the specific textual mechanisms of participation or co-creation—the narrative effects of the text on the reader and the reader's response to the text. As Dean Franco points out, much Morrison criticism describes reader-text participation through a vague and, because vague, "ethically problematic and politically limited discourse of co-memory and co-mourning" (Franco 415).<sup>96</sup> Franco criticizes what he calls "'critical wish fulfillment,' a critical projection of real-world ethical and political goals onto the reading scene" (ibid). Franco argues that, while Morrison's novels are frequently held up as effecting personal or political transformations, "the claims that the criticism makes are far from self-evident, and the performative power ascribed to literature in such claims bears some scrutiny" (Franco 416). For Franco, if we as critics claim "that novels do things, presumably in the world at large," then we must provide detailed answers to two questions: "What do novels do and how do we know they do them?" (ibid). If we make claims about the real-

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<sup>96</sup> Dean Franco, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Beloved." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.2 (2006)

world impacts of fictional stories, then we must clearly specify what actions they perform, through what channels and to what effects. Franco's article, which focuses almost exclusively on *Beloved* (1988) criticism, argues that too-automatically adopting Morrison's discourse of co-creation can perversely limit, rather than bolster, the political efficacy of her novels by giving the appearance of progress where nothing has occurred. Such critical readings "end up either serving as mute witnesses to a scene of destruction, like Benjamin's so frequently cited 'Angel of History,' or they end up suggesting that something or someone has mourned and is now healed in or by the text, without adequately exploring just what and how this happens" (Franco 427). Franco identifies this double-sided risk a particular threat to the contemporary wave of trauma-theory approaches to Morrison.

While he recognizes the potential value of trauma-theory, Franco worries that the psychological focus of that methodology frequently pulls critics away from the physical, material, and public implications of Morrison's novels. Franco takes particular issue with the approach of Nancy J. Peterson, who, he argues, is too quick to read *Beloved* as an agent of healing or closure: "With Caruth's analysis, the 'wound' of history always throbs, though Peterson would have the novelist heal it. This obviously endows the literary author with an impressive capacity for power over the past" (Franco 418).<sup>97</sup> In

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<sup>97</sup> Franco refers to Peterson's work in *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory* (U Pennsylvania Press 2001). Franco's own reading of *Beloved* focuses on the specific language of the novel and its relationship to property: "Property is the point in the novel, and it is where trauma and material possession meet. Drawing out the novel's multivalent utterances of 'claim' does not change the subject from trauma to property rights; rather, it points out the novel's particular lexicon of trauma" (Franco 425). His reading of "claim" in *Beloved* shows Morrison working against the language of law and property through the valences of that particular term of ownership, family, loss and argumentation. Franco argues that Morrison "sustains rather than elides the language of property not to expose how susceptible her characters are to internalized self-perceptions of property, but to turn that discourse against itself, from the inside out" (423). After analyzing *Beloved's* language of rights, loss and possession, Franco suggests that a "discourse of reparations" (428) can provide a productive link between the novel's language and our contemporary political life. My reading of Morrison alongside Arendt departs from Franco in his turn to reparations as the material and therefore public/political work of the novel. Rather than a public

other words, Franco warns against treating the fictional narration of trauma as achieving the mastery or control over the world that Morrison herself renounces. Franco acknowledges that the “discourse of Sethe’s emotional and moral experience, performed in trauma-centered analyses of the novel, provides by far the richest possible description of her deep textured humanity,” but he insists that critics making those analyses must be aware of the “impossible ontological problems” involved with translating historical and fictional experiences onto the experience of a reader, “especially given the extent to which trauma-theory is wed to deconstructive accounts of being human, a point which Caruth makes clear but which Peterson and others elide” (Franco 426). This chapter takes seriously both the critical desire to see Morrison’s fiction as politically active and Franco’s insistence that critics describe the specific mechanisms through which texts act politically. While Franco’s attempt to uncover the specific workings of Morrison’s fiction and navigate the straights between fictional and historical experience hinges on Morrison’s revaluing of economic language and the contemporary legal discourse of reparations and reconciliation, I outline in detail the specific mechanisms of narrative apposition that Morrison develops and displays most clearly in *Jazz* (1992) and *Paradise* (1998), structural tropes that serve as the particular avenues of co-creation and participation on the part of Morrison’s readers. My attention to concrete narrative apparati is intended as an augmentation of and occasional correction for the body of criticism that both desires and claims a real-world political efficacy for Morrison’s fiction. By disclosing the appositional strategies that Morrison builds into her novels, I am offering narratological support for the trauma-theory readings of her fiction with the textual specificity that Franco rightly calls for. While some trauma-theory readings move

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discussion of material reparations, my chapter examines the public actions which Morrison’s books perform through their own materiality.

too easily from representation to restoration or focus on the role of the author/speaker in narrating trauma while neglecting the relationship between the narrative and its readers/listeners, my focus on the mechanics of narrative apposition offers clear, definable answers to what Morrison's novels do and how we know they do them. Specifically, Morrison's texts present themselves as doing what Morrison, in "Home," calls the work she can do as a novelist: they remake the semantic field of American vernacular English, and they invite their readers to participate in this recreation.

All of Morrison's texts present themselves to some degree as invitations, but Morrison's clearest and most radical invitations to political co-creation take place in the novels on either side of her 1993 Nobel Prize. Morrison's experiments with language and narrative structure in *Jazz* (1992) and *Paradise* (1998) develop two distinct if sometimes intertwined strategies for wresting useful language out of the grip of raced and racist ideologies. Both of these novels perform the construction and reception of narrative on both thematic and structural levels, and, as such, they serve as productive keys to understanding co-creation and the political potential of participating with Morrison's narrative worlds. Her "Nobel Lecture," like the novels it falls between, serves as an interpretive key linking Morrison's fictional worlds to the world inhabited by Morrison and her readers.<sup>98</sup> While Morrison's choice of subjects, characters and stories does

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<sup>98</sup> While some Morrison scholars—Carolyn C. Denard in particular—offer insightful readings of Morrison's "Nobel Lecture," the lecture has not received the level of critical attention it deserves. Morrison's speech is, word for word, one of the richest narratives in American letters, and, delivered in 1993, it stands at a critical focal point in Morrison's career. The lecture shares fundamental components of structural self-awareness and self-disclosure with *Jazz*, and it predicts many of *Paradise*'s most important innovations, including the oversaturated language Morrison experiments with in "Recitatif," yet it is usually relegated to footnotes, epigraphs and glancing descriptions. Justine Tally's reference to the Nobel Lecture in her essay on "The Morrison Trilogy" is typical of its invocation: "What is repeatedly manifest in any analysis of the trilogy, however, is Morrison's concern with language...exemplified in her acceptance address for the Nobel Prize for Literature" (81). *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, ((2007) edited by Tally, relegates the essay almost entirely to Sami Ludwig's essay on Morrison's "social criticism." Ludwig offers a cognitive reading of the "Nobel Lecture" that emphasizes language's connection to "the extra-linguistic world" (131), but he also compares Morrison's wise woman to T.S.

perform a significant shift from the traditional canon she frequently refers to as “whitemale” literature, her two appositional strategies—virtuosically displayed in *Jazz Paradise* and her “Nobel Lecture” (1993)—perform an even more radical revision of American language and letters. Her first strategy, the use of a simultaneously reticent and oversaturated language, appears experimentally in “Recitatif” (1983) and is further expanded in *Paradise*: by refusing to satisfy the racially-coded commonplaces that are built into the American vernacular, Morrison displaces her readers from the comfortable distance of observation and places their unspoken and perhaps unconscious desires at the center of her stories. Her second appositional strategy, used most effectively in her metafictional masterpiece *Jazz*, consists in narratives overtly performing their own existence as self-disclosures: rather than instructing or informing its readers through representations of the world, the structure of *Jazz* effects a self-disclosure in the everyday world that calls, in turn, for a similar disclosure on the part of its readers. Arendt identifies this type of public self-presentation as the *sine qua non* of political action and the only credible basis on which people can hope for a non-catastrophic future, and, as her Nobel Lecture indicates, Morrison’s aesthetic and political project is overwhelmingly oriented towards the future as unwritten, unknowable and, for those reasons, a legitimate repository for hopes that exceed the known, catastrophic past.<sup>99</sup>

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Eliot’s “individual talent,” asserting an unsupported continuity with the “whitemale” tradition of Western letters. I will return to Morrison’s lecture regularly in my discussion of the appositional structures in “Recitatif,” *Paradise* and *Jazz*, and I will address Denard’s reading directly in the final section of the chapter.

<sup>99</sup> Taken together, Morrison’s narrative innovations in the 1990’s serve as a primer for reading her other works, including the inaugural work in the trilogy they complete. Rather than offering an extended reading of *Beloved*, I offer a methodology for reading that novel through the lens of its successors (the reverse is more frequently the case in critical readings). I argue, implicitly, that, rather than reading *Jazz* and *Paradise* as sequels to *Beloved*, we should read *Beloved* with an eye towards Morrison’s particular strategies of narrative apposition.

## ART, POLITICS, AND “SOCIOLOGY”

For Morrison, aesthetic formalism and political action are not opposed to one another. In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” (1984), Morrison insists that if any of her writing “isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything” (“Rootedness” 64). Reversing the aesthete’s tendency to view political art as didactic or “tainted,” Morrison argues that novels without public, political ambitions are corrupt: “It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time” (ibid). While she does discount “harangue passing off as art” (ibid), Morrison describes the aesthetic and the political as mutually interdependent aspects of fiction, and she consistently opposes both of them to what she calls “sociological” readings of literature. The “sociological,” which, for Morrison, refers to a reading strategy and not the academic discipline, treats texts as tools for mastery; it uses narratives to bolster its own sense of certainty and judges their merit based on the “truthfulness” of their representations. In a 1981 interview in the *New Republic*, Morrison condemns “this kind of sociological judgment” as “pervasive and pernicious. ‘Novel A is better than B or C because A is more like most black people really are.’ Unforgivable” (LeClair 374).<sup>100</sup> In “Memory, Creation, and Writing” (1984), Morrison explains that she relies on memory in crafting her narratives because it “prevents my preoccupations from descending into sociology. Since the discussion of Black literature in critical terms is unfailingly sociology and almost never art criticism, it is important for me to shed those considerations from my work at the outset” (“Memory” 214).<sup>101</sup> In a 1994 interview, Morrison is clearly

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<sup>100</sup> Morrison’s interview with Thomas LeClair, “‘The Language Must Not Sweat’: A Conversation with Toni Morrison,” was first published in *The New Republic* in 1981.

<sup>101</sup> “Memory, Creation, and Writing” was published in the now-defunct *Thought* in December of 1984. The citations in this text refer to the more readily available re-printing in James McConkey’s *The Anatomy of Memory* (1996).

critiquing “sociological” readings when she notes that she is “aware of the cautions and the caveats and the misunderstandings that seemed to lie around the criticisms of my work. My books are frequently read as representative of what the black condition is. Actually, the books are about very specific circumstances, and in them are people who do very specific things” (Dreifus 106).<sup>102</sup> Morrison’s criticism of “sociological” readings of works by her and other black authors links “universality” with “representation”: the sociological critic wants her to represent the universal reality of black experience, as if such an abstract amalgamation existed.

In her opposition to the “sociological” desire for universal representation (for “representative” narratives) and her insistence that her narratives are unique products of the imagination, Morrison sounds remarkably like Nabokov lampooning the biographical critic in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* or Nathan Zuckerman in Roth’s *The Ghost Writer* arguing that his stories should not be judged, for good or bad, as representative of the Jewish people. Literature, these writers argue, is a product of the imagination, and should not be confused with biography or demography. Morrison objects to “sociological” readings on the aesthetic grounds that narrative fiction constitutes a different genre of writing than memoirs or case studies: “Fiction, by definition, is distinct from fact. Presumably it’s the product of imagination—invention—and it claims that freedom to dispense with ‘what really happened,’ or where it really happened, or when it really happened, and nothing in it needs to be publicly verifiable, although much of it can be verified” (“Site” 112).<sup>103</sup> The ultimate source of narrative fiction is the imagination,

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<sup>102</sup> Morrison’s interview with Claudia Dreifus, “Chloe Wofford Talks about Toni Morrison” was first published in the *New York Times Magazine* on September 11, 1994. The citations in this chapter refer to its reprinting in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction* edited by Carolyn Denard (2008)..

<sup>103</sup> Morrison’s “The Site of Memory” was published in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (1987).

and critics who look for its sources in personal histories and population statistics are making a category mistake: fiction is imaginative, not representative. Because she views narrative fiction as substantially defined by the creative work of the imagination, Morrison, like Nabokov, condemns “the research of the ‘Oh, yes, this is where he or she got it from’ school, which gets its own credibility from excavating the credibility of the sources of the imagination, not the nature of the imagination” (ibid). In other words, “sociological” critics misinterpret literature because they do not treat it as literature (they do not read literature *qua literature*).

Ironically, by insisting on a statistically “accurate” representation of the world of historical experience and distorting the nature of the imaginative work of fiction, “sociological” readings also destroy the *political* potential of narratives. In looking for factual sources rather than fictional creations, “sociological” critics and readers sidestep their obligation to engage with the imaginative work of the text. By insisting on “facts,” “sociological” readers remove themselves and their imaginations from the work of the text and claim the comfortable distance of disinterested observers. Morrison describes this as the risk “of having the work reduced to sociological anthropology, of having the politics of one’s one language, the politics of another language bury, rather than expose, the reader’s own politics” (“Home” 7). Morrison clarifies the antipathy between “sociological” readings and imaginative engagement in her 1993 “Afterword” to *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Morrison writes that the major challenge in writing her first novel was finding ways to tell a particular story with unique, singular characters without either casting them as types (prototypes, stereotypes, etc.) of the populations to which they belong or, on the other hand, denying that the story has any broader, public significance:

In trying to dramatize the devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause, I chose a unique situation, not a representative one. The extremity of Pecola’s case

stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family—unlike the average black family and unlike that narrator’s. But singular as Pecola’s life was, I believed some aspects of her woundability were lodged in all young girls. (*BE* 210)

Morrison adamantly argues that Pecola is not representative and that her family is not average, but, at the same time, she indicates that Pecola should not be read as an outlier, an unfortunate girl caught in a tragic but freak situation. Morrison also describes the risks involved with readers viewing Pecola as an outlier and taking a distanced, pitying position towards her: “the weight of the novel’s inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing” (*BE* 211). Pity, like the sublime, is comforting because the person offering pity must be removed enough from the situation not to feel the pain he or she observes, and Morrison describes the satisfaction of pity as an escape from the self-interrogation and displacement she wants the book to effect. Morrison’s attempted solution to that problem centered on the novel’s narrative structure: “My solution—break the narrative into parts that had to be reassembled by the reader—seemed to me a good idea, the execution of which does not satisfy me now. Besides, it didn’t work: many readers remain touched but not moved” (*ibid*). We should notice two things about Morrison’s estimation of the novel’s lack of success. First, the criterion by which she judges a book as a success or failure is the book’s ability to move its readers. “Moved,” in this case, is defined against “touched,” and those terms line up with the descriptions in the previous sentence of readers, in the latter case, pitying Pecola from a comfortable distance or, in the former, taking up “an interrogation of themselves for the smashing” (*ibid*). A reader who is moved by the work is forced to reassemble the fragmented narrative and, in the process, begins to question and reassess his or her own subject position. Put simply, the narrative structure of the work aims at displacing its readers. Second, while she is not ultimately satisfied with the *execution* of her strategy,

she stands by the strategy itself: narrative disruption remains central to Morrison's strategy for displacing readers out of their satisfaction. "Sociological" interpretations, which use biographical or statistical facts to avoid engaging with the imaginative core of fiction, preclude this displacement, so Morrison continues to develop new structures of language and of narration that short-circuit sociological readings and their concomitant satisfactions.<sup>104</sup>

In *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference* (2003), winner of the Best Book Award at the 4th Biennial Toni Morrison Society Conference in 2005, Lucille Fultz notes that Morrison has consistently called for literary criticism

that would engage literature by African Americans within relevant critical practices and not merely as a sociological study of black life. While the sociological is relevant, indeed essential to any engagement with African American life, Morrison urges that it cannot be the end of criticism and theory. Rather, she argues, the sociological informs, de rigueur, African American art, but it must do so within the context of a given artistic construct. (2)

Unfortunately, Morrison's consistent and consistently heated rejection of "sociological" criticism has not prevented scholars from reading her work in precisely this way. While history, race and socioeconomics cannot and should not be removed from Morrison's novels or criticism about them, many critical works continue to treat her characters and her stories as representative examples of black American life. One recent and particularly egregious example demonstrates the risk of turning trauma-theory approaches into a new "sociology" in which we value Morrison's books to the extent that they accurately represent the raced and gendered traumas of her characters, a move that shifts the object

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<sup>104</sup> Satisfaction, as I am using it here, refers primarily to being satisfied with a particular representation or explanation of the world and is not exclusively the domain of the comfortable and comfortably distant aesthete. While smug self-satisfaction is one manifestation of textual satisfaction, a fatalistic resignation to the evils of the world—whether they are suffered personally or only witnessed—is an equally problematic result. In either case, the reader is asked to accept the given-ness of present conditions based on the authority of statistics, historical precedents, or inertia.

of representation from individual black people to the traumas suffered by racial and power minorities. In *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2010), Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber argues that

Black Americans, as Morrison shows in adept and nuanced ways, suffer from specific historical, contextual, and inherited trauma...[Morrison's oeuvre] presents a study of human weakness and resiliency through characters who experience the crises of black lives from different angles: slaves, former slaves, children, orphans, women, expatriates, fathers, mothers—dark and light-toned, poverty-stricken and affluent, rural and urban. (3)

Schreiber unfailingly treats Morrison's novels as case studies representing trauma and responses to trauma, and she evaluates Morrison's work (albeit positively) by a criteria which Morrison rightly denounces—supposedly accurate representations of black lives.<sup>105</sup> As literary critics, we cannot simply shift our claims of representative objectivity from individual human beings to the trauma they experience and carry. If literary criticism should not look to Morrison's novels for representations of “what black people are like”—and Morrison persuasively argues that it should not—then it should also avoid claiming that her novels represent “what racial trauma is like.” Nevertheless, Schreiber insists that “Morrison's characters provide good examples of how people inherit and pass on trauma, as well as how their early attachment experiences influence behavior and social interaction” (Schreiber 12). Schreiber fails to approach the novels as works of narrative art, and that category mistake blinds her to what the novels are *doing* (as opposed to what they thematically represent). This “sociological” bent also leaves her

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<sup>105</sup> A small sampling of Schreiber's “sociological”/representative use of Morrison's fiction: “Morrison's novels chronicle how each generation processes slavery's traumatic residue” (7); “Traumatic events leave people feeling abandoned...Abandonment is a prominent theme in Morrison's novels” (8); “Morrison's work intricately depicts how home, family, and community can moderate trauma and, as a result, self-esteem” (9); “Morrison's characters who are traumatized as children carry their trauma into adulthood, as we see in *Nel*, her mother, and *Sula*” (Schreiber 9); “Morrison's work traces the lives of black Americans from childhood through old age, in a range of class and geographic situations, through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (27).

with the alternatives of psychoanalyzing Morrison's characters (who are not, in fact, people and therefore cannot carry trauma in either psychological or physical circuits), of psychoanalyzing Morrison at a distance through her characters (another risky and unprofessional practice), or of substituting our experiences with Morrison's characters for our encounters with flesh-and-blood human beings. This last possibility risks falling into what Franco refers to as "wish-fulfillment readings" that prohibit, rather than effect, any real political address or redress in the common world. While the most Schreiber looks for are stories *about* trauma and recovery, Morrison insists that her novels *act on* and *with* her readers to effect real personal and political change in the wake of traumatic histories. Her novels do not merely represent action, they act; they are actors, not illustrations.

"Sociological" readings are, for Morrison, symptoms of a closed and foreclosing imaginary that prefers conclusive pronouncements over ongoing engagement with the world: "sociological" readings are tools for mastering a text or a topic and for asserting sovereignty and control. By demanding that fiction remains faithful to its statistically sanctioned image of the world, closed imaginaries reinforce the status quo and envision a future determined and defined by the asymmetrical hierarchies of the past. In "Home," Morrison argues that the closed imaginary of American political thought has defined even "the possibility of imagining race without dominance" as "aftermath—as rubbish, as an already damaged experience, as a valueless future" ("Home" 11). Morrison's opposition to closed imaginaries centers on her concern for language and how language reveals new possibilities for human being in the world—in other words, she is concerned with how language determines our ability to imagine the future as other than catastrophic.

## AN OPEN OR A CATASTROPHIC FUTURE

In “The Future of Time: Literature and Diminished Expectations” (1996), Morrison offers an extended meditation on time and the contemporary absence of the future: “Time, it seems has no future” (“Time” 170).<sup>106</sup> Morrison points out that “[t]ime is, of course, a human concept, yet in the late twentieth century (unlike in earlier ones) it seems to have no future that can accommodate the species that organizes, employs and meditates on it. The course of time seems to be narrowing to a vanishing point beyond which humanity neither exists nor wants to. It is singular, this diminished, already withered desire for a future” (ibid). Like Arendt, Morrison diagnoses a break in Western culture’s ability to reconcile the past with the future and she locates that schism in the middle of the twentieth-century. The pyramid builders of Egypt and the cathedral builders of medieval Europe were able to imagine their works and their world extending for centuries, but, Morrison argues, “at least since 1945, the comfortable assurance of a ‘World without End’ is subject to debate and, as we approach year 2000, there is clearly no year 4000 or 5000 or 20,000 that hovers in or near our consciousness” (“Time” 171). Human beings at the end of the twentieth century look back at our recorded history and cannot believe or cannot imagine that the species will survive a similar number of years in the future. Morrison argues that we, as a culture, can no longer see our future as an outgrowth or progression of our past (we lack the security of continuity), and, as a result, we turn away from the future and examine the past as if performing a post-mortem on the human race: “Even our definitions of the period we are living in have prefixes pointing backwards: post-modern, post structuralist, post colonial, post Cold War” (“Time” 171).

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<sup>106</sup> “The Future of Time” was originally delivered as the 25<sup>th</sup> Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities in March of 1996 (two years after she delivered “Home” at the “Race Matters” conference and one year before “Home” was published in Lubiano’s book). The version cited in this chapter appears in *What Moves at the Margins* (2008).

This proliferation of “post-everything” labels imagines the future in what Morrison calls, in “Home,” the language of aftermath. The closed, sovereign imaginary of the dominant American culture obsesses over the past because the future no longer seems to promise anything but catastrophe.

Morrison posits two historical reasons why time, in her words, “seems not to have a future that equals the breadth or sweep or even the fascination of its past” (“Time” 170), and like the year 1945, each cause is tied to a catastrophic history. First, the threat of nuclear war, inaugurated in 1945 with the detonation of American atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki and escalated through the American-Soviet arms race, made the violent and sudden end of the world seem at least as likely as its continuation. Morrison argues that contemporary human beings gave up imagining the future as a response to “fifty years of life in the nuclear age in which the end of time (that is human habitation within it) was and may still be a very real prospect. There seemed no point in imagining the future of a species there was little reason to believe would survive” (“Time” 172). The readily imaginable end of all human life through nuclear weapons (we might add global climate change or any of the other potentially world-ending crises that have, after the end of the Cold War, taken the place of nuclear winter) makes it easier to imagine universal catastrophe than any significant successes, improvements, or even survival. Morrison argues that, in this environment, people become obsessed with the past not as a key to understanding where we are or where we are going but as a psychologically necessary compensation for the lack of a future. Second, Morrison links the contemporary loss of the future to the catastrophic histories of twentieth-century totalitarianisms, signified by, but significantly broader than, the European Holocaust of

which the Western world became widely aware in 1945.<sup>107</sup> According to Morrison, the accomplished fact of twentieth-century totalitarianism in its various forms with its many terrors has eliminated the possibility of imagining the future as the always-improving product of historical progress: “I am not interested here in signs of progress, an idea whose time has come and gone—gone with the blasted future of the monolithic Communist state...gone already by the time Germany fired its first deathchamber. Already gone by the time South Africa legalized Apartheid” (“Time” 178). The belief that human culture and politics would inevitably “progress” (like technological improvements) to better ways of being or that human institutions were historically growing into utopias was shattered by the pseudo-scientific mass social movements of totalitarianism: the collective, technological project of cultural development crashed mid-century into the horrors of industrial genocide and technological oppression.<sup>108</sup> These two historical catastrophes challenge our ability to imagine a future that is better than our past or even the possibility of any future whatsoever.

While the catastrophic past of the twentieth century (among other periods) is factually undeniable, Morrison argues that the threat to the future comes less from the historical record than the language and stories we use to record and retell that history.

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<sup>107</sup> Hannah Arendt credits the experience of totalitarianism as an established fact with accomplishing the final break with an already eroding Western tradition: as she puts it in “The Gap Between Past and Future” (1961), “the old metaphysical questions were shown to be meaningless... it began to dawn upon modern man that he had come to live in a world in which his mind and his tradition of thought were not even capable of asking adequate, meaningful questions, let alone of giving answers to its own perplexities” (“Gap” 8). If the Western tradition’s ethics and epistemologies could not even begin to fathom the horrors of totalitarianism, much less prevent them from happening, then the tradition could not be trusted to guarantee a way forward, and our break with the past threatens the nature or the very existence of our future.

<sup>108</sup> Morrison’s rejection of “signs of progress” and her connection of the idea of progress to totalitarian movements both mirror Arendt’s rejection of politics as a project with definite, specific aims. Arendt claims that action, rather than fabrication, is the appropriate mode for politics because human beings cannot and should not be treated like raw materials to be shaped and molded into a predetermined form with specific uses.]

When the young people in Morrison's "Nobel Lecture" object to the sage's answer that the bird is in their hands—that whether it is alive or dead they are responsible for it—they demonstrate an awareness of the facts of their history while reminding her that the future she tells them they are responsible for has already been forfeited in the fatalistic perspective of their elders: "We have heard all our short lives that we have to be responsible. What could that possibly mean in the catastrophe this world has become...Our inheritance is an affront. You want us to have your old eyes and see only cruelty and mediocrity" ("NL" 26). The young people know that they inherit a future that is, from the perspective of their elders, already a catastrophe. Rather than directing their anger at the historical facts of the world they inherit, they chastise the old woman for *the language* she uses in addressing them: "How dare you *talk to us of* duty when we stand waist deep in the toxins of your past?" ("NL" 27 emphasis added). While they do balk at the sage's language of duty, the young people do not attempt to push the blame for an already-failed future back on her or shirk the responsibility she lays at their feet. Knowing that they will necessarily inherit some future world, the young people ask for her help in retelling that world's history: "Is there not context for our lives? No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience that you can pass along to help us start strong?" ("NL" 27). In order to face the difficult task of creating and inhabiting a future world, the young people need a historical narrative that can serve as the context or location for a new beginning. Because standard, fatalistic history locates them in a toxic present with no real hope for a future, the young people demand a different kind of narrative that, while necessarily imperfect, does not foreclose on their future: "Think of our lives and tell us your particularized world. Make up a story. Narrative is radical, creating us the very moment it is being created. We will not blame

you if your reach exceeds your grasp” (ibid).<sup>109</sup> The young people do not ask for a history lesson—a recitation of facts and dates; they ask for a new narrative about their history.

Morrison argues that, contrary to the dominant political ideology, the facts of history do not, on their own, lead inevitably to a catastrophic future. In “The Future of Time,” Morrison indicates how fatalistic history manifests in contemporary political discourse, and she pays particularly close attention to how language contributes to this fatalism: “It is abundantly clear that in the political realm the future is already catastrophe. Political discourse enunciates the future it references as something we can leave to or assure ‘our’ children or—in a giant leap of faith—‘our’ grandchildren. It is the pronoun, I suggest, that ought to trouble us. We are not being asked to rally for *the* children, but for *ours*” (“Time” 174”). The pronoun troubles Morrison for two reasons. First, because *our* children are not *their* children, the pronoun draws lines between racial, national, religious and ethnic groups and implies a willingness to sacrifice “their” children to safeguard the future for “ours.” Second, as the general topic of Morrison’s lecture and the inclusion of “our grandchildren” as a leap of faith imply, Morrison is troubled by the foreshortened vision of the future that “*our* children” projects: this future consists of only a generation or two and rules out the possibility of a future that includes five, twenty or a hundred more generations. Morrison argues that the catastrophic past does not, in itself, rule out a long and non-catastrophic future, and she places the blame for this foreclosure on the exclusionary, fatalistic language of closed imaginaries. Near the end of her essay on time, Morrison offers a brief, selective survey of contemporary fiction and finds “an interesting trace here of divergent imaginaries, between the sadness of no more time, of the poignancy of inverted time—time that has only a past—of time

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<sup>109</sup> Morrison’s young people paraphrase Robert Browning, “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp/ Or what’s a heaven for?” The second, un-alluded, line fits particularly well into the lecture’s playful but serious distinction between an earthly/democratic paradise and a heavenly/theological one.

itself living on ‘borrowed time,’ between that imaginary and the other one that has growing expectations of time with a relentless future” (“Time” 185).<sup>110</sup> While she argues that dominant Western culture has, since at least 1945, seen the future as bleak and history as a swan song, Morrison notes that “some writers disagree with the prevailing notions of futurelessness. That they very much indeed not only have but insist on a future” (ibid). She argues that this future-oriented, open imaginary does not rely on the “tentative hope” or “obstinate optimism” of naïve idealism but emerges from “an informed vision based on harrowing experience that nevertheless gestures toward a redemptive future” (ibid). Because the history of the twentieth century is, in fact, catastrophic, Morrison argues that any meaningful conceptualization of the future must be capable of addressing that “harrowing experience” without declaring that the future can only hold more of the same. Morrison claims that, far from ignoring history’s catastrophes, writers who manifest a future-oriented imaginary tend to come from groups who have first-hand experience with the horrors of the past: “I notice the milieu from which this vision rises. It is race inflected, gendered, colonized, displaced, hunted” (ibid). In other words, contemporary stories of the future that are not catastrophic, that imagine the world outlasting the grandchildren of their writers, are coming from sites other than the whitemale hegemony of Euro-American culture. The languages of the old, oppressive regimes can only tell two stories about the future: the continuation of their own dominance (a mirror of the past) or the catastrophe of their future collapse (the end of the world). For a narrative to present a future that is neither more of the same nor the end of everything, it has to be told in a different language.

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<sup>110</sup> She surveys fiction by Umberto Eco, Peter Hoeg, William Gass, Toni Cade Bambara, Salman Rushdie, Ben Okri, and Lesli Marmon Silko.

## REPRESENTATION AND DEAD LANGUAGE

Because Morrison insists on the open possibility of the future, she is careful to point out the difference between preserving open narratives, on one hand, and preaching inevitable progress or cheap optimism, on the other. As she argues in the passage from “The Future of Time” quoted above, faith in the idea of progress ended with rise of totalitarianism.<sup>111</sup> While they may forecast different futures, stories of inevitable progress are just as problematic as fatalistic predictions of catastrophe because they present equally closed-off visions of the future. Fatalism and progress are different sides of the same coin, presenting narratives that view their histories as definitive and the future as already determined. In contrast to this hubristic certainty, Morrison is interested in possibility, in “the places and voices where the journey into the cellar of time does not end with a resounding slam of a door, but where the journey is a rescue of sorts, an excavation for the purposes of building, discovering, envisioning a future” (“Time” 181). Both progress and doom slam the door on the future as possibility, and Morrison calls for narratives that return to the past in order to discover what is possible (as opposed to what is certain). Morrison rejects both inevitable comedy and inescapable tragedy in favor of narrative openness: “I am not, of course, encouraging and anointing happy endings—forced or truly felt—or anointing bleak ones intended as correctives and warnings. I mean to call attention to whether the hand which holds the book’s metaphors is an open palm or a fist” (“Time” 181-2). Morrison, like the exceptionally-astute young people of her “Nobel Lecture,” privileges stories that keep an open palm, histories that do not pretend to grasp everything in their reach. The young people in that lecture ask the wise woman explicitly for a story that lacks perfection and finality: “We know you can never do it

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<sup>111</sup> At the end of that passage, Morrison emphatically reiterates her point: “No, it isn’t progress that interests me. I am interested in the future of time” (“Time” 178).

properly—once and for all. Passion is never enough; neither is skill. But try” (“NL” 28). Because passion and skill are *never* capable of getting the story exactly right, “once and for all” (ibid), Morrison does not trust narrative representations to recast history or redeem the future, and she insists on narratives that avoid the certainty of representation and the satisfaction of final conclusions.

In her “Nobel Lecture,” Morrison argues that, in order to talk about the past without foreclosing on the future, both language and narrative must circumvent the satisfied posture of representation. Language cannot finally show us how the world was or how it will be. Because language does not and cannot know or express a final, fixed, settled or otherwise locatable meaning or truth, language, at its best, is gestural: “The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience it is not a substitute for it. It arcs towards the place where meaning may lie” (“NL” 20). Living language tells us to keep looking, to keep reassessing the meanings we draw from and attach to our experience in the world. Living language is gestural rather than definitive, and any language that reifies the positions of its speakers and listeners in a closed system is dead. Dead languages pretend to reach their mark, demand an end to inquiry and an acceptance of the official story, and attempt to replace individual experiences with ideologically sanctioned substitutes. Morrison elegantly contrasts the attempt to *replace* experience with language’s role in *displacing* experience: rather than taking the place of experience and setting itself up as definitive “Truth,” living language pushes our perception of reality away from the settled conclusions of official stories and forces us to reassess, again and again, the experience that it displaces. Living language does not attempt to tell us what the truth is, an act that, by swapping one settled story with another one, would offer only a false choice between different dead languages.

Instead, living language gestures towards, in Morrison's words, places "where meaning *may lie*" (ibid, emphasis added). Because it gestures towards the possibility of meaning rather than applying pre-formed concepts, living language makes it possible to imagine a future that exceeds the boundaries and limitations of the past. That potential to imagine an unforeseen and unforeseeable future constitutes, for Morrison as for Arendt, the characteristic action of human beings *qua human beings*: "Word-work is sublime, she thinks, because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference—the way in which we are like no other life" ("NL" 22). Generative word-work is sublime because it pushes us towards ways of being that are neither included in nor foreseen by its own language: it is language that reaches beyond itself.<sup>112</sup> This living on the edge of consciousness to secure the possibility of new ways of living and knowing, constitutes, for Morrison, our human difference (that which makes us human and not something else). It indicates that we are free to imagine the world in previously unimagined ways; it means that the future is as yet unwritten.

Morrison singles out Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" as a seminal example of living language, and her description of that address is worth quoting at length:

his simple words are exhilarating in their life-sustaining properties because they refused to encapsulate the reality of 600,000 dead men in a cataclysmic race war. Refusing to monumentalize, disdaining the 'final word,' the precise 'summing up,' acknowledging their 'poor power to add or detract,' his words signal deference to the uncapturability of the life it mourns. It is this deference that moves her, that recognition that language can never live up to life once and for all. Nor should it. Language can never 'pin down' slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable. ("NL" 20-1)

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<sup>112</sup> Living language attempts to imagine possibilities for life that, like Stevens' palm at the end of the mind, are perceived but not understood because they have yet to enter the horizon of consciousness. The mind's perception of that which is beyond its understanding has traditionally been understood as "the sublime."

Lincoln's words are powerful, in Morrison's estimation, because they reach towards the ineffable reality of lived experience while simultaneously recognizing that they will never reach the unsayable. Lincoln's words do not stand in the place of the battle, pretending to encapsulate or explain or encourage. His words stand in apposition to the battle, telling us to "little note" what is said at the battle site and, instead, remember what the soldiers did there. The true potential of living language is not in finally naming, understanding, prescribing or proscribing life in the past, present or future. Because language never reaches but only reaches *toward* the truth or meaning of lived experience, language is never finished.<sup>113</sup> Unlike some of his contemporaries, Lincoln did not pretend to have special access to final truths and settled explanations. While Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic," for instance, asserts a privileged, divine perspective on the Union cause, Lincoln refuses to wrap the horror of the war in the "Glory of the Lord" that the speaker in Howe's song claims to see with his or her own eyes (Howe 10).<sup>114</sup> Lincoln rejects theological dictates about the war because the battle's cause was, as he claims at both the beginning and the end of his still-shockingly short address, "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth" (Lincoln 23). An earthly government that is of, by and for the people cannot operate by heavenly fiat, so Lincoln elevates the political over the theological, eschewing absolutism in favor of what must be, because it is human, both an ongoing and a collaborative act of remembrance and action.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Language is like the proverbial shark that dies when it stops moving: living language stays alive because it avoids settling meanings. It keeps moving by never reaching its mark that it reaches toward again and again and again.

<sup>114</sup> "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" was first published in *The Atlantic* in February 1862, seventeen months before the battle at Gettysburg and twenty-one months before Lincoln's address.

<sup>115</sup> Lincoln emphasizes the collaborative nature of preserving democracy: "It is rather for *us* to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before *us*" (Lincoln 23, emphasis added). For Lincoln, this "dedication" is work that must be done together.

Morrison's lecture insists on the participatory nature of living language and the danger of monologic pronouncements. Her recasting of the Old Testament Babel myth serves, like Lincoln's address, to emphasize unfinished collaboration over theological monument building. After noting that the traditional reading of the Tower of Babel is "that the collapse was a misfortune. That it was the distraction, or the weight of many languages that precipitated the tower's failed architecture. That one monolithic language would have expedited the building and heaven would have been reached" ("NL" 19), Morrison rejects this onto-theological interpretation in favor of a political one: "Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet. Complicated, demanding, yes, but a view of heaven as life; not heaven as post life" (ibid). While the multiple languages of Babel are depicted in Genesis as a curse, a mark of divine wrath, Morrison's revision of Babel presents the possibility of a complicated, difficult, pluralistic earthly paradise founded not in monologic and monolithic agreement and identity but in speakers and actors who abandon the divine centralization and legitimization of their speech and embrace a position of pluralism (of sharing the surface of the earth with all other people) and judgment (being able to think potentially in the position of everyone else). In contrast to a dead language that not only allows but requires an escape from judgment into the insular security of a rigid, single-voiced narrative (whether that voice is "sociological" or "theological"), Morrison's vision of "heaven as life" and not "heaven as post life" requires a living, flexible language capable of addressing the perspectives and positions of other people and unforeseen circumstances. The only possibility Morrison allows for a heaven on earth requires the participation of multiple voices and languages. The imposition of a single language does not build a tower to heaven; it builds gas chambers

to silence heterodox voices. In order to imagine a future worth living, language must be open to the interruptions of other human beings.

Morrison's wise woman is "worried about how the language she dreams in, given to her at birth, is handled, put into service, even withheld from her for certain nefarious purposes" ("NL" 13). While Lincoln's language approached Gettysburg with an open palm, inviting and requiring ongoing engagement, the dead language which worries the woman is "unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis. Like statist language, censored and censoring" ("NL" 13). Because it is *censored*, such dead language cannot generate new ideas; because it is *censoring*, it does not allow new ideas to be formed.<sup>116</sup> Morrison warns that dead language "actively thwarts the intellect, stalls conscience, suppresses human potential. Unreceptive to interrogation, it cannot form or tolerate new ideas, shape other thoughts, tell another story, fill baffling silences" ("NL" 14). Morrison calls this language dead because it is fixed and unresponsive, but its death-like rigidity does not make it inert. By imposing an inflexible, intransigent *rigor mortis* on the minds and mouths of its speakers, dead language actively assaults the human ability to imagine new possibilities for the world. A dead language that is "unreceptive to interrogation," that cannot or does not allow "the mutual exchange of ideas" and that speaks only "in order to force obedience" functions as a closed, hierarchical loop ("NL" 14, 17, 15): official language and ideas come down from above or are handed down from the past (and, given the organic connection between age and authority, those are often one and the same source) and the people who receive that language are expected to use it, repeat it, obey it. Dead language forms a self-supporting system whose primary concern is

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<sup>116</sup> "The systematic looting of language can be recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, mid-wifery properties for menace and subjugation" ("NL" 15-6). Rather than acting as a midwife, dead language serves as a prophylaxis against new ideas. At this point, Eichmann's peculiar aphasia may come immediately to mind.

maintaining its own power: “it has no desire or purpose other than to maintain the free range of its own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance” (“NL” 13-4). Babel would, in fact, be a threat to such a system, but the imposition of a dead language functions as a kind of anti-Babel: dead language reduces the plurality of languages to a single-voiced, asymmetrical speech that, by reinforcing its own position and suppressing any competition, continually adds to its own monumental stature.<sup>117</sup>

In a passage that echoes Nietzsche’s critique of “concept mummies” in *Twilight of the Idols*, Morrison describes dead language as “a suit of armor, polished to shocking glitter, a husk from which the knight departed long ago” (“NL” 14).<sup>118</sup> Dead language is, as its name makes clear, a life-denying language that is too set in its own form to affirm the broad possibilities of life, and, in order for language to become life-affirming and support rather than thwart a non-catastrophic vision of the future, the empty suit of armor has to be sounded out. Nietzsche argues that the chief failing of philosophy is the elevation of fixed, closed systems of “being” over the unsettled “becoming” of life in flux. Out of its love for being, philosophy produces fixed concepts and crafts a language that presupposes and prefers those concepts (“good” as derived from “evil,” the idea of a “real world” in opposition to sense experience, etc.), and, when it is employed, the dead language of philosophy kills, hollows out and mummifies every aspect of life it purports to explain: “It is no different in this case than with the movement of the sun: there our eye

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<sup>117</sup> Morrison provides a short list of concept-idols dedicated to their own control: “Sexist language, racist language, theistic language—all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas” (“NL” 16-7).

<sup>118</sup> Nietzsche describes the desire for conceptual and linguistic mastery as antithetical to life in the world (what, in this passage, he calls “becoming”): “You ask me which of the philosophers’ traits are really idiosyncrasies? For example, their lack of historical sense, their hatred of the very idea of becoming, their Egypticism. They think that they show their respect for a subject when they de-historicize it, *sub specie aeterni*—when they turn it into a mummy...When these honorable idolators of concepts worship something, they kill it and stuff it; they threaten the life of everything they worship” (Nietzsche 479). Because life in the world always implies change, fixed concepts and settled languages are by definition life-denying.

is the constant advocate of error, here it is our language” (Nietzsche 482). Nietzsche sets for himself the task of “sounding out” philosophy’s stuffed concepts, tapping them with a hammer as with a tuning fork (the alternate title for *Twilight of the Idols* is *How One Philosophizes with a Hammer*). Morrison describes her project in very similar terms: she identifies the dead language of institutional, bigoted cant (racist, sexist, classist) as the target of her critique, and, in both her essays and her fictions, she explores ways to turn her own language—the warp and woof of her narratives—into a hammer for sounding out the idolatrous, life-denying vacuity of the American vernacular. The challenge for Morrison is in escaping the closed system of dead language in order to offer a critique which is not *a priori* co-opted by the language it employs.

#### **MULTISTABLE NARRATIVES AND LINGUISTIC DISPLACEMENT**

Morrison argues that the violence of oppressive imaginaries adheres in the very structure of their languages: “Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge” (“NL” 16). Because she cannot critique violence or expand the horizon of understanding in a dead language that is inherently violent and limiting, Morrison responds with a focused, creative violence towards the language itself. In a 1992 interview with Elissa Schappell, Morrison claims that writers confronting the language of racism must “[try] to alter language, simply to free it up, not to repress it or confine it, but to open it up. Tease it. Blast its racist straightjacket” (Schappell 74).<sup>119</sup> Morrison provides Schappell with an example of blasting language’s racist straightjacket by pointing towards the intricate

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<sup>119</sup> Morrison: “Toni Morrison: The Art of Fiction” interview with Elissa Schappell (1992); originally appeared in the *Paris Review*. The version cited in this essay appears in *Toni Morrison: Conversations* edited by Denard. Schappell asked Morrison how black writers can “write in a world dominated by and informed by their relationship to a white culture” (74).

structure of “Recitatif,” her only published short story. The story’s strategy for freeing language is, somewhat ironically, to restrain it. In “Recitatif,” Morrison withholds information about the race of her three main characters in order to create a reflexive, multi-stable narrative that displaces its reader’s relationship to his or her own language.<sup>120</sup> Morrison says that, while the story uses class codes, it withholds racial codes in order “to provoke and enlighten”: “What was exciting was to be forced as a writer not to be lazy and rely on obvious codes. Soon as I say, ‘Black woman...’ I can rest on or provoke predictable responses, but if I leave it out then I have to talk about her in a complicated way—as a person” (Schappell 75). The complicated reticence with regard to racial coding that Morrison develops in “Recitatif” and deploys later in *Paradise* does significantly more than “leave race out” of the story. If, as Morrison tells Salman Rushdie in another 1992 interview, the language of the United States is wholly racialized, then she cannot escape racial coding simply by ignoring race: “My effort in writing in a language which, in the United States, is wholly coded and highly racialized...is to liberate myself, as a writer, from these codes” (Rushdie 59).<sup>121</sup> In order to liberate language from its

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<sup>120</sup> Morrison gives Faulkner the credit for her discovery of this reticent strategy which she locates in the structure of *Absalom, Absalom!*: “Faulkner in *Absalom, Absalom!* spends the entire book tracing race, and you can’t find it. No one can see it, even the character who *is* black can’t see it... I was so fascinated, technically. Do you know how hard it is to withhold that kind of information but hinting, pointing all of the time? And then to reveal it in order to say it is *not* the point anyway?” (ibid). Morrison points out how Faulkner’s language, like Lincoln’s, is gestural: it does not *show* race, but it *points* to it. Morrison goes on to describe how Faulkner’s combination of reticence and indication engages his readers politically through the aesthetic structure of the novel: “As a reader you have been forced to hunt for a drop of black blood that means everything and nothing. The insanity of racism. So the structure is the argument. Not what this one says, or that one says...it is the *structure* of the book, and you are there hunting this black thing that is nowhere to be found, and yet makes all the difference” (ibid, emphasis original). As Morrison describes it, the reader’s experience of racism in *Absalom, Absalom!* stands in apposition to the insanity of racism in the world of historical experience. *Absalom, Absalom!* carries its argument about the ubiquitous irrationality of hypodescent within the structure of its narrative: rather than presenting the reader with arguments or discussions of race in American social politics and identity performance, Faulkner forces the reader to enact the insanity of searching for the “one drop.”

<sup>121</sup> Morrison’s interview with Salman Rushdie was originally broadcast on the BBC’s *The Late Show* and was transcribed for the Summer 1992 issue of *Brick: A Literary Magazine*. That text was reprinted in Carolyn C. Denard’s *Toni Morrison: Conversations* (2008), which is the source of the citation above.

racialized and racist codes, Morrison attacks the codes themselves, and “Recitatif” is, more than anything, a story about its reader’s encounter with racially coded language.

Morrison cannot free American language from its racist straitjacket by *representing* a world in which race does not matter. Because American language itself is racially over-determined, any attempt to represent a race-specific but non-racist world in that language will result in one of three alternatives: either, one, the racial hierarchies that are embedded in our language will insinuate themselves into the fictional world, two, the fictional world will masquerade as “raceless” while implicitly supporting the marginalization of people who do not integrate with the center through a process of whitewashing, or, three, the fiction will participate in a hollow multiculturalism that celebrates difference and diversity without addressing the real problems of racist structures that have little to do with one individual’s personal sentiments. The first alternative simply reifies the status quo, and the latter two actively obfuscate the social reality of race and racism. In our wholly racialized culture, a writer cannot *depict* any alternative conception of race because our language, our metaphors, our schemata are *part of that culture* and are incapable in their standard forms of anything but reifying one traditional picture or another. In order to meaningfully discuss the individual differences and similarities between the girls as unique characters, the story must first grapple with the American vernacular’s preferential predisposition towards whiteness. It is not enough for Morrison not to mention race or for her to show that race does not matter for her protagonists (even if that were the case, which it is not) because the story’s readers will project racial assumptions based on class, region, cuisine, etc. Even if she managed to write a story free of racial coding (and Morrison’s argument that American language is entirely racialized strongly emphasizes the “if” in that possibility), either the cultural bias towards normative whiteness or the biographical bias to read characters as sharing their

author's race and sex would mark her characters as either black or white. In order to undermine the racially over-determined assumptions in American language, Morrison has to foreground the reader's entanglement in those assumptions while denying them any place to settle in the story.

In her chapter on "Recitatif," Fultz argues that Morrison's reader-focused strategy "deliberately foregrounds, obfuscates, and collapses difference. The narrative sets up expectations and then topples them by showing us how much we rely on limited and stereotypical information in order to draw conclusions about certain characters and certain events" (Fultz 22). Fultz provides an interesting and compelling analysis of the story that focuses on Maggie—the disabled and racially-indeterminate woman who worked at St. Bonny's during the girls' brief time in residence—and positions Morrison's strategic denial of racial markers as a critique of the human tendency to see physical differences like race or a disability as markers of an inadequate or less-than-human status. She argues that the "structure of 'Recitatif' opens the possibility that readers are sometimes more vested in the attribution of race to individual characters than they are in the underlying issues that unite and separate the characters. What is problematic for some readers—which girl is black and which is white—poses no problem for Twyla or Roberta after their initial meeting" (Fultz 27). While she presents a solid reading of the story's structural challenge to its reader's implicitly racist desires, Fultz's reading of the relationship between Twyla and Roberta is, on final analysis, too optimistic: race does, in fact, matter to both women (for instance, Roberta's excuse for not speaking to Twyla at the Howard Johnson's is explicitly racist). Not only does each girl know her own racial identification, but race is frequently problematic for both girls-become-women, and it is by making race matter, by highlighting the social realities of race, that Morrison is able to invoke and expose what she calls the insanity of racism. This strategy does not work if

race does not matter to Roberta and Twyla. By claiming that “Recitatif” is anti-racist because it emphasizes the girls’ fundamental similarities over their superficial differences, Fultz’s reading of the story risks becoming a hollow multicultural gesture. Morrison is, certainly, challenging her readers’ perceptions of race, but she does not do so by deemphasizing the importance of race to the two main characters.

In “Recitatif,” Morrison thematizes the racial assumptions embedded in her reader’s language by over-saturating the story with linguistic racial codes and simultaneously omitting any definitive physical descriptions of Twyla or Roberta. Rather than presenting the two girls as neither black nor white (in which case readers are likely to find private reasons for projecting race onto the girls), “Recitatif” presents *both* Twyla and Roberta as *both* black and white, and this logically impossible positive claim about their races resists the projections of personal bias or assumption that a negation of race invites. Readers cannot “fill in the blank” of either girl’s race because Morrison has not left any blanks to fill. On the contrary, her multi-stable depiction of their races provides too many codes and fills too many blanks for a reader to decipher race intelligibly.<sup>122</sup> The effect of Twyla’s and Roberta’s multi-stable race identifications stands in clear distinction to Maggie’s indeterminate race. Maggie’s race is a question about which the characters within the diegesis of the narrative cannot come to an adequate conclusion. The girls’ inability to recall with certainty whether Maggie was black or white does play a key role in the story, but this indeterminacy does not differ from the uncertainty any of us might have guessing at or trying to remember another person’s “race” if their body

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<sup>122</sup>Critics tend, like Fultz, to read this strategy as evading, rather than emphasizing, the role of race in the story. Morrison occasionally encourages this reading by pointing out that, for her as an author, it is more challenging to develop a character without being able to use racially-coded linguistic shortcuts. Morrison’s challenges as a writer, however, should not be conflated with the structure of the text or the work it requires of readers.

does not offer up explicitly-raced phenotypic markers.<sup>123</sup> On the other hand, Twyla and Roberta have no difficulty determining which of them is black and which is white: the confusion about their racial identifications exists for the story's readers but not its characters. This difference in what knowledge is available at different diegetic levels makes raced language itself the dominant frame narrative and includes Morrison's potential readers within the scope of the story. "Recitatif" is a story about its own readings, a narrative that demonstrates the constraints that our racialized language places on narrative. Like the language of *Absalom, Absalom!* that forces readers, in Morrison's reading, to *enact* the insanity of racism and "one-drop" hypodescent, the language of "Recitatif" forces its readers to *perform* the unintelligibility of their own language's racial and racist coding.<sup>124</sup>

Rather than creating a generalized confusion of race-signifiers in which the reader can never attach a race-label to her characters, Morrison presents a series of scenes or passages in which she baits readers into employing their ever-ready categories of racial coding and then pulls the rug out from under them by switching the coded signifiers used for each girl. This formal strategy of reversal demonstrates both the arbitrariness of the signifiers that we will accept as racial markers and our willingness to accept those markers despite their epistemic flimsiness. Morrison famously avoids labeling either Twyla or Roberta as definitively black or white, but she continuously reminds her readers of their races by having Twyla inform us that, for instance, they "looked like salt and

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<sup>123</sup> This indeterminacy is, in itself, a challenge to the American one-drop characterization of race: if black and white are two hermetically sealed categories of human being, then how can we experience this level of indeterminacy? But, as the cultural persistence of racial essentialism indicates, *objective* evidence frequently fails to effect changes in beliefs and opinions about race. Morrison attributes these objective failures to the stultifying control of dead language and directly addresses her political program to her readers' *subjectivities* (their means of perception rather than the data they perceive).

<sup>124</sup> The ultimate point being that our conception of race itself is unintelligible. The perlocutionary impact of this narrative strategy (luring readers into participating with the unintelligible racialization of language while simultaneously making their participation visible to them) helps drive the point home.

pepper” (“Recitatif” 244). While the reader never knows which girl is black and which is white, the story constantly draws attention to this distinction and reminds readers that race matters (to us as well as them) in how we read their interactions.

We can see in Twyla’s original introduction of Roberta and the two girl’s racial difference that Morrison (and it is Morrison, not Twyla, who plays with the signifiers) originally codes Twyla as white and Roberta as black: “It was one thing to be taken out of your own bed early in the morning –it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race. And Mary, that’s my mother, she was right...they never washed their hair and they smell funny. Roberta sure did” (243). While Morrison does not let Twyla confirm the reader’s suspicions by providing a physical description, she leaves the loose codes related to kinky hair and white beliefs about funky smells in place until the girls’ mothers come for an Easter lunch six pages into the story. Mary’s green pants and the substantial cross worn by Roberta’s mother do not, on their own, indicate race, but they do fit with certain stereotypes of (lower-class) white and (devoutly religious) black women, so their presence appears to confirm the original pseudo-indication of race from Twyla’s original introduction. Morrison uses the race-codes surrounding certain foods at first to reinforce the implication that Twyla is white and Roberta black: “We were supposed to have lunch in the teachers’ lounge, but Mary didn’t bring anything...I sneaked a look at Roberta. Her mother had brought chicken legs and ham sandwiches and oranges and a whole box of chocolate-covered grahams” (“Recitatif” 248). Morrison simplifies the racial coding of lunch by not having Mary bring any food, leaving all the signifying weight of lunch on Roberta’s mother. While Roberta’s lunch is relatively non-descript, readers who are searching for racial codes (and Morrison is exploiting their desire to do just that) will be likely to latch onto the chicken legs, which headline the list of lunch items. Chicken is, of course, an almost universally

prized protein, but that universality has not prevented it from being coded as a race-specific “black food” in the United States, and Morrison takes advantage of the stereotype that black people (but not white people) love (fried) chicken to momentarily reinforce her reader’s willingness to read Roberta as black.<sup>125</sup> After appearing to reinforce the initial racing of the two girls, Morrison uses the same race-coded chicken legs to effect the first major reversal of race-coding in the story. Twyla tells us that the chicken—and the black identity for which it seems to stand—belong to her, not Roberta: “Things are not right. The wrong food is always with the wrong people. Maybe that’s why I went into waitress work later—to match up the right people with the right food. Roberta just let those chicken legs sit there” (ibid 248). The repetition of the chicken legs—but not any of the other lunch items—and Twyla’s assertion that the “right” food should be with the “right” people shows Morrison’s hand: she is playing with the chicken-as-soul-food stereotype in order to foreground a readerly desire to have race-determinate (and racially determined) characters.

The switch of racial coding—the rapid and unexpected migration of a racial marker from one girl to the other—creates a gestalt moment in the narrative: one moment, Twyla is white and Roberta is black, and the next moment Twyla is black and Roberta is white. Or so it would seem. As W. J. T. Mitchell argues in *Picture Theory* (1994) while describing Wittgenstein’s investigation of the duck-rabbit image (the famous doodle that has either rabbit ears or a duck bill, depending on which direction the head is facing), a gestalt image is never simply one thing or the other; it is, in fact, *both* things at once, and, as such, it forms a meta-image of imaging/imagining.<sup>126</sup> “Recitatif” is

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<sup>125</sup> In fact, the choice of such a broadly eaten and narrowly stereotyped food helps Morrison emphasize the arbitrariness of stereotype and the insanity of racism.

<sup>126</sup> Mitchell follows Wittgenstein in using the duck-rabbit to challenge the standard Gestalt reading of “only duck or only rabbit” because we can, after all, see it as a “Duck-Rabbit”: “Wittgenstein uses this

a gestalt narrative in which two incompatible pictures appear as simultaneously true, and, by being two things at once, it forms a meta-image of the racially-coded language it deploys. Just as the duck-rabbit is never only a duck or a rabbit, Twyla and Roberta are never only white or black no matter how a reader arbitrarily decides to imagine them. By explicitly thematizing the arbitrary nature of this choice, Morrison's linguistic over-determination points back from the assigned-while-unassignable race of her characters to the readerly compulsion to assign and determine race. Like Morrison's project in *Playing in the Dark*, "Recitatif" works "to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served" (*PiD* 90). The code-switching Morrison uses in "Recitatif" operates with regard to language and narrative through the same mechanisms that Mitchell charts in a metapicture's relationship to seeing. Both multistable images and Morrison's multistable language direct our attention to how we pay attention—they thematize thematization—by disrupting the distinction between figure and ground and making their audiences visible to themselves.<sup>127</sup> Mitchell could be talking about Morrison's multistable linguistic play when he describes "the multistable image as a device for educing self-knowledge, a kind of mirror for the beholder, or a screen for self-projection like the Rorschach test. The observer's identity may emerge in a dialogue with

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strange creature to make us see 'that we find certain things about seeing puzzling, because we do not find the whole business of seeing puzzling enough.' The Duck-Rabbit is not just a puzzle that emerges against a background of stable, ordinary visual experience, but a figure...of the 'whole business'" (Mitchell 53). Similarly, if we find the use of racial-coding in "Recitatif" puzzling, it is because we do not find the whole business of raced language puzzling enough. The story's gestalt-like shifts of racial coding blur the line between figure and ground and make the ground—language itself—stand out as the figure of the story. <sup>127</sup> Mitchell argues that "the use of metapictures as instruments in the understanding of pictures seems inevitably to call into question the self-understanding of the observer. This destabilizing of identity is to some extent a phenomenological issue, a transaction between pictures and observers activated by the internal structural effects of multistability: the shifting of figure and ground, the switching of aspects, the display of pictorial paradox and forms of nonsense" (Mitchell 57). "Recitatif" disrupts the distinction between figure and ground and makes the powerful racialization of American language visible.

specific cultural stereotypes...that carry a whole set of explicitly ideological associations” (Mitchell 48). “Recitatif” does not represent race or racism so much as it presents (makes present to our perceptions) the representation of race. It serves, to borrow from Mitchell’s description of multistable images, as a location where “representation displays itself for inspection rather than effacing itself in the service of transparent representation of something else” (ibid). The various codes and markers strewn throughout the narrative—from chicken lunches, big hair and Jimi Hendrix to Twyla’s claim that “Everything is easy for them. They think they own the world” (252)—can serve as signifiers of the (multistable) races of Twyla and Roberta, but, more significantly, they refer Morrison’s readers back to their own embeddedness in an entirely racialized system of language. Rather than discovering which girl is black and which white, we discover an otherwise transparent force in our language that insists on race as one (if not *the*) primary characteristic of identity and substitutes certain fixed points of racial identification for the challenging work of getting to know the characters. To paraphrase Mitchell and Wittgenstein, “Recitatif” becomes a picture of “the whole business” of race-in-language, a working emblem of the difficulty an American writer faces when she or he attempts to write about race without simply reifying one set of stereotypes or another.

While it draws attention to the influence of broad cultural, linguistic and systemic forces, “Recitatif” also engages its readers in an active game of participation. The fact of the matter is that multistable images, whether optical illusions like the duck-rabbit or textual reversals like “Recitatif,” are enjoyable. We like the experience of fooling our senses, especially when we know that they are being fooled. People, both children and adults, seek out optical illusions for no reason other than play, and Morrison’s multistable text brings many of the same primal pleasures. If the experience of code switching for a

first-time reader is confusion or revision, the experience for a re-reader is a delight that corresponds to the fun of playing with optical illusions or the mental repetition of a multi-stable word in a line of poetry. The sheer playfulness of Morrison's language persists even through the seriousness of its themes, and this specific type of play underlines and supports the potentially serious work of the story. We enjoy optical illusions because of the feeling, a sort of dizziness or vertigo, that accompanies the images' invitation not to trust our senses. We know that we had been looking at a duck and that, without the image itself changing, we are now looking at a rabbit. Because the image or figure did not change, the transformation had to happen within us: we, as beholders, have been fooled, and we can be fooled again at will (the volitional nature of optical illusions is complicated by the fact that they both are and are not voluntary: we can nudge our senses, but we cannot command them). The vertiginous feeling does not attach to the image itself—"how could it be both a duck and a rabbit?"—but in our perception—"how can *I* continue to see it as either a duck or a rabbit when I consciously know it is a trick?" The conscious reader of "Recitatif" who is willing to occupy the subject position of the story's audience—and not place someone else, a less enlightened reader, in her or his stead—can feel a similar alternation of race that is simultaneously volitional and involuntary and, like the viewer of optical illusions, we realize that the shift is not a result of the story, which stays the same, but of our perception (we also realize that this game of shifting races is only partially voluntary.) Mitchell refers to this shift from object to observer as "the 'Effect of Interpellation,' the sense that the image greets or hails or addresses us, that it takes the beholder into the game, enfolds the observer as object for the 'gaze' of the picture" (Mitchell 75). If we answer the hail of the text, recognizing ourselves as the audience whose schemas, prejudices and perceptions it parasitically preys upon, then we become active players in the story of the story. We loose our

privileged distance from which we could evaluate the story's accuracy or truthfulness or profoundness with regard to race and, having been displaced from that comfortable arm's length, we find that the story's resistance to disclosing race has pushed us into a self-disclosure. This experiential, bodily involvement of the story's readers goes beyond intellectual engagement with content, no matter how true, about the arbitrariness of racial markers and the fluidity of racial identity. Morrison's multistable play uses the racial codes of the American vernacular in order to sabotage them, and this sabotage arrests or seizes her readers in the application of a language that is certainly everyday but must not be accepted as natural.

Morrison's productive sabotage generalizes the questions that surround Maggie and could otherwise appear as only applicable to her exceptional case. Maggie, the only character besides Twyla and Roberta to appear in all four sections of "Recitatif," is the absent center of the plot and narrative. The story's section breaks do not follow the different time frames or encounters between Twyla and Roberta (the first section, for instance, covers both St. Bonny's and Howard Johnson's). Instead, each of the marked divisions in the story is centered around a different version of what happened to Maggie in the orchard: 1) Maggie fell down, 2) the "gar girls" knocked her down, 3) she was/was not a black lady that Twyla and Roberta did/did not join in kicking, though Twyla wanted to, and 4) she was a racially indeterminate woman that the "gar girls" kicked while Twyla and Roberta watched and wanted to join.<sup>128</sup> Maggie—a "sandy colored" woman who may

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<sup>128</sup> We can very reasonably think of the four sections of "Recitatif" as four separate entries, each penned by the adult Twyla, and doing so has the advantage of reconciling the changing perception of facts recorded in Twyla's narration. The first entry records her encounter with Roberta in the Howard Johnson's and includes the necessary background information about their childhood connection. The second section narrates their unexpected encounter as more mature adults and approximate neighbors. The third section narrates the racial strife that brought them together for another encounter but quickly drove a wedge between them. The last section narrates a kind of reconciliation that happens around the memory of Maggie. By section three, Twyla has accepted the revised story of Maggie in the orchard that Roberta

have been black, was reportedly aged, probably suffered from a mobility impairment and certainly lacked the ability to speak—eludes both Twyla’s and Roberta’s memories on multiple occasions and, even though she occupies a focal point of the narrative, exists in a fog of misremembering, fear, accusation, guilt, complicity and violent desire. Maggie’s inability to speak for herself, to bring language to bear, reflects the narrative’s inability to speak about her, the failure of language to bear her out, to bare her story. For Twyla, who tells a four-part story structured around her changing recollection of Maggie, and for Roberta, whose desperate question about Maggie ends the story, their inability to speak coherently about Maggie troubles not only the relationship between them but also their formative memories and identities.

If it does not, on its own, constitute a new language in which race can be spoken, encountered or experienced in free, non-statist ways, Twyla’s and Roberta’s struggle with Maggie’s indeterminate race does at least signal the need for such a language while demonstrating the power of language both to reify and disrupt our notions about race. The linguistic acrobatics of “Recitatif” also signal that Morrison was not free to tell just any story she wanted about Twyla and Roberta because the same obscure desires that fog the two women’s memories obscure our ability to talk or think about race in general. The racialized and racist tendencies of American culture and vernacular English foreclose on all but a few possibilities of plot and characterization. This is not necessarily to say that Morrison could not write the story she wanted to write (for one thing, we do not have easy access to her private desires in the early 1980s) but that, by demonstrating the lengths an author must go through to escape the stultifying confines of racial coding, she reveals how limiting that language is. So, one of the stories Morrison tells us about

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presents her with in section two, and in section four Roberta has stepped back from her accusative version in section three.

Maggie is the story of how language itself constricts what we can say, and to some degree what we can imagine, about Maggie. Viewed from this angle, the story's final line—Roberta's question, "What the hell happened to Maggie?" (261)—registers not only that Twyla and Roberta lost and have track of Maggie (both what *happened* to Maggie in the orchard and what *has happened* to Maggie in the intervening years) but also that the narrative has not and cannot tell us either what has happened to Maggie (where she, like the girls' mothers mentioned in the previous sentence of dialogue, finally ended up) or what happened to Maggie (what definitively took place in the orchard and its significance in Maggie's life or the lives of Twyla and Roberta). This narrative limitation is not an accidental feature of the story that could have been written otherwise: it is the effect of a limited and limiting language, of the racist straitjacket from which writers must struggle to free the vernacular.

According to Morrison, racist language has a tremendous amount of imaginative and political power because it provides people with a definite satisfaction. The limitations that Morrison feels as a writer when pushing against the vernacular's predeterminations of race and sex are powerful, in part, because those linguistic short-hands are easy and comforting. Setting aside bigots who take conscious pleasure in reinscribing racist hierarchies through hate speech, racist language can seduce people of good will and good faith because it offers familiarity, order and control. In a 1998 conversation about her just-published novel *Paradise*, Morrison wonders non-hypothetically about her own ability to resist the control that racial codes offer: "Can I give up the inherent power of signaling race? It *has* a power" (Verdelle 170, emphasis original).<sup>129</sup> She tells A. J. Verdelle that refusing to signal the races of the women at the Convent "was in some ways

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<sup>129</sup> Morrison's interview with A.J. Verdelle, "Loose Magic: A. J. Verdelle Interviews Toni Morrison" was first published in *Doubletake* in 1998. The version referred to above appears in *Toni Morrison: Conversations* (2008).

daunting for me, and also I felt crippled—the language was crippled—because I couldn't take those shortcuts anymore. I had to say something else about a character or nothing or probe into some other places" (Verdelle 165). As she does with Twyla and Roberta in "Recitatif," Morrison places Mavis, Gigi, Seneca and Pallas beyond the racing reach of her readers' language by refusing to give racially-conclusive physical descriptions of the women while simultaneously marking all of them with too many race-coded signifiers of class and culture: "I say and flag 'race' in the first sentence of *Paradise* and never mention it again as far as the newcomers go. The reader only knows that of those four women, one of them is not black. One of them is white. But the language of the book refuses to identify which one she is. The text will not answer the question" (ibid). Morrison demurely references her novel's inflammatory and often-quoted first line—"They shoot the white girl first" (*Paradise* 3)—as "signaling race." Morrison takes nearly eight chapters and over 280 pages to return to that same murder marked, once again, with the victim's whiteness: "Suddenly a woman with the same white skin appears, and all Steward needs to see are her sensual appraising eyes to pull the trigger again" (285). Both before and after each woman has been introduced to the reader and to the community at the convent, Morrison plays a purposeful game with our desire to know which of the women was shot just inside the doors of the convent in a crime which both is and is not motivated by her race (the other four women, including Consolata, are hunted down with the same bloodlust).

The novel preys on our desire to mark its characters first and foremost by race, and Morrison offers plenty of signifiers—from Mavis's Cadillac to Pallas's father who was "warned about the consequences of marrying outside his own people" (*Paradise* 254)—that can lead race-seeking readers into thinking they have discovered a Rosetta stone of racial identification. In some cases, *Paradise* even uses variations on the gestalt

shifts that Morrison developed in “Recitatif.” For example, Pallas is by far the wealthiest of the four women, and, because class markers are frequently conflated with race markers, readers may be tempted to see Pallas as “the white girl.” The above quotation about her father marrying “outside his own people” seems to contradict that estimation: if Pallas is of mixed parentage, then the one-drop laws of hypodescent would *exclude* her from being white. Of course, on further reflection, neither of these potential race-markers actually tells us anything about Pallas’s race: because race and class are not exact correlates, her father could be black or white and, because “own people” could signify class, religion or any number of other non-racial group markers, her father’s exogamous marriage is also a dead end. The shifting pseudo-signifiers of race do not tell us anything about which of the four women is white, but, like “Recitatif,” *Paradise* uses these multistable signifiers to turn its readers’ attentions back on the assumptions that they hold and are held by in their everyday language: “what the book invites the reader to do is examine, recognize, hold onto, or dismiss, the racial baggage, which is frequently cultural baggage, that a reader brings to a character” (ibid). Coded language satisfies as a way of suppressing questions and desires that push against the status quo: it is, in the words of Morrison’s Nobel lecture, “content to admire its own paralysis” (“NL” 13). By turning the focus of her narratives onto the means through which dead language silences other possibilities, Morrison aims at leaving her readers unsatisfied. In discussing her aesthetic goals with Elissa Schappell, Morrison is clear that a writer “shouldn’t over-gratify, you should never satiate. I’ve always felt that the peculiar sense of hunger at the end of a piece of art—a yearning for more—is really very, very powerful” (Schappell 72).<sup>130</sup> Both aesthetically and politically, Morrison’s appositional narrative experiments and

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<sup>130</sup> “Toni Morrison: The Art of Fiction,” Morrison’s interview with Elissa Schappell, originally appeared in the *Paris Review* in 1992. This interview was published the same year as *Jazz* (1992) and one year before Morrison’s “Nobel Lecture.”

multistable language in particular have a single goal: leave readers with an appetite for something more.

#### FROM DISSATISFACTION TO PARTICIPATION

In her interview with Verdelle, Morrison connects her multistable language-game to the characters in *Paradise* whose races are seemingly stable and established, and she describes this connection as a move against “sociological” readings of the novel: “We’re so generally understood as *the* black woman, or *the* black man, or what have you, and it’s just, you know, burdensome. So one of the ways for me to get specifically at the differences was to have a population...that is wholly unraced...[N]ot signaling race frees me up to talk about the characters in all sorts of ways—to not have race be the only way in which they are understood” (Verdelle 166). *Paradise*, a novel that begins when a group of men from an all-black town “shoot *the* white girl first” (emphasis added), certainly does not avoid race or pretend that race does not matter. Morrison’s text raises questions about the workings of race at a particular time and place in American history, and, to aid that history, she refuses to signal race in a way that satisfies the desire to use race as an epistemological short-cut. The un-race-able and therefore un-place-able women of the Convent draw explicit attention to language and to the assumptions that that language smuggles into the story. They remind readers that language is not naïve, innocent or natural. The disruption effected by the multistable races of the four displaced women creates a space for Morrison to examine history outside the “sociological” constraints of statistical accuracy, racial stereotype, or communal myth. *Paradise* places the raced desires of its readers’ language in dialogue with the text of the Oven and the founding and refounding of Haven and Ruby.

If the language of *Paradise* is marked by the oversaturated, undeterminable races of the Convent women, the plot is marked by the inscrutable presence of the Oven and its contested text. The Oven was built in 1890 by the freedmen who founded Haven, and the founders of Ruby, the grandchildren of Haven's founders, took it apart brick by brick and placed it at the center of Ruby. When the Oven is first introduced in the "Ruby" section, focalized in the mind of Arnold Fleetwood as he stalks through the Convent's kitchen, Arnold thinks of it as "the huge, flawlessly designed Oven that both nourished them and monumentalized what they had done" (*Paradise* 6-7). The oven is a monument to the founding act of "the Old Fathers" (6), a literal source of nourishment and a symbol of authority. The iron hearth of the Oven bears an inscription that Ruby's authorities, the men who reenacted the original founding of Haven by bringing the Oven with them, read as "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" (86). Arnold Fleetwood's mental description of the Oven begins by emphasizing the clarity of this text—"the Oven's iron lip was recemented into place and its worn letters polished *for all to see*. He himself had helped clean off sixty-two years of carbon and animal fat so the words shone *as brightly as they did in 1890 when they were new*" (6, emphasis added). The monument appears, at first, as public, clear, and guaranteed by men whose authority comes from their closeness—in age, family and action—to its founders. To know the history of Ruby, you only need to look to the Oven.

Or so it would seem. Questions about the origin and interpretation of the inscription creep into Arnold Fleetwood's consciousness, and the Oven's initial clarity does not survive the paragraph in which it is introduced. He knows that Zechariah "Big Papa" Morgan placed the words on the hearth, but "It is not clear where the words came from. Something he heard, invented, or something whispered to him while he slept...who knew if he invented or stole the half-dozen or so words he forged?" (7). While Deacon

and Steward Morgan claim an ancestral tie to the words on the hearth, Arnold questions what connection the inscription has to the author, their grandfather, and Arnold's metallurgic pun implies that, whether invented or stolen, the words are a forgery. Arnold's uncertainty about the inscription's origin is followed immediately by doubts about the authority that he, like Deacon and Steward, claims to have over their interpretation: "Words that seemed at first to bless them; later to confound them; finally to announce that they had lost" (ibid). The need for interpretation fractures the univocal, monolithic history of Haven and Ruby, and, as at Babel, the proliferation of voices seems to keep them from reaching paradise. From the perspective of Arnold, Deacon, Steward and the other men who gather at the Oven before hunting and murdering the women at the Convent, any variance in interpreting the Oven and the history it monumentalizes is a threat to the future of Ruby. Deacon tells the young people at Reverend Misner's meeting about the inscription, "Nobody, I mean nobody, is going to change the Oven or call it something strange. Nobody is going to mess with a thing our grandfathers built...nobody is going to come along some eighty years later claiming to know better what men who went through hell to learn knew" (85-6). Deacon claims the authority to interpret his grandfather's text first by pointing out his genetic tie to Zechariah—"That's my grandfather you're talking about" (84)—and, second, by pointing to the faithful repetition of the Oven's re-construction in Ruby: "Tell them, Sargeant, how delicate was the separation, how careful we were, how we wrapped them [the Oven's bricks], each and every one...Me and my brother lifted that iron. The two of us" (85-6). When one of the young men at the meeting interjects that "It's our history too, sir. Not just yours," Deacon tells him that the "Oven already has a history. It doesn't need you to fix it" (86). For the men who take the side of Deacon and Steward Morgan, maintaining the monumental history of the Oven is the only way to guarantee the future of Ruby and its citizens, and

any variation from the official, authoritative history is seen as an existential threat and actively suppressed. Steward, who fires the shot that opens the novel's first sentence, goes so far as to threaten the lives of any dissenting youths: "If you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake" (87).<sup>131</sup> Steward's hot-headed threat shows that the official history of Ruby—the story of the Disallowing, the supernaturally assisted trek to Haven, that town's quick decline and its refounding in a new location as Ruby—has become, in the words of Morrison's Nobel Lecture, an "oppressive language" that "does more than represent violence; it is violence" (NL 16).<sup>132</sup> The specific threat to "blow [the] head off" of anyone that challenges the monumental history of the Oven connects the violence of this official language to the physical violence that finally travels, both metaphorically and literally, from the Oven to the Convent.

The official history (for which Steward Morgan is willing to shoot "the white girl," Connie, and presumably anyone else he sees as a threat to the narrative) places "the Disallowing" at the very center of Ruby's history just as the Oven sits at the town's geographic center. The story of the Disallowing, like most of Ruby's history, appears in its clearest, most complete form as part of Pat Best's "history project" (187), but her story is collected from and largely corroborates the fragments of the official story that are

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<sup>131</sup> Steward's words echo the warning at the end of John's apocalypse: "If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book" (Rev 22:18-9 KJV). Like Morrison's reevaluation of the Babel myth, Steward's threatening redeployment of John's injunction pits the anthropological/democratic against the theological/authoritative, and, in *Paradise* as in her "Nobel Lecture," Morrison privileges the former over the latter.

<sup>132</sup> A related passage from Morrison's Nobel Lecture seems almost to predict the thematic structure of *Paradise*: "Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet. Complicated, demanding, yes, but a view of heaven as life; not heaven as post-life" (NL 19).

scattered throughout *Paradise*. In Pat's version, the nine families who went on to found Haven originally fled post-Reconstruction Louisiana and Mississippi in search of a haven in Fairly, Oklahoma, a new town founded by and for freedmen and their families (and the official story certainly emphasizes the *men* in freedmen). When the families arrived at Fairly, the light-skinned citizens of that town refused to let them enter because they were, as Pat calls them, "8-R" or "eight-rock, a deep deep level in the coal mines. Blue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren't 8-rock like them" (193). While they had been used to thinking of the world as a struggle of "free against slave," "rich against poor," or "white against black," the Disallowing made them aware of "a new separation: light-skinned against black" (194). In Pat's estimation, "Everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many" (189). In particular, Pat looks to the Disallowing and sees the origin of an unspoken "blood rule," an inverted logic of hypodescent in which one (visible) drop of white blood is enough to marginalize a person as impure. Pat believes, with good reason, that her family has been ostracized because her mother, who died in childbirth, "looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me" (196). While a prohibition against apparent miscegenation is never discussed openly in Ruby, Pat claims that "the rule was set and lived a quietly throbbing life because it was never spoken of, except for the hint in the words Zechariah forged for the Oven" (195). The Oven's commandment, as Patricia interprets it, is both "a threat to those who had disallowed them" and a warning to anyone who would harbor anyone like the fair citizens of Fairly (*ibid*). For Pat Best, the first light-skinned daughter of Ruby, the Oven is a monument to the town's monolithic "8-rock" history and a warning for its citizens to maintain a pure version of that history along with pure 8-rock blood.

Candice Jenkins notes that the unspoken blood rule described in Pat's history appears to be "a neat reversal of the Western color hierarchy that privileges whiteness and derides blackness and ranks those in-between according to how they fall on the phenotypic spectrum" (Jenkins 280).<sup>133</sup> Jenkins speculates that the term-swapping in Pat's hierarchy may explain why many "critics read the novel as a comment on (white) American history, for by portraying what appears to be a mirror image of white racism and Eurocentric obsessions with physical purity, *Paradise* does speak to the limitations and social consequences of interracial bias" (ibid). The 8-rock prejudice of Ruby's founding fathers may seem to be a simple repetition of Anglo-American race prejudice with repositioned hierarchical terms (black over white instead of white over black), but, as Jenkins persuasively argues, "the reverse color hierarchy that exists in Morrison's all-black town of Ruby is neither an exact equivalent to white racism nor a consistently applied arbiter of light skin" (ibid). For example, Jenkins points out that the idealized "nineteen Negro ladies" that Deacon and Steward see on their tour of black towns are described as light-skinned, yet they "hold the power to 'excite' desire or to inspire awe and admiration because of their conspicuous (and conspicuously male-controlled) wealth" (Jenkins 284). The 8-rock blood rule is not, Jenkins argues, about blood or phenotypic markers but a stand-in for "specifically black discourses of cultural authenticity, usually nationalist in origin" (Jenkins 277). Rather than reading Ruby's race-prejudice as an allegory of white American racism, Jenkins reads 8-rock skin as a metonym for the social or cultural ideal of "authenticity" among black Americans, and she argues that "Morrison implicitly critiques the very notion of racial authenticity, in the process commenting on the frequent suppression of the multiracial in authenticity

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<sup>133</sup> Candice M. Jenkins, "Pure Black: Class, Color, and Intraracial Politics in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." MFS 52.2 (2006)

discourse” (Jenkins 277). Jenkins argues that this critique of purity or authenticity as such is seen most clearly in Deacon’s relationship to Connie: “the racial hybridity that is so foreign to him is a function of his angle of vision...After all, he is for her a memory of home, not because she recognizes their ‘essential’ African commonality across the boundaries of geography and ethnicity but because she sees in him yet another iteration of the cultural creolization that is African diaspora” (Jenkins 290).<sup>134</sup> While Deacon and Steward want to protect Ruby by insisting on the purity of its racial and historical origins, they are always and already situated in a history (or multiple histories) that preclude the possibility of any monolithic or univocal purity.

Jenkins’ reading of *Paradise* illustrates what happens when people turn history into a monument to be defended rather than a text to be interpreted. Morrison tells Verdelle that the first question she explores in *Paradise* is “how do fiercely revolutionary moral people lose it and become exactly what they were running from, that is, destructive, static, performed?” (Verdelle 162). One answer is that, like Ruby’s 8-rock elite, they respond to an oppressive hierarchy by replacing the dominant term or characteristic while leaving the structure itself intact. Haven’s founders were unjustly rejected by the light-skinned residents of Fairly, so Ruby’s founders reject the light-skinned women loved by Roger Best and Menus Harper. The terms may change but the language, and the structure it supports, is just as dead as it was before. Connie’s recognition of an always and already creolized African diaspora in the body of Deacon

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<sup>134</sup> Jenkins continues: “She is willing to recognize what he is not—that the very ‘Americanness’ he and his community insist on (an Americanness set up in deliberate contradistinction to Africanness) marks him as a product of the New World. The fear and hatred of the miscegenated ‘black’ person in Ruby is due to the inscrutability of all so-called black American bodies—‘black’ by choice and by culture, ‘black’ according to the illogical laws of hypodescent, yet containing visible and invisible traces of historical violence, family secrets, unsolved mysteries, and unanswerable questions about who African Americans really are. And while Consolata’s body might wear this mystery more perceptibly, Deacon’s is by no means exempt from it” (Jenkins 290).

Morgan does more than reverse the terms of this binary or even set them on an egalitarian footing. Connie's New World recognition of Deacon and Pat's genealogical history of Ruby attack the division between the terms, calling attention to their historical construction and ideological uses. *Paradise* does not suggest that multiracial identity is superior to an identity grounded in racial purity or authenticity; rather, it implies that there are no such categories as pure or impure that can be placed in opposition to one another (much less in a hierarchy of privilege).<sup>135</sup>

Such a radical reevaluation of the categories that compose Ruby's official history—in the telling and retelling of the Disallowing and the building of the Oven, in the children's Christmas pageant, etc.—calls for a different way of knowing the present that is rooted in a different relationship to the past. While the Morgans and their allies want to protect the future of Ruby by speaking in a single and constant voice about the town's past, the past in Morrison's narratives, as in Faulkner's aphorism, not only isn't settled, it isn't even past.<sup>136</sup> Judylin Ryan points out that the “opportunity to analytically unmake and remake the past is an unfailing ideology in Morrison's fiction. The past, including past works—not the future—is treated as unfinished and continuously

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<sup>135</sup> At this level, the novel's thematic treatment of the Oven works in tandem with the oversaturated, reticent language that creates multistable racial identities for the women at the Convent.

<sup>136</sup> *Paradise* as a whole and the Oven in particular clarify the connections between Morrison's vision of history and three key concepts from Arendt's phenomenology of public life: authority, natality and plurality. Arendt argues that authority, which derives its persuasiveness from its proximity to a founding act, responds to the human condition of natality by passing its monumentalized version of history to the next generation in an attempt to guarantee a continuity with the future. Ruby's patriarchs claim authority based on their proximity to Zechariah Morgan and his generation, and they treat that authority as sufficient reason for the town's young people to accept their official history. Natality, the fact that we arrive in this world as newcomers who will necessarily pass it on to those who arrive after us, directly implies a plurality of human existence that is at odds with univocal authority. Because the creation and transmission of official histories necessarily takes place in public, both human plurality and the *a priori* presence of past and future generations require interpretation. Like most of Morrison's fiction, *Paradise*, which begins with a section named after a woman who died at the founding of the town that bears her name and ends with a section named after an infant two generations removed from her, tells a story that stretches across multiple generations. Its narrative is, to that degree, structured around the human condition of natality, a condition that requires history to be always and everywhere written and rewritten.

unfolding” (Ryan 160). Unlike Ruby’s patriarchs, Morrison is not interested in building a fixed monument to a particular version of the past. In “Memory, Creation, and Writing” (1984), Morrison claims that her “compact with the reader is not to reveal an already established reality (literary or historical) that he or she and I agree upon beforehand. I don’t want to assume or exercise that kind of authority” (“Memory” 217). Morrison connects her disavowal of authority or control to a distinction between “memory” and “research”: “Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way” (“Memory” 213). In phenomenological terms, Morrison emphasizes the noetic pole of experience—memory—over the noematic pole—research: Morrison’s historical fictions do not present monumental history or try to present “the facts” as they existed (or as they exist). While she is interested in expanding the scope of historical inquiry to include marginalized subjects, her main goal is to expose the historical *consciousness* of her readers (and the conscious processes of history). She is not interested in replacing a mistaken monumental history with her preferred version of “the truth.” She is, instead, shining a spotlight on consciousness as it ventures intentionally (in both its Husserlian and standard usages) into the past and creates a narrative with significance for the present and the future. Rather than treating history as a naturally occurring, readily available set of facts, Morrison thematizes her readers’ participation in the creation of historical facts. Monumental histories claim to present the bare facts and attempt to satisfy their listeners with regard to the past, and like “sociology,” monumental history leverages representation to produce a representative appearance. Morrison, by contrast, wants her readers to be dissatisfied with *any* version of history—including her own—and to continually work to recover and recreate the past.

Resisting both satisfaction and the “sociological” posture of monumental history requires Morrison to actively resist representing the past. In an essay published the same year as *Paradise*, Nancy Peterson points out that while “the historical content of novels like *Beloved* and *Jazz* should be taken seriously, it also seems clear that Morrison strategically emphasizes narrative patterns in her novels that work against the construction of a new, monolithic black history” (Peterson 215).<sup>137</sup> Morrison’s historical novels emphasize the importance of the past to both the present and the future, but her thematic choices and narrative structures undermine their erection as new historical standards.<sup>138</sup> Peterson argues that “*Jazz* is a historical novel that ‘fails’ to represent its epoch properly: set for the most part in Harlem, the novel opens in 1926, the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance, but it offers for full view almost none of the artistic, cultural, or political milestones that African Americans achieved in those years” (Peterson 201). *Paradise* similarly fails to represent its epoch: it is a civil rights history with no civil rights leaders and a history of the Vietnam War without a single battle or protest march.<sup>139</sup> The most significant monument in *Paradise*, the Oven, sits in a controversial and often destructive position, and, like Morrison’s other historical fictions, the novel itself actively resists readings that would turn it from a text into a monument. By the end of the novel, the young people have discovered an additional interpretation of the text—“We Are the Furrow of His Brow” (*Paradise* 298)—and Deacon Morgan, following his

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<sup>137</sup> Nancy Peterson, “Make Me, Remake Me” (1997). Early in her essay, Peterson argues that “the nature of these stories from the past tells us something about Morrison’s definition of ‘historical.’ Neither *Beloved* nor *Jazz* is much interested in narrating fictionalized stories of monumental events” (Peterson 205).

<sup>138</sup> While *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise* are often granted this label, all of Morrison’s novels are arguably historical fictions.

<sup>139</sup> As Peterson says about *Jazz*’s exclusion of the “usual suspects” of Jazz Age histories: “Authors, of course, are not obliged to make overt references to public events and figures from the time in which their novels are set. But Morrison’s decision not to include the kind of detail Gates supplies in his review is particularly intriguing because *Jazz* is a historical novel and historical novels typically include these kinds of references. Clearly, as both *Beloved* and *Jazz* indicate, Morrison is not interested in writing a conventional historical novel” (Peterson 202). *Paradise* certainly extends and strengthens Peterson’s claim.

barefoot walk to Reverend Misner's house, has begun to re-evaluate the story of the Disallowing by returning to Zechariah/Coffee Morgan's dispossessed twin brother Tea. Morrison is less interested in recording history for later generations than she is in questioning how those later generations will create, discover, interpret and employ their own histories.

By freezing the past into an official and seemingly inevitable narrative, monumental histories imply an equally frozen and inevitable future. Peterson opposes this danger to the human condition of plurality when she argues that "a historical master narrative has a grand resolution whose outcome has already been decided, and so individual players are unimportant except as they contribute to this final already-determined conclusion" (Peterson 209). This danger applies equally to reactionary and progressive visions of the past and the future because the *form* of monumental history, rather than the *content* of the monument, is the source of the problem. Any univocal representation of the past forecloses on the possibility of a future that emerges from but is not determined by the past it represents. By contrast, the open and always already changing past that Morrison imagines creates a space for an unexpected future. As Ryan argues, "Morrison positions her characters, her readers, and the society-as-readers to discover that the (recurring) past is a reservoir from which the future can be drawn and redrawn in more expansive and enabling ways" (Ryan 160). To maintain the possibility of a usable past and an unsettled future, Morrison's historical fictions must be both pluralistic and fluid: her narratives must hold themselves open to the active and substantial participation of their readers. In Morrison's words, "the text, if it is to take improvisation and audience into account, cannot be the authority—it should be the map. It should make a way for the reader (audience) to participate in the tale" ("Memory" 217). In order to instigate this type of participation and make it "difficult for the reader to

confine himself to a cool and distant acceptance of data” (“Memory” 215), Morrison’s historical novels focus on her readers’ perception and historical consciousness.<sup>140</sup> Morrison wants her readers to confront their own entanglement in history, their active participation in re-membering the past. If Morrison’s use of multistable narratives reveals her readers’ investment in the comforting satisfaction of a dead, racist language, her “failed” historical novels point to the ease with which monumental, racist history can satisfy historical consciousness. Morrison wants to leave her readers dissatisfied with history, so, as Peterson says of *Jazz*, Morrison’s model of historical fiction “self-consciously re-presents the past in order to emphasize that historical understanding must be dynamic and constantly reworked if it is to be useful” (Peterson 215). Reading the book cannot in and of itself be a useful, generative act unless it provides the potential starting point for unpredictable action in the world. A work that satisfies completely, that wraps up its loose ends and tucks its reader in for the night, presents itself as a conclusion rather than a commencement. Dissatisfaction, on the other hand, demands further reflection, a restlessness that does not foreclose on other conclusions, other directions, other languages and other acts. It demands the active participation of readers in the creation of both the narrative and the future.

#### **PARTICIPATION, SELF-DISCLOSURE AND JUSTICE: WHAT LOVE LOOKS LIKE IN PUBLIC**

While, as Peterson demonstrates, Morrison actively avoids the themes and content of monumental histories—she does not give us fictionalized versions of great men and great events—Morrison’s most radical strategy for preserving an unsettled future relies

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<sup>140</sup> This is another reason why, for Morrison, formal or literary readings are *more* political than “sociological” readings: the “sociological” perspective assumes a position of distance and pseudo-objectivity masked in scientific discourse. The literary implicates the reader and reveals her or his active participation in crafting the story of the novel or the history of the nation.

on the explicit, generative self-disclosure of her narratives as narratives. Ryan describes this strategy as “the deployment of a language and narrative techniques that unveil her own authorial presence, and that call attention to her role in scripting the reader’s position so that she or he consciously experiences her/his position as scripted, as part of a collaborative relationship, as an exchange of gazes” (Ryan 154). Morrison provides a figure of the invitational, participatory work of her self-disclosing texts near the end of her “Nobel Lecture.” By the end of that lecture, the at-times troubled interaction between the wise old woman and the questioning young people becomes the collaborative work of saving the future from the life-denying grip of dead language. The woman’s original answer to the young people’s question about life and death—“It is in your hands” (“NL” 11)—draws an unexpected response from the young people in the form of a narrative. They present their story, which is worth quoting at length, as a request for the story they want her to tell:<sup>141</sup>

Tell us about a wagonload of slaves, how they sang so softly their breath was indistinguishable from the falling snow. How they knew from the hunch of the nearest shoulder that their next stop would be their last. How, with hands prayed in their sex, they thought of heat, then sun. Lifting their faces as though it was there for the taking. Turning as though there for the taking. They stop at an inn. The driver and his mate go in with the lamp leaving them humming in the dark. The horse’s void steams into the snow beneath its hooves and its hiss and melt are the envy of the freezing slaves. The inn door opens: a girl and a boy step away from its light. They climb into the wagon bed. The boy will have a gun in three years, but now he carries a lamp and a jug of warm cider. They pass it from mouth to mouth. The girl offers bread, pieces of meat and something more: a

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<sup>141</sup> This short but evocative narrative is as close as the young people come to indicating how her story might provide a useful context for imagining their future. In order to face the difficult task of creating and inhabiting a future world, the young people need a historical narrative that can serve as the context or location for a new beginning. Because standard, fatalistic history locates them in a toxic present with no real hope for a future, the young people demand a different kind of narrative that, while necessarily imperfect, does not foreclose on their future: “Is there not context for our lives? No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience that you can pass along to help us start strong?...Think of our lives and tell us your particularized world. Make up a story. Narrative is radical, creating us the very moment it is being created” (“NL” 27).

glance into the eyes of the one she serves. One helping for each man, two for each woman. And a look. They look back. The next stop will be their last. But not this one. This one is warmed” (“NL” 29-30).

The story they both offer and desire is bleak, but it imagines a future that departs from the catastrophe seemingly determined and demanded by present circumstances. This story finds the possibility of life, of small hopes, even if it does not change all that is wrong with the world. It is a story of the preservation of life, and life, as long as it continues, harbors possibility. The enslaved men and women in the wagon have no reason to believe in a future further than this particular stop—sitting in the snow, they have every reason to believe that their deaths will be imminent and inhuman (while freezing to death, they envy both the horse and its urine)—but a new future irrupts unexpectedly in the persons of the white boy and girl who bring them warmth, sustenance, and human recognition. They are still enslaved, and the next stop may be their last, but this stop was not, and because it was not, they still, remarkably, unexpectedly, have a future.

Morrison emphasizes the “something more” that the young girl offers the enslaved passengers—the eye-to-eye look of human recognition—and indicates why it offers hope for a non-catastrophic future. The girl does not take inventory of the wagon’s cargo in the asymmetrical gaze of mastery. When she looks into the eyes of each person in the wagon, she also discloses herself to them: she offers “a look. They look back” (ibid). Her look may only be a glance, but it creates a space in which she and they exist together as fellow human beings. The old, wise woman of Morrison’s parable hears this story of self-disclosure and resulting possibility, and she responds with an unexpected disclosure of her own: “‘Finally,’ she says, ‘I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done—together’” (“NL” 30). Denard notes the surprising nature of this response: “‘Instead of feeling disrespected, she is heartened by the children’s critique...She seems

to appreciate their ‘talking back,’ as it were, and concludes after the exchange that she can ‘trust them now’ and can begin a real conversation, indicating that they both—the children and the old woman—have been on a quest to find out what is authentic about the other” (Denard xii).<sup>142</sup> The blind old sage sees the young people’s self-disclosure and finally trusts them with the responsibility she originally ascribed to them. The beauty she asks them to see is found both in their story of the men and women in the wagon and in the relationship that story creates between her and them: they have, together, mined language and discovered words with which to imagine the future.<sup>143</sup>

Like the blind wise woman from her lecture, Morrison wants her readers to collaborate with her on the stories she creates. Fultz notes that “For more than thirty years, Toni Morrison has been commenting on her fiction and narrative strategies. She has stated that her writing is a cocreation between author and reader. While this notion of fiction as a shared process is not new, what is striking is Morrison’s unfailing vision of this cooperative venture as indisputably integral to all her fiction” (Fultz 1). Garnering this active participation from her readers requires Morrison to make them aware of their

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<sup>142</sup> Denard’s excellent reading of the lecture’s surprise ending points out the peculiarly political aspect of the exchange and the political potential of narrative art: Arendt insists that the main revelation of political speech and action is always the speaker/actor, that is, through speech and action we reveal ourselves to one another in the public space of political action. Because, for Arendt, actions are new beginnings that cause chain re-actions, one person’s appearance on the public stage makes it possible for others to respond, re-act and appear alongside the first actor. Action takes place among human beings, and because each human being is equally capable of responding in new and unexpected ways, an actor never knows the final consequences of his actions. Rather than being determined by the necessity of means and ends, every action constitutes a beginning and has a “character of startling unexpectedness” (*HC* 178). Arendt sets the unexpectedness of action over against the predictable order of natural systems or statistical probability and concludes that human action “always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable” (*HC* 178).

<sup>143</sup> I borrow the language of “mining” from Morrison’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech: “I will leave this hall, however, with a new and much more delightful haunting than the one I felt upon entering: that is the company of Laureates yet to come. Those who, even as I speak, are mining, sifting and polishing languages for illuminations none of us have dreamed of” (“NBS” 32-3). Morrison’s banquet address, like this dissertation, is divided into three sections that address our relationships to those who have come before us, those who share our present, and those who will follow after us.

own presence *as readers*. Morrison's fictions both posit and perform a causal link between dissatisfaction, self-disclosure and the open possibility of the future: rather than satisfying their readers with a comfortable (received) language or a prefabricated (received) history, her narratives disclose themselves as problems that turn her readers' attention to their own embedded positions in language and history and emphasize their responsibility (both ability and duty to respond) within their given languages and histories. Morrison's texts attempt to hail readers who will collaborate with her on the creation of both the novel and the world, and Morrison's fictions at their best serve as instigations rather than representations. As Ryan argues, Morrison's novels "inscribe a reader who is neither a consumer nor a decoder, but a co-creator of the text. Not only does she anticipate that the reader possesses certain (perhaps diminished) competencies but she assists the reader in *reclaiming and strengthening* these" (Ryan 154 emphasis original). Rather than representing facts or disseminating a revised version of history or vision for the future, Morrison's fictions aim to develop capacities in her readers. Specifically, Ryan argues that Morrison's fictions present a "teacherly vision" concerned with "the relationship between interpretation and ethics...for the ways in which interpretive competence increases ethical competence and supports ethical agency" (Ryan 152). Ryan's description of "interpretive competence" aligns Morrison's project with the capacity of judgment that Arendt borrows from Kant's aesthetics and around which she builds her vision of non-catastrophic politics.<sup>144</sup> The end of Morrison's "Nobel Lecture" presents this complete movement from dissatisfaction through self-disclosure and participation to the opening of political possibility in a thumbnail or dumb show version.

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<sup>144</sup> Like Arendt, Ryan also associates judgment with democracy: "Morrison's response to the needs of a nation of readers and misreaders—her focus on expanding representation, participation, and interpretive competence—expresses her commitment to democracy and to the type of social relationships it predicates" (Ryan 152).

Contrasting Morrison's "surprising twist" with a "proverbial ending in which young people are brought to their senses by the wisdom of an elder," Fultz notes that "in Morrison's version the goal is not to reinscribe the familiar but to surprise with the unanticipated" (Fultz 100). The old woman disavows any claim to authority based on her age and wisdom, and her answer that is not an answer—"It is in your hands"—forces the young people back onto their own capacities of judgment, creates a space for them to disclose themselves in the creation of the wagon narrative, and places responsibility for both the story of the past and the possibility of the future into their hands. By giving up control, the wise woman moves beyond lectures on history and responsibility and begins the movement of appearance and action in the world that Arendt recognizes as the heart of robust public life and the only hope for a non-catastrophic future.

While this structural invitation to self-disclosure and political action appears throughout Morrison's canon, its clearest and most spectacular iteration is in her novel *Jazz* (1992), published one year before Morrison won the Nobel Prize. Like all of Morrison's novels, *Jazz* returns incessantly to the past as a way of understanding its present and envisioning its future. More than any of Morrison's other works, *Jazz* is a masterpiece of narrative dissatisfaction and self-disclosure.<sup>145</sup> Since its publication, critics and reviewers have noted the jazz-like structures of the novel, pointing out features from the lyricism of Morrison's prose to the "solos" by Joe, Violet, Dorcas and Felice. The characteristic of jazz that Morrison mentions most frequently, and the one that is most significant for my project, ties jazz and *Jazz* to a necessary denial of satisfaction. As early

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<sup>145</sup> In a November 10, 2008 interview with Charlie Rose, Morrison says that, while she understands the cultural importance and broad popularity of *Beloved*, from her perspective *Jazz* is her best work. Morrison's regard for *Jazz*—she singles it out over *Paradise, Love* (2003) and *A Mercy* (2008) as well as *Beloved* (1988) and her earlier novels—lies in, as she puts it, "the obstacles I set for myself, the writing" (Rose). Those obstacles make *Jazz* her most explicitly and consistently oppositional novel. Judged by Morrison's political criteria—which are always and already aesthetic criteria—*Jazz* is arguably her greatest masterpiece.

as 1983, Morrison describes dissatisfaction as the characteristic of jazz that she wants to incorporate in her fiction: “Take Lena [Horne] or Aretha [Franklin]—they don’t give you all, they only give you enough for now... They have the ability to make you want it, and remember the want. That is part of what I want to put into my books. They will never fully satisfy—never fully” (McKay 411).<sup>146</sup> In her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” (1984), Morrison notes that “a musician’s music is enhanced when there is a response from the audience” and discusses the challenge of mimicking that relationship in a book “which closes—after all”: “having at my disposal only the letters of the alphabet and some punctuation, I have to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate. Because it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance, as it is in these other art forms that I have described” (“Rootedness” 59). In her 1992 interview with Schappell, Morrison indicates that the performative, improvisational structure of *Jazz* aims at leaving readers dissatisfied and courting their participation: “The playful aspect of *Jazz* may well cause a great deal of dissatisfaction in readers who just want the melody, who want to know what happened, who did it and why. But the jazz-like structure wasn’t a secondary thing for me—it was the *raison d’être* of the book.” (Schappell 80-1). Morrison emphasizes the form of her novel over its specific content, and she repeats this emphatic focus on structure in her “Forward” to *Jazz*: “I had written novels in which the structure was designed to enhance meaning; here the structure would *equal* meaning” (*Jazz* xix, emphasis original).<sup>147</sup> Morrison describes her strategy for equating structure

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<sup>146</sup> Morrison’s interview with Nellie McKay, “An Interview with Toni Morrison,” was published in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives* (1983), a collection edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah.

<sup>147</sup> Morrison’s “Forward” to *Jazz* explicitly places the novel in apposition to the music and the history of the Jazz Age. She describes her desire to “establish the structure where meaning, rather than information, would lie; where the project came as close as it could to the idea of itself—the essence of the so-called Jazz Age...Primary among those features, however, was invention. Improvisation, originality, change. Rather

with meaning as a delicate balance of tipping her hand and cheating: “The challenge was to expose and bury the artifice and to take practice beyond rules” (ibid). First, *Jazz* performs an elaborate burying and exposure of its own artifice through the self-disclosure of its narrator as the body of the novel, and, second, it goes beyond rules by sabotaging the generic requirements of novelistic presentation and demanding more of its audience than reading a static book “which closes—after all.”

Morrison’s strategy for leaving readers dissatisfied and securing their co-creation of a book that will inevitably close centers on the novel’s narration and, more specifically, on its narrator. The first sentence of the novel begins with an assertion of the narrator’s presence and knowledge: “Sth, I know that woman” (3). The woman in question, as we are told a few sentences later, is Violet Trace, but, as is typical in *Jazz*, the narration subordinates her presence to the narrator’s knowledge of her. For example, Joe’s introduction immediately follows Violet’s and takes the form of another assertion of the narrator’s perspicacity: “Know her husband, too” (ibid). Over the three-plus pages of explication that begin the book, the novel describes a number of things the narrator knows—“like me, they know who she was,” “I do know that mess didn’t last two weeks,” “it became clear to her (as it was to me) that this niece had been hardheaded as well as sly” (4,5,6)—and the occasional fact that the narrator does not—“Whether she sent the boyfriend away or whether he quit her, I can’t say” (5). After briefly describing the action of the story from Joe shooting Dorcas to Felice’s arrival at the Trace home, the narrator’s assertions of knowledge culminate in a prediction of sorts: “Violet invited her in to examine the record and that’s how that scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue began.

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than be about those characteristics, the novel would seek to become them” (xviii). She repeats this ambition on the next page: “I didn’t want simply a musical background, or decorative references to it. I wanted the work to be a manifestation of the music’s intellect, sensuality, anarchy; its history, its range, and its modernity” (xix). Invention, improvisation, change, anarchy—Morrison prioritizes the characteristics of jazz that make it unpredictable, unsettled, and positively unsatisfying.

What turned out different was who shot whom” (6). While, from a narrative standpoint, this assertion is a prediction (we, as readers, have not yet seen who shoots whom), the verb tense treats this second murder as an accomplished fact. This discrepancy in timing appears, at first, to indicate a conventional frame-narration in which the dominant diegetic level of the novel—the narrative space in which the narrator is speaking to the reader—is located at a point in time later than the main action of the story (Conrad’s Marlow talking about the title character of *Lord Jim* or Morrison’s Claudia recounting Pecola’s story in *The Bluest Eye* are two examples). By mimicking conventional frame narration, the narrator of *Jazz* assumes the role of official story-keeper, the one who knows what has happened and is passing that knowledge—a privileged, predictive knowledge—on to the reader. The novel’s opening pages show the narrator, full of smug self-confidence, taking on the mantle of monumental history. *Jazz*’s narrator, though, is neither a confidant of the novel’s characters nor a privileged observer of its events. The narrator of *Jazz* is *Jazz*. The book narrates itself, and Morrison’s identification of narrator and narrative, her creation of a self-narrating and self-narrated narrator, provides her with a fulcrum to shift the focus of the book away from a fixed history of the Jazz Age or of Violet and Joe Trace and engage her readers in a co-creation that performs the improvisatory, unpredictable character of jazz. The opening pages of *Jazz* do not present a brief recollection of an incident to be filled in later; they present a preliminary sketch that serves as a starting point for creation or an opening theme setting a baseline for the riffs and improvisations that follow. The question of temporality, and therefore of causality, is important because it indicates that the narrative of *Jazz* is both the narrator and the implied author of its story, a voice whose disclosure of details is coextensive with their existence in the world of the novel. As Morrison says in her interview with Schappell, “I thought of the image being a book. Physically a book, but at the same time

it is writing itself. Imagining itself. Talking. Aware of what it is doing. It watches itself think and imagine” (Schappell 85). While this narrator is “physically a book,” it turns out to be a dynamic character that changes over the course of the novel from a closed, controlling voice of monumental history into a chastened, generous invitation to write a genuinely open future.

The narrator of *Jazz* begins dropping clues about its textual identity immediately after the opening frame narration.<sup>148</sup> In its lyrical description of “the City” in 1926, the narrator offers clear acknowledgements of its identity hidden in apparent hyperboles like “I haven’t got any muscles, so I can’t really be expected to defend myself” and “I lived a long time, maybe too much, in my own mind” (8, 9). This is sly metafiction. By the end of the novel, when the narrator’s confidence is shaken, the creating voice speaks more clearly about its relationship to the story and admits that “I break lives to prove I can mend them again” and “when I invented stories about them—and doing it seemed to me so fine—I was completely in their hands” (219, 220), but, early on, the novel-narrator tries to maintain its authority and control over the story through a double-strategy of concealment and knowledge: “I do know how to take precaution. Mostly it’s making sure no one knows all there is to know about me. Second, I watch everything and everyone and try to figure out their plans, their reasoning, long before they do” (8). The “everyone” watched by the book includes both its characters and its readers. As Morrison tells Angels Carabi, “The book uses verbs—‘I think,’ ‘I believe,’ ‘I wonder,’ ‘I imagine,’ ‘I know’—but it never sits down, it never walks, because it’s a book. The voice is the voice of a talking book. So when the voice says, ‘I know what it’s like to be left standing when

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<sup>148</sup> Because the narrator is a book, I will refer to it with the object pronoun “it” and not the personal pronouns “he” or “she.” I am also following Morrison’s lead: “I could not think of the voice of a person; I know everybody refers to ‘I’ as a woman (because I’m a woman, I guess), but for me, it was very important that the ‘I’ would say what a typical book would limit itself to, what a physical book would say” (Carabi 94-5).

someone promises,' it talks to the reader" (Carabi 95).<sup>149</sup> At the broadest level of narration, *Jazz* is a book that invents itself and has a conscious, explicit knowledge of its relationship to its reader, but, at least at the beginning, the novel does not want its reader to share in that knowledge. While, as Morrison points out, "the verbs that I used in connection with the 'I' Voice would be only those things one could associate with the book" (Hackney 127), the narrator uses those verbs in ways that conceal its identity.<sup>150</sup> The novel-narrator's two "precautions" explicitly link self-concealment and expansive knowledge in a strategy for maintaining control, and it is not willing to give away its advantage.

Morrison creates this self-concealing, self-satisfied narrative voice in order to undermine its false sense of control and bring it to a place of self-disclosure and participation. In her essay "Home," Morrison says that "in *Jazz* the dynamite fuse to be lit was under the narrative voice—the voice that could begin with claims of knowledge, and indisputable authority ('I know that woman...') and end with the blissful epiphany of its vulnerable humanity and its own needs" ("Home" 9). By the novel's end, the narrator's assumption of control has vanished. Rather than repeating the murder of Dorcas as the initial frame-narration predicts, Joe, Violet and Felice escape the controlling narrator's taste for blood and form an unexpected and unexpectedly happy family of sorts: "I saw the three of them, Felice, Joe and Violet, and they looked to me like a mirror image of

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<sup>149</sup> Morrison's interview with Angels Carabi was conducted in 1993 in Barcelona and published in *Belles Lettres* in 1995.

<sup>150</sup> Morrison's interview with Sheldon Hackney was first published in *Humanities* in 1996. Morrison continues: "I wrote it as though it were literally a book speaking, so that the verbs that I used in connection with the 'I' voice would be only those things one could associate with the book. The book says things about its imagination, about its dreaming, about its yearnings and its assertion of knowledge, and then its admission at points that it was wrong" (Hackney 127). Morrison makes an almost identical description of the technical challenge in her interview with Carabi: "I deliberately restricted myself to using an 'I' that was only connected to the artifact of the book as an active participant in the invention of the story of the book, as though the book were talking, writing itself, in a sense. It's an interesting and overwhelming technical idea to me" (Carabi 95).

Dorcas, Joe and Violet. I believed I saw everything important they did, and based on what I saw I could imagine what I didn't...It never occurred to me that they were thinking other thoughts, feeling other feelings, putting their lives together in ways I never dreamed of" (221). The narrator misses the mark and predicts the wrong future for two reasons. First, as the narrator admits, the book has a taste for suffering: "Pain. I seem to have an affection, a kind of sweettooth for it...What, I wonder, what would I be without a few brilliant spots of blood to ponder" (*Jazz* 219). In her interview with Hackney, Morrison implies that this narrative sadism derives at least in part from the need to make life interesting (as Roth would say) or from "human interest" (to borrow Nabokov's terminology): "The man who goes back and forth across a lake every day without consequence is lucky. But it's when he sinks that the novelist steps in" (Hackney 137). Morrison uses her example of the sinking man to deflect Hackney's implication that her work is or ought to be representative in a "sociological" fashion.<sup>151</sup> The narrator of *Jazz*, by contrast, does not share Morrison's aversion to the "sociological" or to monumental history (they are two sides of the same coin). The second reason that *Jazz* does not end as predicted results directly from the narrator's belief that the past is a fixed story that determines the future: "I was so sure one would kill the other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen. That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle" (220). A record, of course, has a single groove that the needle of a phonograph mechanically follows, and the narrator of *Jazz* begins the novel believing that the past presents a path just as single and just as mechanical for the future to follow.

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<sup>151</sup> Hackney asks Morrison, "What is the meaning of life?" and, when Morrison replies that "it certainly is original. That's about all I know about it," Hackney attempts to answer for Morrison: "So, life is tough, but redemption is to love and nurture. I'm inferring from your characters" (137). Morrison's response, including the man whose boat finally sinks, refuses to locate *the* meaning of life in her characters.

The narrator's claim to know Violet and Joe and to know how their story will end is grounded in its knowledge of their past. In the initial frame narration, the narrator explains Violet's failed affair by pointing to a childhood trauma: "It could have worked, I suppose, but the children of suicides are hard to please" (4). As the novel unfolds, the narrator sets out to create a past that explains why Joe shot Dorcas and why Violet attacked her corpse, and the narrator believes that its knowledge of and control over this past guarantees the future it predicts.

As happens in all of Morrison's novels from *The Bluest Eye* to *Home* (2012), the total action of *Jazz* expands well beyond the scope of its setting and includes the stories of past generations. Specifically, *Jazz* returns to the post-Reconstruction 1870s, the decade in which *Beloved* and Paul D. arrive at 124 Bluestone Road and to which *Paradise* returns in its histories of Zechariah Morgan and the Disallowing. *Jazz* returns to the 1870's in Vesper County, Virginia, where Joe and Violet were born and raised. Both Violet and Joe are orphans. As the narrator hints on the second page of the novel, Violet's mother Rose Dear threw herself down a well, and Violet was raised largely by her grandmother True Belle. Joe was born to a nameless woman called "Wild" and raised as an orphan by a local family. The history that *Jazz* tells about Joe and Violet is filled with the physical, economic and terroristic violence suffered by black people in the American South in the decades following Reconstruction. The narrator implies that Rose Dear commits suicide, in part, because white men repossessed everything she owned, down to the chair they had to tip her out of, but the list of possible motivations includes a broader range of violence:

Had the last washing split the shirtwaist so bad it could not take another mend...Perhaps word had reached her about the four-day hangings in Rocky Mount: the men on Tuesday, the women two days later. Or had it been the news

of the young tenor in the choir mutilated and tied to a log...Or was it that chair they tipped her out of?" (101).

That general atmosphere of racial terror is reflected the circumstances that bring Violet and Joe together. Joe begins his reminiscence of their first meeting by noting that 1893 is "when Vienna burned to the ground. Red fire doing fast what white sheets took too long to finish: canceling every deed; vacating each and every field; emptying us out of our places so fast we went running from one part of the country to another—or nowhere" (126). Escaping the destruction of that black community, Joe and his adoptive brother Victory find work in Palestine, Virginia, where Joe meets and marries Violet. As a newly married couple, the Traces are caught almost immediately by the economic violence of sharecropping: "The debt rose from one hundred eighty dollars to eight hundred...Interest, he said, and all the fertilizer and stuff we got from the general store" (ibid). Even after paying off their "debt" and migrating to Harlem, Joe is almost killed in a 1917 race riot sparked, Joe is told, by a party "where they sent out invitations to whites to come see a colored man burn alive" (128). The violence Joe experienced and witnessed in Virginia pushes him to the limits of his own language, and he can only record traces of things done, "In Virginia. Two of my stepbrothers. Hurt bad. Bad. Liked to kill Mrs. Rhoda. There was a girl, too. Visiting her folks up by Crossland. Just a girl" (ibid). Violet and Joe live in the City as refugees from a bloody past, and the novel seems to posit a causal relationship between that past and Joe's murder of Dorcas, a young girl who was, herself, a refugee from the race riots of East St. Louis in which her home was burned and her parents murdered. The narrator, who has both recorded and created these histories, believes that the past determines the future and that someone will be shot when Felice joins the couple's story: according to the novel's opening frame, the violence of

the past has already determined the future, and the narrator's job lies in providing the past causes of those future effects.

This context of past cause and future effect explains the narrative's extended focus on Golden Gray and his 1873 return to Vesper County. While he is not related by blood to either Joe or Violet, and neither Violet nor Joe ever meet him, Golden Gray plays monumental roles in each of their personal histories. First and foremost, Golden Gray's story is the story of Joe's birth: it is Joe's pregnant mother whom Golden Gray finds in the forest and regards with such disgust and terror, and Golden Gray's absent-because-unknown father, Hunter's Hunter or Henry LeStory, is present at Joe's birth and later serves as Joe's surrogate father. Golden Gray was himself raised primarily by True Belle, Violet's grandmother who returns from Maryland when Rose Dear collapses and raises Violet after Rose Dear throws herself down a well. The novel gives us no reason to believe that Joe knows anything about Golden Gray's position in the story of his birth, but Violet eagerly ate up and internalized the stories that True Belle told about the golden-skinned boy. Several times, the narrator tells us that True Belle "delighted the Girls with descriptions of life with the wonderful Golden Gray" and even surmises that Violet became a hairdresser because of "all those years listening to her rescuing grandmother, True Belle, tell Baltimore stories...[about] the blond boy who ran away from them depriving everybody of his carefully loved hair" (143, 17). Golden Gray, the unknown son of Joe's surrogate father, raised by the same woman who later raised Violet, stands as the original point of contact between Joe and Violet, an intersection of their life stories decades before they met and fell in love beneath the tree in 1893. From the narrator's mechanistic perspective, Golden Gray is the reason Joe is born in Hunter's cabin and learns to track from Hunter as he will later track Dorcas in Harlem, and he is both the reason True Belle is absent when Rose Dear's life falls apart and the source of

Violet's unreachable ideal of human grandeur. While he is not related to either of them directly by blood, he provides a kind of genetic source for the violence that later erupts in The City. The novel as narrator, by reaching into the past to fashion Golden Gray, attempts to create a focal point in the past that serves reasonably as a causal explanation for Joe's murder of Dorcas and Violet's attempt to slash the dead girl's face.<sup>152</sup>

The logic of sociology or of monumental history may view a comprehensive knowledge of the past as the key to understanding the present and predicting the future, but, in the case of Golden Gray, the past resists comprehension and escapes the narrator's control. The narrator relates the romance between Vera Louis and Hunter's Hunter/Henry LeStory and Vera Louis's pregnant exile to Baltimore through the eyes of True Belle, whom Vera Louis took away from her own daughters to raise Golden Gray in Maryland. When he leaves Baltimore on a patricidal mission, the narrator shifts away from focalizing True Belle—"True Belle never saw him again after he rode off"(143)—and explicitly focalizes its own creative process: "I've thought about him a lot, wondered whether he was what True Belle loved and Violet too" (ibid). The narrator links Golden Gray to Violet's adult psychology as an introduction to the story of Golden Gray's encounter with Wild, a story that ends in Joe's birth. That encounter begins on page 143 when the narrator conjures the image of Golden Gray in a carriage: "*I see him* in a two-seat phaeton" (143 emphasis added). This appearance to the mind of the narrator is the beginning of the first version of this story, a version I will call "mark one," but both the

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<sup>152</sup> Golden Gray is not only a step-brother to both protagonists, he is also emblematic of hypodescent and the insanity of racist ideology. Raised as a white man, Golden Gray learns that his father, Hunter's Hunter, is black only after his mother has died. His internal battle with racial purity and the supposed insult done to his (white) mother by his (black) father locates Golden Gray at the irrational crossroads of American racial identity, politics and ideology. In this light, Golden Gray's prominent position in Violet's and Joe's histories could be read as an indication of the role of race and racism in Dorcas' murder. At any rate, Golden Gray's parentage and person work, like all of Morrison's fiction, to complicate our conception of race and undermine the binary opposition of black and white.

story and the man elude the narrator as it attempts to find the proper, functional version of Golden Gray and Wild. Six pages later, when Golden Gray has found Wild and made it all the way to LeStory's house, the novel loses confidence in its initial narration, and the break in control is marked by an ellipsis and a shift back to Golden's encounter with Wild:

The owner of the house might return, or the liquid black woman might wake or die or give birth or...

When he stopped the buggy, got out to tie the horse and walk back through the rain, *perhaps it was because* the awful looking thing lying in wet weeds was everything he was not... (149 emphasis added, ellipses original)

The narrator throws over "mark one" and begins a full blown "mark two" on the next page: "I like to think of him that way. Sitting straight in the carriage...So carefully is he listening he does not see the one-mile marker with vienna carved vertically in the stone"(150). Less than a page later, Golden Gray and Wild have once again arrived at LeStory's, and the narrator begins hinting at its lack of satisfaction: "That is what makes me worry about him. How he thinks first of his clothes, and not the woman. How he checks the fastenings, but not her breath. It's hard to get past that, but then he scrapes the mud from his Baltimore soles before he enters a cabin with a dirt floor and I don't hate him much anymore" (151). The narrator struggles with not hating Golden Gray "mark two" because he is, in the words of the narrator, a hypocrite and a liar constructing a story that runs counter to the official narration: "I know he is a hypocrite; that he is shaping a story for himself to tell somebody...He is lying, the hypocrite...He thinks his story is wonderful, and that if spoken right will impress his father with his willingness, his honor. But I know better" (154). The narrator does forgive Golden Gray because of his youth and his distress, and after declaring that "I don't hate him at all" (155), continues the story almost to the end of the chapter when "mark two" falls apart as well: "What was I

thinking of. How could I have imagined him so poorly?...I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am” (160). On the next page, the narrator begins formulating a third version of the story: “Now I have to think this through, carefully, even though I may be doomed to another misunderstanding. I have to do it and not break down. Not hating him is not enough; liking, loving him is not useful. I have to alter things...I want to dream a nice dream for him, and another of him (161). This third version of Golden Gray begins the next chapter and carries the flashback through Joe’s birth and back to the diegetic present day in Harlem.

The novel cannot create a stable version of Golden Gray’s intractable story, and, while the narrator continues with Golden Gray “mark three,” the presence of his earlier iterations foreground the constructed, imperfect and tenuous nature of any version. As the narrator admits, the jack-rabbit starts and stops of Golden Gray’s story reveal that the book-as-narrator is unreliable, and the narrator, like the Wizard of Oz, cannot slip back behind the curtain once it has been pulled aside. The narrator is, to use Morrison’s phrase, not in control. One way to read this lack or loss of control is to picture the narrator as “a historian confronted with pieces of evidence...[that] can be used to construct many different explanations or stories: the story of Golden Gray as a repulsive racist, the story of Golden Gray as a fearful and confused young man, and so on” (Peterson 213). Peterson recognizes and identifies the distinct, mutually contradictory narratives and argues that the narrator has learned the “necessity to create a narrative that is faithful to the actual and yet points toward the possible” (ibid). Peterson argues that the narrator “brings more details into the picture” with each revision and “continues to contemplate these past events” until it learns its lesson: “The narrator sees the limits of her earlier attempts to narrate the past: she has been an overly confident historian, focusing so concertedly on the big picture and its predictable patterns that she has forgotten to take

into consideration human agency and the mystery of individual lives” (Peterson 212, 213, 214). While Peterson does draw our attention to the problem of capturing individual actions and human agency through the “sociological” “big picture,” her narrator-as-historian metaphor obscures the fact that the narrator is not discovering pre-existing facts. Because the narrator is both book and implied author, Golden Gray does not exist prior to his narration. At the diegetic level of the narrator’s revisions, he is a character being created, not a historical person being discovered. Caroline Brown recognizes this distinction in her description of the narrator’s forced revisions of Golden Gray: “Even as he is being inscribed within the text from a particular perspective...his ever-evolving actions confound and foil the narrator's attempt to contain him. Though a creation, like the other characters, he too seizes the word and proceeds to subvert the narrator's initial intention. In short, his life becomes his own, and his truths far richer and more perplexing than anyone, including his creator, could ever assume” (Brown 637).<sup>153</sup> The narrator does not record facts more or less faithfully; the narrator creates the textual world. There may be unexpected possibilities for being in that world (as at the end of the novel) but those exist as potential realities or futures and not as misapprehended pasts (because creation is not apprehension). The book-as-narrator does *not* lose focus or perception, it loses *control*, and its lack of definitive control over the story is what makes the book’s unexpectedly redemptive ending possible. Violet, Joe and Felice, like Golden Gray, escape the narrator’s control and forge their own story. The narrator’s struggle with Golden Gray is not epistemological, not strictly a question of knowledge, but a question of power, potency and potential. Put another way, if Golden Gray’s actions are the sort of thing that can be “previously overlooked,” then they exist independent of the narration

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<sup>153</sup> Caroline Brown, “Golden Gray and the Talking Book.” *African American Review* (2002) *African American Review*. Terre Haute: Winter 2002. Vol. 36, Iss. 4; pg. 629, 14 pgs. PDF.

and have some kind of ontological status whether or not the text makes us aware of their existence. (This is different than saying that a character would have acted differently, which is a counterfactual judgment of an author's characterization and consistency). Historical, factual narratives may overlook or misrepresent the persons and events they narrate, but fictional characters exist only insofar as the texts they inhabit constitute them.

While the historian metaphor for *Jazz*'s narrator is useful and almost too easy to adopt—Brown, for instance, quickly begins discussing “valuable insights that were *previously overlooked*” by the narrator (*ibid*, emphasis added)—treating Golden Gray's story as a past that exists previous to and independent of its narration obscures both his position in the novel and the novel's relationship to its readers. If Golden Gray exists in the narrator's world before he is narrated, then *Jazz* has an autodiegetic narrator who exists within the world of the novel and the narrator is simply a character who narrates and speculates about its fellow characters (Twyla is this type of narrator in “Recitatif”). The narrative claims of autodiegetic narrators are epistemological (they are knowledge claims about a preexisting world), and if they are unreliable then we can chalk it up to human weakness, duplicity or some other idiosyncratic failure of a particular character (the narrator). On the other hand, if the narrator is not a fellow character in the world of the novel but, as is the case in *Jazz*, both the implied author and the novel itself, then the narrator's narrative claims are ontological (the narrator's knowledge constitutes the being of the fictional world): the world of the novel is exactly coextensive with its narration, so facts cannot be checked against an external reality.<sup>154</sup> In this case, the narrator's

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<sup>154</sup> This is not to say that we must always believe a narrator or that narrators are always reliable. We should not, for instance, trust Humbert Humbert's account of his abusive domination of his step-daughter, but, because both Humbert and Lolita only exist within the textual world of a novel narrated almost exclusively by Humbert, our departures from, disagreements with and condemnations of Humbert must be based on the world constituted almost entirely of his unreliable words. We read *Lolita* for the faults, tensions and inconsistencies that show Humbert to be a liar, but we cannot accuse Humbert of lying because the real Dolores did or did not do x, y or z (we cannot, for instance, say that she never attended a particular school,

unreliability extends beyond the characterization of a specific character and raises questions about the structure and form of fiction. It is the difference between, on the one hand, Morrison criticizing the historical awareness of a particular person or particular type of person and, on the other hand, Morrison questioning and pushing against the limits of narrative art. Most novels have unreliable characters, and plenty of them have unreliable narrators, but very few self-consciously address the unreliability of narrative itself. When *Jazz*'s narrator fumbles the story of Golden Gray, we as readers do not glimpse the "real world" that the narrator has overlooked or otherwise obscured. Rather than disclosing a more accurate or more reliable history, *Jazz* discloses *itself*, and self-disclosure, as Arendt reminds us, is political action *par excellence* because it calls other people to participate in the world through their own self-disclosures. The lack of control (the unreliability) Morrison builds into her novel-as-narrator is responsible for both the story's redemptive ending—Joe and Violet escape its taste for pain—and the true political potential of the novel.

By identifying the narrator of *Jazz* with the physical body of the book, Morrison makes it possible for her text to perform, rather than describe, the political, worldly act of self-disclosure. *Jazz*'s self-disclosure and its relationship to its readers appears most explicitly on the last page of the novel. The last two paragraphs, culminating in Morrison's virtuosic use of material metafiction, are worth quoting in their entirety:

I envy them their public love. I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed, aw longed to show it—to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: *That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your*

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summer camp, etc. unless the text gives us reason to suspect otherwise). While this caveat is in no way groundbreaking—it is the basic premise of close-reading that most literature instructors teach in their introductory courses—the rhetoric of epistemology that slips in regarding the narrative revisions around Golden Gray demonstrate that the otherwise simple point is worth reiterating.

*fingers falling on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer—that's the kick.*

But I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now. (229)

The last two paragraphs of *Jazz* turn, in a move that is characteristic of Morrison's fiction, from talking *to* the reader to talking *about* the reader: the narrator begins by talking about Violet and Joe but quickly shifts to address the reader in the language that it would use *if it could*. The more-than-tentative, counterfactual status of the novel's declaration of love operates in a homologous fashion to the wagon story that the young people in Morrison's "Nobel Lecture" ask the old sage to tell them. Both the narrator and the young people ask for a story by telling it, and, in both cases, the story they tell is a self-disclosure that asks their interlocutor to respond in kind. The counterfactual quality of the young people's story is important to the old sage because it demonstrates their use of a living language that creates rather than forecloses on possibilities. The particular language she uses at the end of Morrison's lecture is worth revisiting: "I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done—together" (NL 30). Morrison's sage directs the young people to their own hands—to their responsibility for language and for the future—and tells them that, because they have taken responsibility for a living language that resists the dead language of monumental history and "sociological" determinism, that she will work with them, that she already is working with them, to create the world together. *Jazz*, the novel and the narrator, also directs its readers' to their own hands as an indication their freedom and responsibility to make and remake the novel. The book is, literally and figuratively, in its reader's hands. The material markers in the passage—references to fingers on

pages, to the book and reader facing each other, and, finally, to the readers hands holding the codex—move the literal point of contact between the narrator and the reader outside of all of the novel’s several diegetic frames and stage the meeting between reader and narrator in the world of historical experience. In other words, on the last page of *Jazz*, the novel discloses itself to us in the world that we, as human beings, inhabit in our everydayness, and both the response it calls for and the responsibility it points to in our hands exist in the world of historical experience. The final word of *Jazz* hails us as partners in the use of living language, in the creative return to the past, in imagining an unforeseen future, at the point of time that exists synchronously in the world of the novel and the world of historical experience—“Now.” *Jazz* does not predict a future, happy or otherwise, but it acts in the world through its peculiar self-disclosure, and that self-disclosure calls on its readers to act in turn as free, pluralistic practitioners of living language. And pluralistic, open human action is, for Morrison as for Arendt, the condition necessary for the possibility of a non-catastrophic future.

The language *Jazz* uses in its envy of Joe and Violet—“I envy them their public love” (38)—echoes a particular construction that Morrison’s Princeton colleague Cornel West uses consistently to describe the nature of justice: “Justice is what love looks like in public” (West). If we love people, that love will manifest itself in the justice of our actions and our institutions. While the resemblance in language may be incidental, West’s ethical and political postulate points us towards two important points about the political action of *Jazz*. First, reading is, as the novel laments, a private practice, and the novel *qua novel* cannot step into public life and practice a public love. In order to practice love in public, the novel relies on its readers, on the responsibility they hold in their hands. Second, if political justice is the public incarnation of private love, then our public future, like Joe and Violet’s private one, can never be separated from the past. While the

performative breakdown of narrative control does undermine the narrator's deterministic fatalism, it does not swing so far in the other direction as to make the past irrelevant. The connections linking Golden Gray, Wild, True Belle and Rose Dear to Joe and Violet remain significant even if they are not determinate. As they lay in bed at night, Joe sees an apparition of both Wild and Dorcas—darkness taking the shape of a shoulder with a thin line of blood” (224-5)—while Violet keeps communion with her dead mother and absent father—“Violet rests her hand on his chest as though it were the sunlit rim of a well and down there somebody is gathering gifts (led pencils, Bull Durham, Jap Rose Soap) to distribute to them all” (225). *Jazz* presents a past that matters, one that should not and cannot be ignored, but it also presents a future that is unpredictable, made possible, but not determined, by the past. Peterson argues that “the narrator learns that a past of trauma, pain and unfulfilled longing does not have to continue on into the present or the future—if one can arrive at a narrative that will enable reflection and renegotiation” (Peterson 215), and her claim is at least half right. The traumatic past does not predetermine a traumatic future, but the novel's self-disclosure demonstrates that the possibility for a new beginning lies outside the scope of narrative. The unexpected good turn taken by its characters makes the novel—the narrative itself—long for something more than narrative. In particular, it makes the novel long for the unpredictable possibility of embodied human experience, for a life and a future that can be made and remade in ways more remarkable and more radical than any re-reading or interpretation can accomplish.

Morrison uses narrative apposition throughout her body of fiction to support a living language that generates rather than reiterates itself, that celebrates the many voices and many stories of human plurality instead of the univocal pronouncements of monumental history, that invites substantive participation and shared responsibility

instead of inscribing the controlling voice of mastery. Because a generative, pluralistic and participatory language cannot also be settled, Morrison uses narrative techniques that turn her readers' attentions away from the necessarily fixed words on the pages of books that necessarily close and towards their own prejudices, practices and responsibilities *as readers* and *as citizens*. As works of fiction, they approach their civic responsibility through the structures and limits of narrative, and, rather than re-inscribing the forms of dead language by taking control of how the past and future are represented, they gesture towards a meaningful past and a hopeful future that, if they are to remain meaningful and hopeful, cannot be closed off through satisfactory and satisfying representations. To paraphrase Morrison's praise of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, they gesture towards places where futures may lie.

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