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# **Critical Enchantments: Reading Fictionality in the Contemporary Novel**

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## Summary

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This thesis examines the resurgence of an enchanted idiom in the contemporary novel and shows how it frames questions about the type of enchantment that reading fiction can lay claim to, ranging from unresolved mysteries to authors who call themselves mediums. With reference to novels by J. M. Coetzee, Toni Morrison and Ali Smith, *Critical Enchantments* makes an intervention into the study of contemporary writing by reinstating the importance of the distinction between ‘the novel’ and ‘fiction’ at a time when the critical and political function of fictionality is deeply contested.

In the introduction I delineate the logic that enchantment and fictionality share – their invitation to recognise artifice and yet maintain a readerly investment in the artwork. The project is then organised around three lines of enquiry. Chapter one surveys the recent re-enchantment of literary reading practices: through a discussion of the recent work of critics such as Rita Felski and Timothy Bewes (and their Ricourean, Lukácian forbears), I locate an idiom of mystery and magic that structures Smith’s experiments with the idea of too-close reading as surveillance. The second chapter appraises the construction of fictional ‘belief’ that figures centrally both in Coetzee’s late fiction and, with recourse to novel and narrative theories of fictionality (particularly Catherine Gallagher’s), illustrates how concerns about belief find articulation in Coetzee’s recurring figure of the secretarial reader. The final chapter reads Morrison’s fiction alongside the reflexive critical trends that have formed in response to her creative and critical corpus; reversing my previous focus on fictional readers, I demonstrate the enchanting effects that Morrison’s extra-fictional anticipation of being read has on her readers.

Taken together, these scenes of critical enchantment tell a story about how the contemporary novel trades on the genre’s tradition of engaging with the mystifying effects of fiction on both readers and writers, and reveals how this mystification is indexical to a performance of authorship that anticipates critically adept readers.

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## Introduction

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[R]e-enchantments continually return because they are the means by which we conceive and reconceive of the aesthetic and of fiction.<sup>1</sup>

-- Nicholas Paige, 'Permanent  
Re-Enchantments'

In 2014 the BBC aired a documentary film as part of its 'Storyville' series. Originally titled *An Honest Liar*, it had been repackaged for the BBC as *Exposed: Magicians, Psychics and Frauds*.<sup>2</sup> It was a documentary about the life of James Randi, a Houdini-esque stage magician who, in his fifties, changed the focus of his career and began devoting his knowledge of trickery to debunk people who claimed 'real' magical and psychic powers. Throughout the 1970s, Randi set out on a campaign to discredit the self-proclaimed psychic Uri Geller who was then gaining popularity. Randi would shadow Geller's television appearances, performing the exact same spoon bending trick as Geller and assist producers in setting up the room's conditions so that Geller would be unable to make his other psychic powers 'work' that evening. Randi's problem with this type of performance was that it profited from a lie; Randi, so he said, was honest about his own lies – magicians are truthful in their tricks because they tell you that they are performing a trick but Uri Geller was being dishonest, he was telling you that the tricks he performed were rooted in genuine psychic and supernatural powers. What became increasingly apparent, and analytically interesting, was that in spite of Randi's ongoing interventions, audiences did not seem too bothered if Geller was faking it or not. Debunking the illusion and exposing the technique did not have the expected effect of altogether debunking interest in Geller, and it did not have the effect of shunning him from public life for his fraudulence either. Even if many stopped believing, there was always someone who continued to believe. Randi was also responsible, in the early 1980s, for foiling university researchers' investigations into parapsychology. He trained two teenage boys in sleight of hand and stagemanship and

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Paige, 'Permanent Re-Enchantments: On Some Literary Uses of the Supernatural from Early Empiricism to Modern Aesthetics', in *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*, ed. by Joshua Landy and Michael Saler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 159–80 (p. 179).

<sup>2</sup> *Exposed: Magicians, Psychics and Frauds*, dir. by Tyler Meamsom and Justin Weinstein (BBC, 2014).

foxed the supposedly rigorous tests formulated by the scientists.<sup>3</sup> The lesson to these researchers and others was that even when we think we are being objective, scrutinising and critically attuned, we remain vulnerable to the authority of knowledge-bolstered artfulness.

Randi's pursuit of truth and his failure to stand in the way of belief – for all its shortcomings<sup>4</sup> – articulates a dissonance that this thesis examines in the context of the contemporary novel. Narrators might beguile or trick us, narratives might enthrall us, plots and characters might excite and affect us; the success of an artwork, and particularly of the novel, has often been defined in terms of the success with which it forges the conditions for a sustained readerly attention. But when we read novels we know we are reading something that, because written, has been constructed. If stage magic aims to solicit a response in which the viewer can be both enchanted and sceptical, immersed in the effects but aware that there exists a technique which produces those effects, then the novel is an aesthetic form which shares in that duality. But Randi's failure to dispel belief in Geller also suggests that there is something in the allure of believing in magic, or in irrational beliefs more generally, that is robust and which might even be responsible for enhancing the effects of stage magic. The novels, and novelists, in this thesis help us to see how the novel negotiates, and even benefits from, its proximity to magic and enchantment.

This dissonance finds concise expression, in the context of the novel, in Catherine Gallagher's 2006 essay 'The Rise of Fictionality'. Gallagher argues that the novel form came into being only after eighteenth-century readers had become discerning in recognising 'fictionality' – communications that were understood to be plausible rather than truthful – and thus able to read with a 'cognitive provisionality' through which readers achieved a 'competence in investing contingent and temporary credit.'<sup>5</sup> This ability to mediate between credibility and truth claims was an ability to exercise 'disbelief': 'Disbelief is thus the condition of fictionality, prompting judgements, not about the story's reality, but about its *believability*, its plausibility.'<sup>6</sup> The eighteenth-century novel, then, invited a knowing disbelief, a permission to invest but in the knowledge that the investment was in something not real,

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<sup>3</sup> Philip J. Hils, 'Magicians Score a Hit On Scientific Researchers', *Washington Post*, 1 March 1983 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/03/01/magicians-score-a-hit-on-scientific-researchers/1f374c34-4979-4dba-a2e5-48bea6bda5f6/>> [accessed 3 March 2018].

<sup>4</sup> Randi belongs to a sect known as 'skeptics' who, as pursuers of hyper scientific rationality and objectivity been linked, at worst, to eugenicist thought and, at best, represent an obsession with rationality that is separated from figures like Jordan Peterson by a hair's breadth.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Gallagher, 'The Rise of Fictionality', in *The Novel*, ed. by Franco Moretti, 2 vols (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), I, pp. 336–63 (p. 347).

<sup>6</sup> Gallagher, p. 346. Original emphasis. All emphases and ellipses, throughout the thesis, will be as per the original text unless otherwise stated.



and its condition of fictionality is precisely predicated on those same parameters of enchantment as a knowing disbelief. But it is now second nature to manage competing claims to reality and fiction in the novel, and the expectation of plausibility rather than reality is deeply entrenched.<sup>7</sup> What kind of enchantment, then, can the contemporary novel lay claim to? This is the question that this thesis asks. 'Critical Enchantments' argues that J. M. Coetzee, Toni Morrison and Ali Smith utilise an enchanted idiom which encodes a reflection on fiction and interpretation. Such scenes of critical enchantment include author-characters who claim to be vessels for, rather than originators of, what they write (Coetzee), the conflation of a novelist's fictional and extra-fictional ideas by critics (Morrison) and ambiguous dying words that centre unambiguously on the legibility of a book (Smith). This thesis finds that each novelist depicts the role of, or necessitates approaching, enchantment in a different way, but in each case our attention is drawn to the process by which these authors' critical predilections find articulation in the enchanted terrain of fiction.

### **What is critical about enchantment?**

Beginning this way, with the intimacy of a disclosure and a fun analogy, is a slight ploy on my part. The idea that novels and novelists bear a proximity to magic is everywhere in this thesis, but it is perhaps disappointingly un-magical. Ghosts and the supernatural often emerge, but in this thesis they are routed back to questions about aesthetic enchantment. Rather than arising from witches, spells, or talking animals, the enchantment under examination in this thesis arises instead out of literary theory's recent return to questions of enchantment. Paige, in the epigraph above, confers a historical relationship between enchantment and fiction – the return of enchantment has often signalled a theorising impulse in fiction at a time in which the conditions of reading or conditions of aesthetic production are under scrutiny. Not only is there an emerging scholarly interest in the operation of enchantment in the contemporary moment, and an expanding field of literary sociology that reads the relationship between texts and the literary economy (I will substantiate these claims in the course of this introduction), but the novel's use of fiction is less totalising than in previous centuries.

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<sup>7</sup> A phenomenon like reality television, with its fusion of scripted and unscripted 'real' people and scenarios, presents contemporary audiences with a more mystifying case of how to place the boundary between the invented and the real.

That the novel is an exhausted form, that it is facing extinction, or at best is in decline is a narrative in nearly constant circulation, but it is generally considered to have been especially foundational to the experiments with form and novel authority in the postmodern novel. As Paul Dawson frames it, while '[c]laims for the death of the novel have been a critical commonplace since the mid-twentieth century', the twenty-first century has seen various factors corroborate not the death but the relatively small market share of the novel: 'increased sales and cultural capital for literary nonfiction [...]; the commercial orientation of multinational publishing houses' the influence of retailers like Amazon and the competition of 'cinema, television, and new media' provide an unsensationalised argument for the novel's relatively diminished position in contemporary culture.<sup>8</sup> For Dawson, this 'decline in the cultural authority of the novel' in the last two decades is 'an overt attempt to parlay the conventional authority of a fictional narrator into cultural authority for the author, or, to put it another way, into cultural authority for narrative fiction itself.'<sup>9</sup> If we understand omniscience as that which is embroiled in the imaginative capacity of fiction, then Dawson corroborates Paige's sense that re-enchantment comes at a time when the novel needs to do some rebranding. 'Critical Enchantments' finds a productive foothold in the landscape that Dawson sketches for the cultural authority of authors and narrative fiction, but it deviates from Dawson in that it does not read Coetzee, Morrison and Smith according to omniscience or read their work explicitly along the lines of narrator or narrative voice. Their novels may exhibit traits of omniscience but this is not the object of my interest in their work. And moreover, this project is attached to the idea of the novel rather than narrative fiction. Considering how authors move between genres of fiction will turn out to be crucial to a reading of aesthetic enchantment.

Enchantment has often been invoked as a descriptor of the negative effect of capitalism and commodity, a re-enchantment after Max Weber's pronouncement of the world's disenchantment by the Enlightenment. Karl Marx, for instance, characterised 'modern bourgeois society' as a society which has 'conjured up such gigantic means of production and exchange' that it resembles a 'sorcerer, no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.'<sup>10</sup> His theory of commodity fetishism located the enchanting quality of objects in the fact that the 'labour of

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Dawson, *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-First Century Fiction* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2013), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Dawson, *Return*, p. 9; 21.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 70.

private individuals who work independently of each other' is veiled.<sup>11</sup> To be enchanted is to be under the spell of capitalism. Or, as Theodor Adorno had it, to be enchanted is to be naïve: writing to Walter Benjamin to warn him against his 'naïve' descriptive writing (work which was later published in *The Arcades Project*) he warned of his being at the 'crossroads of magic and positivism' that '[t]hat spot is bewitched. Only theory could break the spell'.<sup>12</sup> The description of literature through metaphors of magic are also common in everyday speech, and theorists have also sought to account for the mysterious or unquantifiable effects of literature's relationship to, and mediation by, the imagination – the structures of metaphoricity and representation that enable the transfer of words, voice, ideas from the realm of the page to the realm of the mind, and out into the world in which the reader is situated. J. Hillis Miller, for example, in his 2003 work *On Literature* uses the term 'secular magic' as a means of naming 'the power that words on the page have to open up a virtual reality when they are read as literature.'<sup>13</sup> Terms like 'omniscience', as Jonathan Culler argues, are a result of our critical habit of 'naturalizing the strange details and practices of narrative' specifically through the imagination of 'a quasi-divine omniscient consciousness when human consciousness cannot fill that role'.<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Royle, usurping omniscience in favour of 'clairvoyance', uses the term because it retains 'what is uncanny, even "magical" about such fiction'.<sup>15</sup> Enchantment occurs, then, when something eludes the grasp of our conscious reasoning, when the whole cannot be explained by the parts.

We know, moreover, that late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century literature and theory borrowed directly from, and were often involved in, occult practices and nascent parapsychological expressions (theosophy, spiritualism, psychical research). But they have, as Simon During outlines, shared in the practices of stage magic too: 'entertainment-and-fictional magic refers back to its "real" double even when departing from it'.<sup>16</sup> W. B. Yeats's poetry-through-automatic writing, which he had his wife Georgie Hyde-Lees do on his behalf, is one well-known example. Leigh Wilson argues that it was 'the double sense of magic as an understanding of the material world and magic as error' which 'made it so productive as a way for aesthetic experiment to change the relationship between art and the

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<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Ben Fowkes, 3 vols. (London: Penguin, 1992), I, p. 163.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Adorno to Benjamin, cited in Leigh Wilson, *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan D. Culler, 'Omniscience', *Narrative*, 12 (2004), 22–34 (p. 32).

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny: An Introduction*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 259.

<sup>16</sup> Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 3.

world'.<sup>17</sup> That magic, in other words, was rooted in honing a knowledge about the world that was contrary to assimilated, enlightenment truths made it especially effective for artists looking to defamiliarise and represent the world anew.

The concept of enchantment, as well as attesting to the aesthetic power that art objects wield, can take on more critical forms too. Indeed, what happens when the fiction we read (or the artwork we are viewing, engaging, contemplating) makes the experience of enchantment – and attendant questions about fiction, artifice and critical reading – a focus of its fictional world? What makes enchantment a critical enchantment? This thesis comes at a time when literary theory is reflecting on the range of activities and affects which comprise critical reading practices; the last decade has seen a proliferation of work which asks how literary studies and aesthetic theory can be reoriented towards (and make room for) theorising the positive affects, attachments and aesthetic investments that dictate disciplinary norms and the experience of interpretation.<sup>18</sup> Spearheaded by Rita Felski's Ricoerian naming of a postcritical turn, this has more broadly been framed by a sociological turn of literary theory through work on big data and distance reading, and the work of Bruno Latour.

Taking theorisations of the novel form and theories of fiction into account, this thesis will build on work that has sought to delineate the uses of enchantment beyond its popular conception as a lapse in, or suspension of, critical faculties (read: *objective* or *rational* faculties). Indeed, the consensus regarding enchantment as a contemporary critical faculty (for those seeking to refashion it into a meaningful critical term) has increasingly been that enchantment is not a state of total immersion or an experience of being under a spell, but rather that the experience of captivation is just one part of a dialectic of aesthetic engagement. The other half of this dialectic is an analytic engagement. Indeed, if magic implies a reader's lack of knowledge of technique, then the three novelists in this thesis all try to create a state of critical enchantment wherein readers are privy, via authorial paratexts and reflexive or metafictional device, to the technique and production of writing. Critical enchantment, then, is both a term to describe the novel that blends fiction and theorising, and a term to describe the type of reading that these novels solicit.

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<sup>17</sup> Leigh Wilson, *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> These works, however, are often more concerned to ask about the *possibility* of doing that than the actual enactment of it; it often remains a reflexive and speculative exercise.

Jane Bennett (writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century) describes modern enchantment as an ‘interactive fascination’.<sup>19</sup> Rita Felski contends that modern enchantments operate with one foot on either side of ‘reason’: they are ‘those in which we are immersed but not submerged, bewitched but not beguiled, suspensions of disbelief that do not lose sight of the fictiveness of those fictions that enthrall us.’<sup>20</sup> Felski’s suggestion of a reading practice that can accommodate enchantment finds a forbear in Paul Ricoeur’s delineation, in *Freud and Philosophy*, of postcritical faith. Ricoeur delineates two paths of hermeneutic activity in the modern age, critical suspicion which looks for hidden meanings and postcritical faith which responds to the revelation or disclosure of meaning *as* a revelation. The latter of these is so named because it is a faith that has ‘undergone criticism’ and in which the critic ‘seeks, through interpretation, a second naiveté.’<sup>21</sup> As such, it represents another image of enchantment as an interactive fascination. This ongoing revision is a context for the current thesis, but it is not the sole context. The most dedicated discussion of these recent theories of reading take place in chapter one through a discussion of how disclosure is reconsidered in Ali Smith’s fiction. These theories pose enchantment as a reading practice; in ‘Critical Enchantments’ it is not the statement of a new mode of reading but a description of the relationships between authors, fictions and readers in the contemporary moment.

The re-enchantment of aesthetic theory is one point of departure for this thesis. The other is fictionality. Felski says modern enchantment maintains an awareness of ‘fictiveness’; Simon During suggests (even if the claim is buried in his investigation of the influence of stage magic across modern culture) that ‘the history and fate of modern magic is intertwined with the history and fate of fictionality, the category in relation to which fictions are written, circulated, and received as fictions’; Dawson’s attention to the return of the enchanted form of omniscience is inflected by his work on theorising fictionality in the

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<sup>19</sup> Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. by Denis Savage (London: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 28. Not only has Ricoeur been influential in contemporary revisions of literary reading practices, but it seems his concept of postcritical faith has seeped into novel theories that have, in turn, been influential. Georg Lukács (writing in 1914-15 but translation in 1978) argued in *Theory of the Novel* that the novel was a ‘negative mysticism’ in a disenchanted world. (Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1978), p. 90.) He contends that the novel is a self-theorising form, but a form which has to express its ideas and ‘pure reflexion’ through the novel’s conceit of plot, character, and ironic distance which shows the novel as a ‘second naivety’: the novel form signals ‘the sacrifice that has had to be made’ to bend ideas to form. (Lukács, p. 85) Whether Anna Bostock had read Ricoeur and repurposed his phrase, or whether this is a coincidence of continental literary theory is uncertain. Bostock (John Berger’s wife) was a prolific translator of Marxist literary theory but is woefully under-researched.

contemporary moment.<sup>22</sup> If enchantment, by way of its inescapable connotation to magic, necessitates a type of doubled critical mode that is both immersed and alert, then this thesis argues that an additional point of departure must be to read the contemporary novel in line with the doubled belief that Gallagher and others have outlined in theories of fictionality. What theorists of magic have seen as a mimetic doubling becomes a ‘double exposure’ in recent theories of fictionality in which it is said to be a type of communication which ‘often provides a double exposure of the imagined and the real’.<sup>23</sup> In a climate where fiction is increasingly understood to exist outside of the novel form, ‘Critical Enchantments’ attends not just to the workings of enchantment but also to fictionality.

What does it mean to read fictionality in the novel? Recent theories of fictionality, in narrative and novel theory, provide a framework with which this thesis reads enchantment across literary, aesthetic and sociological contexts. While narrative studies and literary theory alike have long questioned the point at which fictional narrative ends and non-fictional narrative begins, the question of fictionality has seen a particular resurgence in the last five years, and it has been a widely debated concept in contemporary narrative theory.<sup>24</sup> Across special conference panels, special journal issues and monographs, narrative theorists have sought to investigate how fictionality – an itinerant quality of fiction – permeates non-generic forms of narrative; not only are novels, short stories, or plays all sites in which fictionality can be detected, so too are hypothetical statements, jokes and adverts. All of these, so some narratologists argue, trade in imagination and invention, which is to say that they trade in *fictionality*.

The distinction between the novel and fiction is an important consideration in this thesis, but it is a distinction that takes on meaning throughout the thesis rather than being its object of analysis. Most simply: ‘the novel’ speaks to a form and genre of writing, a book that can be picked up. ‘Fiction’ on the other hand, might be what novels *do*, but it cannot be touched. Fiction is what Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan and Richard Walsh (to be clunkily referred to as Skov Nielsen et al) have recently sought to define through the lens of rhetorical narrative theory. Fictionality, they say, ‘attaches to the communicative act, not

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<sup>22</sup> During, p. 56.

<sup>23</sup> Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh, ‘Ten Theses about Fictionality’, *Narrative*, 23 (2015), 61–73 (p. 68).

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, in the course of writing the first draft of this introduction something of a debate broke out in the ISSN’s listserv. After announcing that the society’s guaranteed MLA 2018 special session was going to be on fictionality, there occurred a 72 hour avalanche of emails which contested the definition and originality that the CFP rested on. This thread, which ran to well over 80 messages, included a number of narratology’s most eminent names (Marie-Laure Ryan, Jim Phelan, Melba-Cuddy Keane and Mieke Bal, to name a few) debating what fictionality was, and whether the organisers’ approach was as novel as they had claimed.

the object of representation'.<sup>25</sup> A fiction might be a novel, but it could also be a short story or a film, or a joke. The concept of fictionality, as invoked by Skov Nielsen et al as well as by Gallagher above, draws our attention to how novels highlight their fictionality, how the discourse of fiction is foregrounded, and how authors use strategies in order to solicit a particular interpretive sensibility from readers. Indeed, against Ian Watt's assertion that formal realism was the first mode of the novel in the English tradition, Gallagher raised a counter-claim that early novels 'emphasized not their realism but their fictionality' and that before the rise of the novel, there took place a rise of fictionality.<sup>26</sup> Emphasis on the fictional, on the artifice of the work, is what distinguished the novel from other fictions, and this thesis explores that claim in relation to the expressions of artifice and aesthetic enchantment that Coetzee, Morrison and Smith make.

In approaching the contemporary novel through the lens of fictionality, this thesis does indeed read a number of novels, but it also reads fictions that are not novels, and it reads the interactions between novels and other fictions, novels and extra-fictional contexts, that show how Coetzee, Morrison and Smith construct the novel as a form that presents itself as ambiguous or open to interpretation. This is also, in part, how enchantment becomes critical enchantment in the contemporary novel: if enchantment, as Bennett argues, is borne out of a 'surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage', then the novel compromises on its ability to surprise by dint of its use of fiction.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the novel must negotiate its own encoding of an already written ending. As such, it builds on theories that see the novel as self-theorising or possessing a critical function, which also goes hand in hand with theories that readers have a hand in meaning-making. A broader perspective of aesthetic enchantment and its related contexts will help us in seeing how enchantment has been called on to describe this relationship.

### **We have never been disenchanted; or, enchantment, disenchantment, re-enchantment<sup>28</sup>**

Enchantment surfaces not just in the history and theory of the novel, and literary theory, but also in Frankfurt school critical theory and sociology, psychoanalysis and the histories

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<sup>25</sup> Skov Nielsen et al, 'Ten Theses', p. 65.

<sup>26</sup> Gallagher, p. 345.

<sup>27</sup> Bennett, *Enchantment*, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> 'We have never been enchanted' is a play on the 1993 work of Bruno Latour *We Have Never Been Modern* in which Latour argues, in a way that precipitates recent revisions of Weber, that the sciences rely on fiction, or narratives of faith. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (London: Harvard University Press, 2012).

of religion and magic. In addition to Adorno, Bennett and Felski, Marx, Derrida and Paige mentioned above, enchantment and specifically *re*-enchantment has been the subject of a number of works on aesthetic and cultural theory. In addition to Morrison Berman's outlier text from the 1980s, this includes work by Bernard Stiegler (where re-enchantment is used to investigate the value of 'spirit' in the experience of late capitalism), a 2009 edited collection by Joshua Landy and Michael Saler which, similarly to Bennett's work, explores the 'alter-ables' of enchantment in key figures in the arts and philosophy, and a 2011 collection edited by James Elkins and David Morgan which seeks to examine the relationship between religion and the arts without relying on concepts like the sublime and Walter Benjamin's concept of 'aura' which they argue has 'smuggled' religion into aesthetic theory.<sup>29</sup> For every claim of disenchantment there is a counter-claim of re-enchantment. Notably, three of these works not only discuss the same concept but bear the same title – *The Re-Enchantment of the World* – it appears to be a pronouncement that bears repeating. The racialised enlightenment history encoded in 'enchantment' has also borne a body of work in postcolonial theory, with critics such as Akeel Bilgrami, Saurabh Dube and Walter Dignolo seeking to wrest the white anthropological gaze from the enchanted-disenchanted binary that sees the narrative of Enlightenment and its enchantments rely on a white and Western construction of primitivism (e.g. Freud's *Totem and Taboo*).<sup>30</sup>

But re-enchantment necessitates the absence of enchantment or 'disenchantment' in the first place. Indeed, any account of enchantment must surely acknowledge the legacy of Weber and his pronouncement of 'the disenchantment of the world'. Excerpted from his 1917 lecture 'Science as Vocation', this phrase is popularly understood as an argument about the usurping of superstition and religion with scientific rationalism (the replacement of knowing the world through superstition with knowing about the world through scientific measurement). Part of the recent attention to enchantment in recent years, however, has resulted in Weber's articulation of disenchantment being shown to be less totalising than previously thought. Weber explains that

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<sup>29</sup> Morrison Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (London: Cornell University Press, 1981); Bernard Stiegler, *The Re-Enchantment of the World: The Value of Spirit Against Industrial Populism*, trans. by Trevor Arthur (London: Continuum, 2014); Joshua Landy, and Michael Saler, eds., *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); James Elkins and David Morgan, eds., *Re-Enchantment* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Akeel Bilgrami, 'Occidentalism, the Very Idea: An Essay on Enlightenment and Enchantment', *Critical Inquiry*, 32 (2006), 381–411; Saurabh Dube, *Enchantments of Modernity: Empire, Nation, Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2012); Walter Dignolo 'The Enduring Enchantment (Or the Epistemic Privilege of Modernity and Where to Go from Here)', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101 (2002), 927–54.



increasing intellectualization and rationalization do *not*, therefore, indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives.

It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one *could* learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.<sup>31</sup>

'Intellectualization' and 'rationalization' may well have become more pervasive, but they created a world in which, while the *availability* of knowledge has increased, the *uptake* of that knowledge does not necessarily mirror the availability. Weber states this more forcefully later in the lecture when he writes that the 'most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal intimate human relations.'<sup>32</sup> Even as Weber articulates a pervasion of 'calculation' in scientific, rational thought and thus in public life, he is careful both to heed that the 'sublime values' once grasped at through magical or superstitious means have not disappeared altogether but have become less visible. Additionally, in the introductory moments of his lecture, Weber challenges the stereotype of rational, scientific calculation as 'involving only the cool intellect and not one's "heart and soul"' arguing instead that even in scientific modes of investigation, 'some idea has to occur to someone's mind' and that 'such intuition cannot be forced. It has nothing to do with any cold calculation.'<sup>33</sup> Just as Adorno and Horkheimer show the Enlightenment's dialectic dependence on 'animistic magic' and that 'with every step with every step enlightenment entangles itself more deeply in mythology', even Weber's calculated investigations retain an enchanted heart.<sup>34</sup>

Critics now say that experiences of spiritual and mystical dalliance were side-lined rather than eliminated by Weber. Bennett paraphrases Weber's disenchantment as an expression of how '[m]odern scientific practices first induce the expectation of a telos and then flatly refuse to fill it; science first whets our appetite for completion of purpose and then insists that no final satisfaction is attainable' and that '[u]ltimately those who live amidst rationalization will develop a craving for the real; disenchanted selves will long for that which is not artifice or the product of human minds or hands.'<sup>35</sup> Felski, in *Uses of Literature*, similarly argues that Weber's modernity 'may exclude the supernatural, yet it remains saturated with the superrational. While the world is no longer enchanted, in other

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<sup>31</sup> Max Weber, 'Science as Vocation', in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 129-56 (p. 139).

<sup>32</sup> Weber, 'Science as Vocation', p. 155.

<sup>33</sup> Weber, 'Science as Vocation', p. 135.

<sup>34</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 7-8.

<sup>35</sup> Bennett, *Enchantment*, p. 61; 63.

words, we are still prone to experiences of enchantment.<sup>36</sup> Jason A. Josephson-Storm, too, has argued that critics have interpreted Weber's 'de-magic-ing of the world' too literally and contends that '[d]isenchament also persists alongside belief in magic.'<sup>37</sup> This re-reading of one of the key articulations of disenchantment in Western philosophy (and in Western society) is one way in which contemporary theory has been endeavouring to re-utilise enchantment. I raise this equivocation not to be contrary but to begin to introduce the role of calculation, the play of expectation and the unexpected, and that pesky figure of 'intuition' in the novel form. Coetzee, Morrison and Smith all emphasise the act of writing as one which involves the unexpected, and this will prove significant for how we understand their relationship to enchantment and fictional artifice.

Bennett's work in *The Enchantment of Modern Life* has been a crucial re-reading of the enchantment-in-disenchantment. Bennett, pursuing 'moments' of enchantment rather than a grand narrative of enchantment finds for example that 'one of the most enchanting claims of modern ethics comes from Kantian lips: there exists an imperious voice of reason (the moral law) embedded in the very structure of human cognition. What a marvel this human reason is!'<sup>38</sup> Bennett's enchantment, then, predicated as it is on revisiting and reversing narratives of disenchantment which write the world (and its matter) as inert, represents a re-vitalisation of matter, objects and things, and which places it in the interdisciplinary field to which it contributes, what is variously known as New Materialism, Thing Theory and Object-Oriented Ontology. Most significantly – and this is where the deviation between Bennett's work and my own is pronounced – Bennett advocates that enchantment is a vehicle for ethical thought and is interested in the ethical possibilities of a 'small dose' of the 'forgetfulness' or 'mindlessness' that is commonly associated with the state of enchantment.<sup>39</sup> This thesis makes no such claim about the ethical force of enchantment or reading.

Attention to the contemporary experience of (and critical tool of) enchantment has also borne, and been borne out of, work on enchantment in earlier periods. Paige suggests that re-enchantment has in fact been a strategy of fictional writing since before the emergence of the novel. He argues that 'from the moment the first recognizably modern debunking narratives were articulated' writers of fiction used these very debunking narratives 'to think about how the process and pleasure of reading implied a symbiotic

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<sup>36</sup> Felski, *Uses*, p. 59.

<sup>37</sup> Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 271.

<sup>38</sup> Bennett, p. 42.

<sup>39</sup> Bennett, p. 10.

relation with superstition’ and that re-enchantment is therefore specifically ‘a product of art’.<sup>40</sup> Michael McKeon’s study of *Don Quixote* draws a similar conclusion but with the emphasis on disenchantment, arguing that Cervantes was an author whose work ‘disenchants the world by “conciliating” reality to fantasy’ and thus constituted an ‘elaborate mechanism for inducing that species of belief-without-really-believing which would become, once the mechanism itself proved unnecessary, the realm of the aesthetic.’<sup>41</sup> Terry Castle finds the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century as a time in which the novel evinces a ‘language of mental experience’ that was ‘suffused with a displaced supernaturalism’ – after ‘denying the spirit-world of our ancestors, we have been forced to relocate it into our theory of imagination’ to the extent that, ‘by the time of Freud [...] everyone felt “haunted.”’<sup>42</sup> Enchantments and re-enchantments are often tied to the supernatural; this is not the case in Coetzee, Morrison and Smith, for whom enchantment is an experience that already exists in the aesthetic.

It is, indeed, in studies of eighteenth-century literature that one of the largest swells of work on enchantment within the novel exists.<sup>43</sup> Sarah Tindal Kareem’s work on ‘wonder’ in eighteenth-century philosophy, as a study which espouses enchantment in terms of plausible rather than explicitly magical subjects, is a particularly instructive precedent for this thesis. Tracing wonder as a response to the strangeness or newness of ‘marvelous’ and mysterious events in eighteenth-century fiction (the appearance of the footprint in *Robinson Crusoe* is one example), Kareem argues that the ‘inception’ of the fictional marvelous in and by eighteenth-century fiction was crucially ‘defined not by its opposition to, but by its integration with realism.’<sup>44</sup> Wonder, she argues, was a strategy utilised by authors and deployed in narrative content to engage ‘readerly attention’ and it was, crucially, through an ‘interplay between credulity and skepticism, [...] from thematic commingling of the realistic and the strange, to simultaneous exhortations to believe and doubt its content’ that these fictions achieved their effects.<sup>45</sup> Kareem’s subjects, then, are

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<sup>40</sup> Paige, pp. 162–3; 160.

<sup>41</sup> Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 286; 282.

<sup>42</sup> Terry Castle, ‘Phantasmagoria and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie’, in *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 140–67 (p. 143).

<sup>43</sup> See, for example: John B. Bender, *Ends of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Jesse Molesworth, *Chance and the Eighteenth-Century Novel: Realism, Probability, Magic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); David Sandner, *Critical Discourses of the Fantastic, 1712-1831* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011).

<sup>44</sup> Sarah Tindal Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Kareem, p. 2.

those mysterious moments which are not supernatural but rather which do *not* make a decisive split from realism because, in this ‘commingling’ readers are invited ‘to catch themselves in the act of thinking, thereby unveiling the processes whereby the conscious mind approaches the world.’<sup>46</sup> To not entirely capitulate, then, to retain a critical sensibility, signals an active interaction between the artwork and its viewer.

This is what Wolfgang Iser theorised in 1978 in *The Act of Reading* when he posited the experience of duration in reading (in which the reader becomes aware of the development and changing nature of their involvement with the text – it is always a past-tense experience) as an experience of ‘participation’ which resulted in self-apprehension: ‘to perceive oneself during the process of participation is an essential quality of the aesthetic experience; the observer finds himself in a strange, halfway position: he is involved, and he watches himself being involved.’<sup>47</sup> Readers not only draw on their past experience and knowledge when reading, but they become aware of the restructuring of this ‘stored experience’ in the event of reading itself.<sup>48</sup> Lukács expresses this in another way when he describes the identity of the novel through its being an unfinished form, a form which ‘appears as something in the process of becoming’: ‘As form, the novel establishes a fluctuating yet firm balance between becoming and being; as the idea of becoming, it becomes a state.’<sup>49</sup>

Kareem, however, explains this ‘catching oneself in the act of thinking’ through Charles Taylor’s concept of radical reflexivity (the self-apprehending-the-self in the act of thinking). Eighteenth-century fiction, says Kareem, does not just fictionalise but *produces* radical reflexivity through a mix of ‘exploration and disengagement’ and ‘engrossment and reflection’.<sup>50</sup> Eighteenth-century theories of engagement and belief will return, via Kareem, Gallagher and others, as an important context in reading the dynamic of belief that Coetzee’s fiction both investigates and solicits, but these insights also resonate in the thesis in other ways. The conundrums that we encounter in Smith’s novels, the incitement to interpret in Morrison’s novels, and the way that all three authors invoke extra-fictional and fictional scenes of enchantment concatenate a readerly reflexivity.

In a similar vein to Kareem’s notion of exploration and disengagement, Sianne Ngai has theorised enchantment as an aesthetic response in a contemporary context. More

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<sup>46</sup> Kareem, p. 24.

<sup>47</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 134.

<sup>48</sup> Iser, p. 134.

<sup>49</sup> Lukács, p. 72–3.

<sup>50</sup> Kareem, p. 24.

specifically, in her theory of the gimmick, enchantment is one side of the coin when we apprehend the use of concepts, ideas and devices in artworks. Ngai came late to this thesis, but her framing of the affect of the gimmick bolsters one of its central conceits, namely that reflexive narrative and enchantment are linked. The gimmick, she argues, is ‘a cheap or aesthetically unconvincing contrivance for achieving narrative closure.’<sup>51</sup> Ngai is interested in the gimmick as a device that, through its manipulation of time and labour, tells us about the capitalist aesthetic form, it is the way that an audience experiences the gimmick that tells us about enchantment: the gimmick ‘is both a wonder *and* a trick. It is a form we marvel at *and* distrust, admire *and* disdain, whose affective intensity for us increases precisely because of this ambivalence.’<sup>52</sup> The gimmick, in the novel, might be the presence of a concept or idea that seems to both demonstrate the presence of a reflexive thought, but also a too-obvious effort to show thought, and it is for this reason that Ngai also contends that the concept, when used in art, is always in danger of becoming a gimmick.<sup>53</sup> Markers of fictionality, often reflexive gestures, can be one such gimmick.

If Ngai bolsters the relationship between reflexive narrative and enchantment, then Robert Pfaller bolsters the relationship between fictionality and enchantment. Discussing what he terms ‘illusions’ in contemporary culture, he notes that there exist two types of illusion, ‘illusions with owners and illusions maintained by people who are not their owners; illusions with subjects and illusions without subjects’: while in some cases ‘people identify with their illusions, which they often emphasize by adding the assertion, “I believe (in) that, I really do.” On the contrary, in other cases, people “know better”; they know that the illusion is “nonsense” or “something silly”’.<sup>54</sup> The latter of these illusions – which might be, to borrow Pfaller’s examples, sports or astrology – are those which people relate to through a displaced belief or displaced illusion: they recognise that there is something irrational about the nature of their belief (or, although Pfaller doesn’t use this word, their investment), they nonetheless hold onto it. In a chapter dedicated specifically to the duality of this belief, Pfaller elaborates on Octave Mannoni’s phrase ‘Je sais bien, mais quand même...’ (‘I know very well, but all the same...’), and argues that Mannoni’s famous formulation of cognitive dissonance marked a profound moment in the epistemology of

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<sup>51</sup> Sianne Ngai, ‘Theory of the Gimmick’, *Critical Inquiry*, 43 (2016), 466–505 (p. 469).

<sup>52</sup> Ngai, ‘Theory of the Gimmick’, p. 469.

<sup>53</sup> Sianne Ngai, ‘The Gimmick as Aesthetic Judgement and Capitalist Form’, *Centre for the History of the Emotions Annual Lecture*, Queen Mary University of London, 16 November 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions Without Owners*, trans. by Lisa Rosenblatt, Charlotte Eckler, and Camilla Nielsen (London: Verso Books, 2014), p. 1.

belief, and specifically in discerning how certain beliefs – *croyanances* rather than *fois* (faiths) – are in fact ‘maintained only where there is better knowledge that suspends them’:

This discovery not only contradicts the common versions in which the illusion dissolves after knowledge of truth is attained; it also goes beyond the already thoroughly disconcerting discovery by a few philosophers who recognized that there are illusions that remain alive even when they are falsified by acquired knowledge. Kant, for example, established in his “Transcendental Dialectic” that the transcendental illusion remained and did not dissolve even after critique had rendered it entirely transparent as an illusion. In a similar way, Spinoza defined the manner of functioning, resistant to all better knowledge, of “knowledge of the first kind”.<sup>55</sup>

Mannoni goes further than either Kant or Spinoza because he ‘detects that certain illusions not only are not destroyed by contradictory knowledge; in fact, they are only able to exist on the basis of such knowledge and in conjunction with it.’<sup>56</sup> These are, in Pfaller’s reckoning, illusions without owners because everybody knows better, but that knowledge is precisely what keeps the illusion in existence and in circulation. Michael Taussig, too, says that faith does not merely ‘coexist with skepticism’ but ‘may even require skepticism.’<sup>57</sup> Taussig exemplifies this via a discussion of ‘the trick’ which he says ‘highlights nature’s mysteries by *defying as well as displaying* them’.<sup>58</sup> Tricks, which might be performed by acrobats, divers, or magicians or card players, are actions ‘requiring inordinate skill, inordinate technique, inordinate empathy with reality’ and yet the knowledge of that technique does not demote the majesty of the act but rather turns ‘magic’ into ‘the highest form of science.’<sup>59</sup>

Alfred Gell has similarly argued that the knowledge of technique and the complexity of construction can induce enchantment. For Gell, this power resides more specifically in the knowledge of the object’s technical production that does not account for the effect that it has or the impression that it makes: the ‘difficulty’ we have in ‘mentally encompassing their coming-into-being as objects in the world’ leaves us ‘forced to construe [the object] as magical.’<sup>60</sup> We should recall Gallagher here and posit that Mannoni, Ngai, Pfaller and Taussig all articulate a dissonance that not only belongs to artworks but also

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<sup>55</sup> Pfaller, p. 42.

<sup>56</sup> Pfaller, p. 42.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Taussig, ‘Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic’, in *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment* ed. by Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 272–306 (p. 272).

<sup>58</sup> Taussig, p. 306.

<sup>59</sup> Taussig, p. 306.

<sup>60</sup> Alfred Gell, ‘The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology’, in *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, ed. by Jeremy Coote (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 40–63 (p. 49).

specifically to the experience of reading fictions that bear a reflexivity or discernible ‘concept’. In the fictions of Coetzee, Morrison and Smith, we see renderings of enchantment in which enchantment is precisely not only borne out of the apprehension of skill and technique but seems to even be enhanced (rather than dispelled) by the knowledge of that skill and technique.

Pfaller demonstrates the way in which enchantment (as a cognitive experience) is variously unmoored from the supernatural or superstition, and yet there remains an ineffability around the mismatch of technique and effect. What to make, then, of this continual recapitulation of searches for the terms of this ineffability? That it has been continuously theorised keys into Blakey Vermeule’s neat observation about the disciplinary norms of literary studies (parsed in her introduction to *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?*) that the discipline of English literature is ‘a concatenation of biases and preferences in favour of the complex, the difficult, the ineffable, and the mysterious.’<sup>61</sup> According to Vermeule, literary scholars stake their disciplinary USP on the unknowability of literature. Heather Love agrees that we have naturalised a hierarchy which privileges interpretive richness over descriptiveness in criticism and argues that ‘[i]f the encounter with a divine and inscrutable message was progressively secularized in the twentieth century, the opacity and ineffability of the text and the ethical demand to attend to it remain central to practices of literary interpretation today.’<sup>62</sup> H. Porter Abbott, in *Real Mysteries*, has proposed the ‘palpable unknown’ as an aesthetic style which is intentionally induced by writers.<sup>63</sup> A subset of the ineffable, narratives that deal in the palpable unknown invite us to ‘let go of the impulse to construct’ and it is thus characterised by ‘the coexistence of two opposed frames of mind: the need to know and the acceptance that one will never know’.<sup>64</sup> ‘Critical Enchantments’, although it goes after the appearance of mystery in the contemporary novel, does not prefer or intend to privilege the ambiguous over the obvious or the ineffable over the describable. Rather, what I hope is already beginning to show is the sense that there are ways of talking about enchantment that do not descend into gestures to the unspeakable.

As we have seen in Pfaller and others, then, a study of enchantment and the dynamic or dialectic of knowing in enchantment often traces a self-reflexive gesture in

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<sup>61</sup> Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), p. x.

<sup>62</sup> Heather Love, ‘Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn’, *New Literary History*, 41 (2010), 371–91 (p. 371).

<sup>63</sup> H. Porter Abbott, *Real Mysteries: Narrative and the Unknowable* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2013), p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Abbott, *Mysteries*, p. 9; 11.

criticism – ruminations on the nature of *how we know* become tied up in considerations of *how we read* (i.e. asking what the best critical practice for this moment is), and that is clear in the critical moment that this thesis coincides with. But while both Ngai and Pfaller tell us about reflexivity in artworks, they don't tell us about how that reflexivity is institutionally produced and mediated. One major interlocutor here is Pierre Bourdieu, who shows how even when artworks provide us with little else than a concept, audiences will make the investment (interpretive and economic) anyway. Explaining this through his notion of the 'circle of belief' Bourdieu gives the example of Piero Manzoni's 'Artist's Shit' (a series of cans that were said to contain the titular item and displayed the artist's signature atop the can) whereby the 'quasi-magical potency' of the signature confers value and legitimises the work anyway.<sup>65</sup> While the authors in this thesis do not make avant-garde or anti-avant-garde gestures like Manzoni's, they nonetheless are engaged in a type of investigation of the devices and mechanisms that underwrite fiction, particularly as those devices aim at soliciting or dissuading a reader's investment in the illusion of the fiction. Moreover, it might even be through the signature of the author that these works invite critical enchantment. But how does this work in the context of novels and fictions rather than visual artworks?

### **Authors or writers?: reflexivity and the literary institution**

It has, so far, been suggested that there is a dissonance between the knowledge of technique and effects, an enchantment that is experienced in spite of and maybe because of artifice. This is one side of this thesis's claim. The other side of its claim is that the novel's enchanted idiom is part of a critical sensibility that must be read through an attention to the novel as an institutionally embedded form which marks the "author" as a player in the literary economy. Sarah Brouillette, building on Pierre Bourdieu's aesthetic theory with a focus on literary economies, has specifically sought to develop our understanding of how

the rise of a large-scale literary marketplace [which] made it possible for authors to make a living by writing occurred in tandem with the development of an ideological artistic purity and separation from economic concerns. This ideology supported the emergence of the charismatic author as a romantic creator, one who disavowed a

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<sup>65</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. by Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), p. 81. The 'potency' that Bourdieu outlines is potent, in part, because it elides what he calls the incommensurate cost of production compared with the market price in works like Piero's. We might speculate how one would calculate the incommensurability in the context of novels, where market price is increasingly cheap and where only first or signed editions become high value.



market that relied on a large-scale production as a means of capitalist accumulation.<sup>66</sup>

Or, as Barthes puts it, '[t]he author performs a function, the writer an activity.'<sup>67</sup> Brouillette's work shows the way that marketplace mediates and plays out in the pages of the novel itself: she reads a set of postcolonial novels (including Coetzee's) as sites which betray expressions of anxiety that their 'authority rests, however uncomfortably, in the nature of [their] connection to the specificity of a given political location' and because of the demographic of their reading public: 'privileged metropolitan markets' particularly Anglo-American markets, rather than the reading public of their political location.<sup>68</sup> Brouillette is a major influence on this thesis's framing of demystification and disenchantment through questions of authorship and authority. Crucial for my readings of Coetzee and Morrison's 'late work' through their Nobel status, both this and Brouillette's more recent work demystifies the ideological weight of the writer as a solitary or ideologically pure figure. To term someone (or indeed oneself) a *writer* gestures to the experience of mystification engendered in the act of writing. The writer is perhaps writing late into the night, sitting at a paper-covered desk wringing their hands and wracking their brains, waiting for the right words to come to them. Whatever ritual or routine the writer engages in, this conception of the writer is an ideological one that obfuscates the economy of writing and focuses instead on its transcendental qualities; sometimes referred to as the *romantic ideal* of writing, it supports the fantasy that it is from the writer – or the writer's communion with a spirit of writing – from which the writing comes forth. To speak of an author or a novelist, on the other hand, is to acknowledge the economy and institution of literature to which the act of writing both contributes and responds. Authors give readings and interviews, have meetings with publishers and editors, they themselves read, they engage in correspondence, and they might win prizes that not only increase but radically alter the demographic of their readership. Brouillette argues that we must challenge the former, the 'model of the asocial or antisocial flexible individualist by stressing that, though it is disseminated as a natural given, it is in fact historically produced, highly contested, and contingent.'<sup>69</sup> Following the example of Brouillette, this thesis is alert to the relationship

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<sup>66</sup> Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Authors and Writers', in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontag (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), pp. 185–93 (pp. 186–7).

<sup>68</sup> Brouillette, *Marketplace*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>69</sup> Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (London: Stanford University Press, 2014), pp. 4–5.

between the extra-fictional presences of authors and their framing of questions about authority and fiction.

As is clear by now, in the course of investigating three permutations of fictionality and enchantment in the contemporary novel, 'Critical Enchantments' also delineates three permutations of the figure of the author; in each chapter we encounter a story about how novels evince a negotiation of authorship and authority in fiction, and how the reputations and extra-fictional activities of authors mediate our interpretation of fiction. Coetzee, Morrison and Smith are three authors with three differing public personas and discernible attitudes to the concept of literary authority in the contemporary age. Taken together, they represent what we can recognise as the novel in the Anglophone tradition, but this is not a label which sits well with their work on an individual level; Coetzee, for example, has increasingly sought to have his work published in Dutch or Spanish before an English version becomes available. These writers frame South African (and Australian), African American (and specifically black *women's*), as well as Scottish (and British) traditions of the novel. What's more, these authors have all held research and teaching posts in university English departments, they all possess at least an MA in English literature and hold dozens of honorary doctorates between them. This was not a predetermined criteria on my part, but it has become apparent that this criteria was predetermined in other ways. The demands of reading fiction by Coetzee, Morrison and Smith is indexical to a reading of the closeness of the institutions that publish and produce writers with those that read, teach and study them. For these three in particular, a broad familiarity with the literary canon and the history of literary theory *as taught through the university* is undeniable and even formative (newsflash: writers are also readers). While my intention is not to delineate their engagement with that canon, the knowledge of writers as readers is important for reading how literary reflexivity overlaps with aesthetic enchantment in the contemporary novel.

Mark McGurl expressed this in another way when he said of the postwar American novel that whether '[e]xplicitly or not, every work of serious fiction in this period is, on one level, a portrait of the artist.'<sup>70</sup> The period that he speaks of is the one that he calls the 'program era' – a time in which the rise of creative writing programs (MFAs) has been symbolic of a broader convergence between 'literary production and the practices of higher education' and has resulted in the emergence of 'a vast range of writers who have also been students and teachers'.<sup>71</sup> Given this imbrication of writers and readers, it is my contention

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<sup>70</sup> Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (London: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. xi.

<sup>71</sup> McGurl, p. ix.

that an attention to forms of enchantment in fiction articulates a critical sensibility in the novel that is anticipatory, and in which scenes of reading and interpretation foreground the novel's ongoing appraisal of its form with specific attention to the fact of its reception and interpretation.

The tension that Brouillette attends to, between the ideology of the solitary writer and the historically specific production of authors, has been expressed in similar terms by Merve Emre in relation to readers. Responding to the recent revisions of critical practice in the US, Emre argues that these new theories 'aspire to present the reader as a particular kind of human being in the world' but do not first elaborate on 'how a historically and institutionally contingent, explicitly mediated and public technique of reading results in the creation of that particular kind of human being.'<sup>72</sup> Polemical rejoinders aside, Emre's investigation of paraliterary reading (enacted by 'bad' readers) proposes that academic or university contexts of reading are not – as is often implicitly suggested – 'closed systems': 'the people who flit into and out of these institutional spaces often do double – and sometimes triple and quadruple – duty as readers, writers, and human actors in many different social contexts'.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, for Emre, understanding the various effects of fictional belief involves attending to readers who are not scholars, readers for who fiction might be read, in quite literal ways, for instruction. While this thesis does not explicitly take a specific pool of readers as its subject (other than in chapter three), it does read from the position that the pronounced use of fictionality and enchantment corresponds to the increased fluency of readers when it comes to matters of literary reference and so needs to qualify the type of reader and type of reading that it takes as its subject. Critical enchantment correlates to what I want to cast, foreshadowing the language of Lisa Zunshine to which we'll soon turn, as a reading which is intentional. While this could, in theory, encompass readers within or outside of the university, this thesis pursues enchantment in the context of critics and readers who read because they are looking to synthesise an interpretation. Theorists of reading often like to make the distinction between readers who read for pleasure – commuters, holiday reads, in short those who *consume* rather than *mull over* the words and ideas that they encounter – and those who read precisely to investigate the internal logic of the artwork, its possible hidden meanings, and its idiosyncratic sense-making of the world. Reading for cultural capital sits somewhere between the two. We might think here of work by Peter Brooks or Frank Kermode which, through various

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<sup>72</sup> Merve Emre, *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 15.

<sup>73</sup> Emre, p. 5.

idioms of literary theory, argues that we go to literature because it exercises the part of us that wants to create order, find patterns and experience the ‘sense of an ending’ that we cannot experience other than in narrative.<sup>74</sup>

Of course, as the above delineation of enchantment as analytical and immersed shows, the opposition is nowhere near this simple, and to speak in general terms about the consumption of literature makes one seem a strange Leavisite spectre, harping on about the Great Tradition and the plague of mass readership. It is nowhere near this simple because the push for university education as a liberal good across the western world means that a greater proportion of commuters, holidaymakers, and other voracious readers have been versed in the basics of literary criticism (or interpretive humanities broadly conceived) than ever before.<sup>75</sup> I have seen London’s ‘city boys’ on the underground with Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, but I have seen them with J. M. Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year* too. A 2006 article by David S. Miall detailed a series of experiments which found that an education in literary interpretation did not lead to any difference in the words and phrases that individuals picked out for their ‘memorable’ or ‘striking’ qualities in literary texts.<sup>76</sup> The studies that he describes suggests all readers to share a general capacity to intuit those aspects of the text that may require attention, but this does not account for the ability of those readers to then describe or account for those intuitions. Joan Swann and Daniel Allington have since argued that Miall’s research is based on a pseudo-objective version of the ‘real’ reader; they favour empirical studies which observe readers in their natural habitats and without pre-set tasks (memory tests and picking out the most striking words and phrases) enabling researchers to learn what a real reader’s own ‘preoccupations’ look like.<sup>77</sup> There is a tension, then, between the predictability and the contingency of readers, but what Swann, Allington and Miall do not account for is the influence of the author or external factors on reading; how does our foreknowledge of authors, literary traditions, cultural production, as well as authors’ foreknowledge of those things, influence our reading? This is a question that has driven recent scholarship in literary studies, and it will be traceable throughout this thesis.

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<sup>74</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>75</sup> Statistics on BAs and MAs undertaken by subject in the UK are not easily available. There are questions about contemporary reading publics that this thesis raises but cannot answer.

<sup>76</sup> David S. Miall, ‘Empirical Approaches to Studying Literary Readers: The State of the Discipline’, *Book History*, 9 (2006), 291–311 (p. 299).

<sup>77</sup> Joan Swann, and Daniel Allington, ‘Reading Groups and the Language of Literary Texts: A Case Study in Social Reading’, *Language and Literature*, 18 (2009), 247–64 (p. 249).

The convergence of readers and writers that McGurl seeks to describe the effects of has also been theorised as the grounds for the swell of self-conscious novels that were dubbed ‘metafiction’ from the 1960s onward. A discussion of ‘metafiction’ in particular foregrounds the encroaching rhetoric of both fiction and criticism, and enables us to consider competing claims to ahistoricity and historicity in contemporary iterations of reflexivity. From its first theorisation metafiction was posed as an ahistorical concept that could be attributed to any work of fiction (as in Patricia Waugh’s assertion, via Derrida’s genre-clause, that ‘metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in all novels. [...] By studying metafiction, one is, in effect, studying that which gives the novel its identity’)<sup>78</sup> but which has, over time, come to seem inextricably tied to the critical moment following the wane of deconstruction in the academy. Writing in 1984, Waugh argues that metafiction is a mode of writing that belongs to postmodernism, and that it is a symptom of the ‘concealed’ and ‘mystified’ power structures of contemporary society that means novelists could neither ‘integrate [with] existing social institutions and conventions’ nor gain enough distance to write in ‘opposition’ and so found that they had to ‘turn inwards to their own medium of expression’.<sup>79</sup> Richard Walsh, by contrast, contends that the homogenised view of metafiction as politically introspective is the result of ‘the misinterpretation of innovative writers’ own comments’ by critics, and argued that these ‘innovative’ fictions actually conduct an outward looking political engagement.<sup>80</sup>

Mark Currie, however, historicises the late-twentieth century iteration of literary reflexivity by situating the self-consciousness of metafiction as a response to the self-consciousness of literary modernism and the structuralist linguistic theory that developed in the early-twentieth century. Writing fifteen years after Waugh, Currie also frames metafiction within a narrative that speaks of the closeness of the writers of fiction and the writers of criticism.<sup>81</sup> Literary theory and fiction, he says, began to evince an increasing awareness of the languages of one another’s discourses: metafiction is therefore only one

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<sup>78</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 5.

<sup>79</sup> Waugh, pp. 10-11.

<sup>80</sup> Richard Walsh, *Novel Arguments: Reading Innovative American Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. viii.

<sup>81</sup> Currie is referring to how these writers are often the same people: ‘On the one hand, novelists often depend financially or intellectually on employment as critics, so that the writers of fiction are also, for example, the reviewers who assess fiction for newspaper readers. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly for metafiction, academic literary critics have been increasingly successful as novelists, leading to a high level of critical awareness within their fictional productions.’ (Currie, *Metafiction*, p. 3.) But a more close-to-the-bone example of this, which gets more personal than Currie’s ‘institutional’ formulation suggests, is that Currie was among the first critical commentators of Ali Smith, a novelist who his brother was friends with at university. My first encounter with Smith’s writing was as an undergraduate student on a module that Currie had designed.

half of an account of metafiction: the reflexivity of metafiction must be put into consort with an account of ‘the self-consciousness of criticism’, or, ‘metacriticism’.<sup>82</sup> It is one of my contentions that instances of reflexivity in the contemporary moment are not simply recapitulations to an earlier era of writing – this is not an account of post-postmodernism – but that they are instructive in discerning how fiction in the novel both investigates and stages enchantment. My authors all stage reflexivity: Coetzee’s fictions contain characters who bear resemblance to him, Morrison’s often address the reader and make an explicit appeal to interpretation, and Smith’s place characters in front of paintings and books, and have them enact interpretations of their own.<sup>83</sup> But these instances of reflexivity all give way to considerations of the enchanting effects of artifice.

### **Reading fictionality: intentions, aims and effects**

I have suggested that enchantment can be read as an affect, as per Bennett and Felski, or through histories of magic-like enchantment, as per During and Paige, and that it also arises out of the circularity of the institutions that produce and read literature. This thesis responds to these, but it also (and primarily) reads enchantment with recourse to theories of fictionality. Indeed, that contemporary enchantment involves a double hit of immersion and analysis is echoed in theories of fictionality which see readers of fictionality deal simultaneously with the novel and fictional connotations. The remainder of this introduction, then, will build on our earlier reading of Gallagher and Skov Nielsen et al and survey the resurgence of fictionality in contemporary narrative and novel theory.

Encountering the term in literary studies, one would likely deduce that fictionality and metafictionality are one and the same thing. Because of its adjectival suffix –ality, it has often been deployed in a way that has no bearing on the specific theorisation of the concept of fictionality. As Simona Zetterberg Gjerlevsen has pointed out, critics use it ‘almost synonymously with terms such as “fictitious,” “fictional” and “fictive.”’<sup>84</sup> It has often appeared this way in literary theory and literary criticism, and for the purposes of signifying something akin to the logic of fiction in the novel: it may signal those features of a fictional text that demonstrate an awareness of its own creation, or which highlight its

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<sup>82</sup> Currie, *Metafiction*, p. 2.

<sup>83</sup> Lisa McNally reads the appearance of reading theories in contemporary writing, or the way that contemporary writing theorises reading in line with a deconstructionist ethic. See Lisa McNally, *Reading Theories in Contemporary Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>84</sup> Simona Zetterberg Gjerlevsen, ‘Fictionality’, in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. by Peter Hühn et al <<http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/fictionality>> [first accessed 3 June 2015].

constructedness, and which therefore alert us to the fact that we are reading an invention. The –ality suffix figures as an adjectival amendment rather than as a gesture to the historical development of imaginative communication. In addition to During’s nod to fictionality above, David Attwell, for example, describes Coetzee as an author who both ‘pursues’ fictionality and brings his reader to ‘an experience’ of it.<sup>85</sup> In a similar vein, this term appears without recourse to the recognised narrative or novel theories in Leigh Wilson’s recent work on the historical novel in the twenty-first century. Turning instead to a theory of novel realism and in collusion with statements of the decline of literary fiction, Wilson suggests that the resurgence of historical fiction speaks to a tip of the scales – between the fictional on the one hand and the real on the other – in favour of the real. After the privileging of the fictional by the 1980s postmodernist novel, Wilson tells us that the ‘thinning of the boundaries the literary and genre in the contemporary historical novel reasserts the ability of the novel to represent the real and asserts a disguised referentiality because of its loss of faith in the fictional.’<sup>86</sup> Waugh, too, locates a ‘quest for fictionality’ in the reflexive strategies of metafiction in a moment where authors faced ‘problems of artistic legitimacy’ and where the novel’s authoritative claim to fiction was perceived to be in crisis.<sup>87</sup> Fictionality can certainly be applied to account for self-consciousness in the novel, but it is not the only meaning that it has. Indeed, it is this form-specific (in other words novel-specific) remit of fictionality that has been contested by narratologists who believe the literary context to be a limiting one.

A 2015 issue of *Narrative* journal has been a notable site of this debate, and introduces us to what is at stake in contemporary discussions of fictionality; namely, the re-framing of fiction as one communicative strategy among many. By understanding fictionality in terms of rhetoric rather than genre or literary form, Skov Nielsen et al seek to emphasise the particular ways in which ‘inventions’ are used for particular audiences, with particular desired effects.<sup>88</sup> But they also retain some of the principles that we are familiar with from our most entrenched notions of what the novel can do, namely that fictionality

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<sup>85</sup> David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), p. 7; David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 235.

<sup>86</sup> Leigh Wilson, ‘Reality Effects: The Historical Novel and the Crisis of Fictionality in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century’, in *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble, and Leigh Wilson (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 145–71 (pp. 146–7). In her distinction between ‘the literary and genre’ Wilson is referring to literary fiction and genre fiction.

<sup>87</sup> Waugh, pp. 9–10

<sup>88</sup> Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh, ‘Fictionality As Rhetoric: A Response to Paul Dawson’, *Narrative*, 23 (2015), 101–11 (p. 102).

‘often provides a double exposure of the imagined and the real’.<sup>89</sup> Skov Nielsen et al’s motivation lies, then, in theorising the utility of fictionality: they argue that through their ‘double exposure’, acts of fictionality – in everyday speech, in political discourse – have a direct impact on the choices we make, and desires we have, about how to live our lives.

But this work of Skov Nielsen et al also endeavours to frame fictionality as an act that hinges on a coherence of the intention of the author (or communicator) and the reader’s (or audience’s) successful discernment of that intention. Fictionality, they say, requires a mutual recognition of the invented nature of the act – it is first of all founded on the intent of its creator and thus ‘what matters is whether they are intended to describe actual events. If they are so intended, then they are nonfictional, and if they are not so intended, they are fictional.’<sup>90</sup> Fictionality, like irony, is ‘a quality that we can contextually assume a text or a passage possesses in order to make it relevant and to understand it. [...] [T]he assumption that a text or passage is intended fictively radically alters our reception of it.’<sup>91</sup> Fictionality, regardless of the form in which it is received, exists when it is recognised as an instance of invention, but crucially, in a way that demonstrates intention. If we think we are in the presence of fiction then we will be alert to metaphor, double meaning, relevant contexts, and perhaps the solicitation of a particular response (hate this politically bad character; love this morally good character). What warrants our interest here is the sense that fictionality is something which we might feel we are apprehending intuitively but which is in fact culturally and formally produced. Would discerning fictionality in the novel come as a product of seeing the cover of the book, reading paratextual information (blurbs, reviews), through knowing the author’s previous work, or would it arise only when reading the first few pages and experientially deducing its genre, its setting, its relationship to the world in which the reader lives?

The notion of intention has a more specific application within cognitive literary studies. In *Why we Read Fiction*, Lisa Zunshine likens reading fiction to bodybuilding: fiction augments the cognitive function of its readers, listeners and audiences, training them to be better readers of the world and of the people around them. Zunshine argues that, through reading fiction, we become better readers of *intentionality*, or, the encoded thoughts behind statements. Intentionality is a type of what is known as ‘mind-reading’ in cognitive psychology whereby mind-reading accounts for ‘our ability to explain people’s behaviour in

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<sup>89</sup> Skov Nielsen et al, ‘Ten Theses’, p. 68.

<sup>90</sup> Skov Nielsen et al, ‘Ten Theses’, p. 65.

<sup>91</sup> Skov Nielsen et al, ‘Ten Theses’, p. 67.



terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires.<sup>92</sup> Reading fiction, then, improves our proficiency in constructing ‘a state of mind behind a behaviour’, using the data and social cues which are available to us in order to deduce what others are thinking and feeling.<sup>93</sup> In my reading, intention does not relate to the reader who considers intentions behind the actions of the character, but rather to the fact of reading with an intention to interpret. This does, in some cases, become a reading of the intentions of the author, but not with the aim of retracing the thoughts behind their writing.

In his response to Skov Nielsen et al’s work, Dawson diagnoses the debate about fictionality as the symptom of a wider problem: the ‘terminological conflation in which the novel has become synonymous with fiction’.<sup>94</sup> Their sense of fictionality as a double exposure of the imagined and real is, he says, merely ‘the standard paradox of fictional truth’:

While Skov Nielsen et al. seek to separate the quality of fictionality from the genre of fiction in order to demonstrate how pervasive it is, they are not supplementing this with a new theory of fictionality so much as applying literary theories outside the sphere of literature. This means that when the theory is turned back to fiction, it has nothing new to offer.<sup>95</sup>

Dawson implies that a specifically literary conception of fictionality might still be fruitful. It is this recuperation of the literary context, and the fact of this debate that matters for this thesis. I invoke this ongoing debate in order to highlight that the functions and discourses of fiction are under scrutiny and to contend that Coetzee, Morrison and Smith all conduct investigations of their own into fictionality. This thesis does not profess or aim to retheorise fictionality or reflexivity after postmodernism, but to investigate the novel’s own examination into the idea and function of fiction in the contemporary moment. Building on Gallagher, this will be a study of how fiction negotiates belief as novelists move between the roles of the contemporary author and between genres of literary text. This is, then, a reading of the novel and its production *through* the lens of debates about fictionality, and particularly its theorisation alongside the novel.

The structure of what follows has been indicated throughout this introduction, but I will frame this trajectory here too, as is the convention. Chapter one reads two of Smith’s novels (*There but for the* and *How to be both*) and puts them into conversation with debates

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<sup>92</sup> Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 6.

<sup>93</sup> Zunshine, p. 25.

<sup>94</sup> Paul Dawson, ‘Narrativizing Novel Studies, Historicizing Narrative Theory’, *Poetics Today*, 39 (2018), 1–16 (p. 5).

<sup>95</sup> Paul Dawson, ‘Ten Theses against Fictionality’, *Narrative*, 23 (2015), 74–100 (p. 84).

about literary interpretation – and its history via Adorno, Ricoeur, Lukács and Sedgwick – in order to show how they pose reading as an activity that involves both suspicion and enchantment. It is in this chapter's tracing of Smith's enchanted artifice that we come closest to seeing what the implication of magic in enchantment enables. Chapter two expands on the purview of fictionality in narrative and novel theory, showing how Gallagher's disbelief is taken further in Coetzee's examination of belief within fiction. I argue that Coetzee codes fictional belief and his anxieties about the problems of extra-fictional authority through the figure of the secretary who, in their enchanted experience of writing through dictation (writing what they hear), stands as an intermediary of fiction and belief. In chapter three, the focus on extra-fictional authority is maintained, but discussed through a return to the question of reading. Through a twofold attention to Toni Morrison – an appraisal of the critical trends that have formed in response to her extra-fictional presence and of her post-millennial fiction – this final chapter attends to the effects of novels (and novelists) that foreground their anticipation of being read and argues that Morrison's authorial accessibility has created a passive enchantment on her critic-readers. Now, with the notion of discerning readers of fictionality in mind, we can take up the question of mystery in the fiction of Ali Smith.

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1.

‘Seeing and seeing again’: from suspicion to enchantment in Ali Smith

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perhaps it is just that George has spent proper time looking at this one painting and that every single experience of looking at something would be this good if she devoted time to everything she looked at<sup>1</sup>

-- Ali Smith, *How to be both*

Perhaps it is just that I have spent proper time reading the following passage from *How to be both* that makes it seem so apposite for a thesis about fiction and enchantment. Or perhaps the novel’s inclusion of reflections like this one above suggests that we ought to be reading the text – our painting – with a similar closeness, in order to see where this close attention might take us. The implications of reading closely, perhaps reading too closely, will be the focus of this chapter. The passage in question features George, a young teenage girl whose mother has recently passed away. George is in-session with her school’s counsellor (Mrs Rock), when Mrs Rock ‘unexpectedly’ breaks away from the counsellor-script in order to share something with George:

The word mystery originally meant a closing, of the mouth or the eyes. It meant an agreement or an understanding that something would not be disclosed.

A closing. Not be disclosed. [...]

The mysterious nature of some things was accepted then, much more taken for granted, Mrs Rock said. But now we live in a time and in a culture when mystery tends to mean something more answerable, it means a crime novel, a thriller, a drama on TV, usually one where we’ll probably find out – and where the whole point of reading it or watching it will be that we *will* find out – what happened. And if we don’t, we feel cheated.

Right then the bell went and Mrs Rock stopped talking. She’d gone bright red up under her hair and round her ears. She stopped talking as if someone had unplugged her. She closed her notebook and it was as if she’d closed her face too. (HB, 72)

This passage speaks of a culture of demystification, locating the problem in the ‘answerability’ of popular narratives. Mystery, it says, has fallen victim to forces of secularisation and no longer pertains to unknowability, the understanding that something would not be revealed. Instead, it has become its own genre – Mystery with a capital M – in

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<sup>1</sup> Ali Smith, *How to be both* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014), p. 156. Subsequent references to HB.

which we expect that ‘we *will* find out’. Mystery deals in foreseen conclusions whereas small m mystery (mystery proper) deals in incompleteness and undisclosed knowledge. This small m mystery, as Mrs Rock knows, is allied with the ancient Greek for ‘secret’, both coming from a root word (μύειν) meaning ‘to close the lips or eyes’ and a ‘secret revealed by God’ which thus suggests a sacred knowledge gleaned only by a chosen few.<sup>2</sup>

This diegetic focus on concealment and disclosure speaks to a fundamental principle in secular theories of interpretation, where interpretation is understood as a process that undoes the concealed, deep-laid or latent forces of textuality in order to cause those meanings to surface and come into legibility. But this passage does not advocate for such a process; Mrs Rock, by way of etymology, is telling George not to go after answers and to instead accept the existence of uncertainty in her life. The tension between these two types of mystery chimes with a recently reprised tension in theories of reading – Paul Ricoeur’s work on the twofold motivation that animates interpretation. The endeavour to interpret, Ricoeur argues, pivots between the experience of dissimulation and revelation in written texts, and pivots also between responding with either a ‘willingness to suspect’ or a ‘willingness to listen’.<sup>3</sup>

The therapeutic setting of the above scene from *How to be both* brings the crossover of these two approaches to the fore: Mrs Rock is paid to listen in a mode that is free from bias and expectation, but she is also paid to listen to the meanings that lie latent in George’s words. The novel, then, displays different modes of attention. It is split into two parts, one which follows the life of George navigating her life after her mother’s sudden death, and one which follows the otherworldly presence of the fifteenth century painter Francesco del Cossa, whose spirit has been conjured into the twenty-first century and in some sense attached to George.<sup>4</sup> Francesco – the painter of a fresco that George’s mother had loved and taken George, her brother and herself to see in person – connects George with the memory of her mother, but also tells the story of their own life as a painter.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> ‘mystery, n.1.’ *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/124644>> [accessed 25 May 2015]. In *Capital*, Marx speaks of how until the large-scale industry of the eighteenth century which ‘tore aside the veil that concealed men from their own social process of production’, the trades were called ‘mysteries (*mystères*), into whose secrets none but those initiated by their profession and their practical experience could penetrate.’ Marx, *Capital*, p. 616.

<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur, pp. 26–7.

<sup>4</sup> The historical del Cossa was Francesco rather than Francescho. The significance of Smith’s addition of the ‘h’ will be discussed in this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> We will also discuss how Francescho’s name containing the word ‘fresco’ partakes in the novel’s lexical play, and attend to the fact that George’s mother’s obsession with the painting directly mirrors Smith’s account of seeing the fresco and writing *How to be both*. I am using they/their pronouns for Francescho because Smith has rewritten the historically male del Cossa as a woman who binds her chest in order to live and be granted work as a painter.

section that you read first, however, varies from book to book; Smith has had half printed with George's narrative first, and the other with Francescho's narrative first.<sup>6</sup> There is a formalisation of the contingency of reading, then: readers are made to pay different types of attention. In Francescho's section, they recall a childhood memory in which they apologised to their mother about the damage done after trying to get her attention: 'you were preoccupied so I threw it to get your attention' (HB, 203). 'Where did you learn that word?' she responds, 'Which word? I said. Preoccupied she said. Attention' (HB, 204). Although these words may not stick out for a reader, Francescho's mother tells us otherwise. She flags them with her own suspicion which marks them out as suspiciously isolated words that might harbour particular significance.

So in addition to telling us about this dual response to mystery, *How to be both* also stages it. Mrs Rock has levelled this etymology at George because George is acting suspiciously. In fact, a series of suspicions structure this scene. George (warning Mrs Rock that she would consider her 'paranoid and hysterical' (HB, 67) after hearing these things) had been telling Mrs Rock of how her mother had believed herself to be under state surveillance as a result of her online political activism, and had been in the process of telling Mrs Rock that there were three reasons for this belief. When she reaches the third, however, she decides not to divulge the information and pretends to Mrs Rock that she had misspoken, that there had in fact been only two reasons. But for the reader, the third reason is presented, perhaps focalised through George, as if stage directions announcing the entrance of a character: '[Enter Lisa Goliard]' (HB, 70). This intertwining of character and textuality is mirrored in the language that marks the sudden end to Mrs Rock's monologue when the bell rings: she 'closed her notebook and it was as if she'd closed her face too'. Not only is there a sudden de-animation which is inflected with the language of mechanisation – it was 'as if someone had unplugged her' – but there is a suggestion that people are like books, or as I will argue, that characters signal their status *as* characters. Open and closed books are central to the discourse of fiction and artifice in *How to be both*.

The significance of George's elision ('[Enter Lisa Goliard]') will be explored at greater length after a discussion of the suspicious and enchanting forces that have structured recent debates about critical reading practices. But before becoming too elusive I will offer some suggestions as to the point of intrigue located in this absence. First, it is worth noting that suspicion and mystery become dialectically entwined here – George's choosing not to speak engenders both mystery and suspicion. Secondly, the obscured

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<sup>6</sup> In my copy, George's narrative comes first. All page references will be to this version.

information (the third piece of evidence) relates to the strange terms of friendship between George's mother and Lisa Goliard (strange because her mother believed Lisa to be an undercover officer, part of the surveillance operation centred on her). Lisa Goliard comes to occupy a position in the novel where literal and figurative representations of attention and artifice converge. Lisa Goliard, we might as well acknowledge now, is an anagram of Ali S – God – Liar.<sup>7</sup> Not only, then, does George perform close attention to the painting in the gallery, but her close attention becomes an incitement for the reader to play close attention.

The title of this chapter ('seeing and seeing again') tells us a bit more about attention. It is excerpted from T. J. Clark's *Sight of Death*, a work of criticism that is comprised of diary entries that Clark produced over the course of three months in the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, where he went almost every day to spend time looking at two paintings by Poussin. In one entry, he begins to realise the implications of this close-looking on his critical practice as an art critic, but also notices that his point of interest is mutable, changing every day: 'astonishing things happen if one gives oneself over to the process of seeing and seeing again: aspect after aspect of the picture seems to surface, what is salient and what incidental alter bewilderingly from day to day' resulting in the slow surfacing of the question '[w]hat is it, fundamentally, I am returning to in this particular case?'<sup>8</sup> Smith has cited the influence of this book on her work, and *How to be both* – a book about a painter and looking at paintings – particularly shows that influence. This chapter will not delineate Clark's influence, or give much focus to the interrelation of the visual and the literal in *How to be both*; instead, it is Smith's response to close attention, its changeability, and its relationship to enchantment or aesthetic attachment that takes our focus here.<sup>9</sup> In what follows, the visual is theorised in as much as I presume that Smith's notion of artifice (in *How to be both*) begins with the visual and the notion of rendering visibility in writing.

Lisa's signalling of an authorial presence, then, is part of a broader investigation in Smith's work of how secrets and disclosures operate in fiction. Readers of Smith are variously witness to story world suspicion, come across encoded textual connections which elicit suspicion but are not hidden, and find that these suspicions lead back to scenes and

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<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to another reader of Smith, Mark Currie, for this insight which inspired some of the deciphering and theories of deciphering which follow.

<sup>8</sup> T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (London: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 5

<sup>9</sup> These connections, between the visual and the literal, or image and word, are indeed worth making and I have written about this in a chapter for *The Edinburgh Companion to Literature and Art History*, forthcoming in 2019.

experiences of remystification or enchantment. As Jonathan Lamb has said of Laurence Sterne's fiction, literary puns are not a puzzle that, when solved, reveals an overarching meaning. Rather, these puns represent a 'double principle' which reminds that the work of interpretation is an open-ended work.<sup>10</sup> What I am arguing is that artifice is not an end-point in Smith's writing, but a starting point; noticing Smith's artifice, as a reader, is not the result of a hard-fought critical interpretation but the sign of a basic level of critical attention. In figures like Lisa Goliard, and in her ficto-critical works (what we will discuss as her creative criticism), artifice is posited as a primary point of interest for Smith as an author. Smith's utilisation and enchantment of artifice, as we will see, shares in studies of the Secret of literature, but it uses the secret against itself. In these fictions, the secret of literature becomes a gimmick of the secret, or a secret that is the open secret of fictionality.

### Enchantment without illusion

*How to be both* is not the first of Smith's works to be positioned at the crossover of word and image. In a piece of writing entitled 'Green' from 2014, and that was collected in Stephen Benson and Clare Connors's *Creative Criticism* anthology, a person (I) is with a friend (you) in a gallery, looking at Cézanne's 'L'Etang des Soeurs, Osny':

I say something about the light and dark, point out stripes and diagonals. You point to the centre of the picture, how there's a space held in what looks like the opposite of space, in the fullness and movement of the leaves and the wind, there, look. I say ponderously how lacking in ponderousness it is. You nod. Then you say this:

Look at the way the artifice is the thing that makes it alive. Look at the way it's made out of the flatness of its own surface so we'll know we're not being deceived, so you'll know that it's just a painting. It takes away illusion. It makes it about what's possible.

No illusion. That's it. The surface opens itself. What I'm looking at ups and arrows right through me like someone just shot me with colour, with the truth about green.<sup>11</sup>

Through the insight of their friend, the protagonist of this story is emboldened to articulate the painting's revelatory knowledge which also has revelatory effects. The painting bears no pretences, it is not trying to be *about* anything but rather, in the friend's reading, is all surface – it intends only to be a painting and to show the fact of that paintedness. That the

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Lamb, *Sterne's Fiction and the Double Principle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Ali Smith, 'Green', in *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide*, ed. by Stephen Benson and Clare Connors (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 249–56 (p. 251).

painting bears no pretence, that it is about green, mirrors the effect felt by the 'T': they are shot through with the truth about green.

A similar reflection appears the following year in *Artful* when its bereaved protagonist remembers their partner 'pointing out' to them at an exhibition

how Cézanne had wanted people who saw it to see how it was formed out of paint, made of colour, made of surface, before they even thought about trees or a lake. That way, you said, the artifice was what made the place in the picture – as well the picture – truly alive. That way, we knew that it was telling us no lies, it was not deluding us, it was real. (A, 88)<sup>12</sup>

The value of artifice here is how it shows itself as a representation of reality in a way that stops it from being merely a representation. It is an artwork too, and as such, has to show itself to be an artwork. It is also worth pointing out that this partner had been a university lecturer. The book (which was given *as* a series of lectures at Oxford by Smith) weaves in and out of unfinished drafts of the partner's lectures ('on time'; 'on form'; 'on edge'; 'on offer and on reflection') and the narrator's responses to it, and their experience of grief, in the form of fiction. *Artful* was written to be spoken and for reception by an academic audience, and engenders a reflexive use of the lecture form for the purposes of interpretation. We start with a set of propositions about artifice, then. The aesthetic artifice that Smith renders is akin to Ngai's gimmick which is 'both a wonder *and* a trick. It is a form we marvel at and distrust, admire and disdain, whose affective intensity for us increases precisely because of this ambivalence.'<sup>13</sup> In the first place, the gimmick inspires an 'initial euphoria in the image of something promising to lessen human toil', but this euphoria soon turns to 'suspicion, closely followed by contempt [...]. A device cannot be a gimmick – it would just neutrally be a device – without this moment of distrust and aversion'.<sup>14</sup> Like the gimmick, Smith's artifice is often in the guise of a narrative trick or device – that is, her characters are often devices and their thoughts or actions are sometimes devices too. By tracing rather than eliding or explaining away the writtenness of fiction, I argue that Smith enacts an enchantment of artifice. It is an intimation made throughout Smith's work that fiction is a type of magic – that fiction can synthesise disparate temporalities, texts, artworks and ideas and yet maintain its own artifice is partly the root of that magic. But what does this effusive support of artifice do to the status of

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<sup>12</sup> The protagonist and their partner are not gendered in *Artful*, hence 'their'.

<sup>13</sup> Ngai, 'Gimmick', p. 469.

<sup>14</sup> Ngai, 'Gimmick', p. 472.



the fiction, and what does the appeal to a theory of art-as-surface or art-as-artifice tell us about Smith as a writer, and the era of fiction in which she writes?

If the gimmick's reception traces a movement from euphoria to suspicion to contempt and stays there, then Smith's use of artifice does something different. Readers of Ali Smith will be familiar with the effusive tone of the above passages, and Smith's tendency to wax enchanted by artworks, bringing descriptions and reflections on paintings, films, novels, poems and short stories alike. There is something wilfully disarming in the voice that Smith adopts, particularly in her unrelenting attention to the composition of words and the punning this yields. Moreover, that the above passages come from texts which are neither strictly fiction nor criticism, and which evince a tone that is locatable anywhere throughout Smith's oeuvre, is significant for understanding the function of accessible artifice. Let's take the following example from *How to be both*. In Francescho's section, we see numerous, intimate appeals to the effects and affective value of art:

in the making of pictures and love – both – time itself changes its shape : the hours pass without being hours, they become something else, they become their own opposite, they become timelessness, they become *no time at all*. (HB, 273–4)

There is a lyric effect that inheres in the building of clauses which both suggests and performs an experience of enchantment, and might also incite enchantment in its reader. Francescho's emphasis on the processual – becoming rather than being – links the artist's enchanted experience of creation to the audience's enchantment that, according to Gell, is rooted in the audience's ability to discern the technical skill that has gone into the work's creation but their inability to understand the process beyond its production by 'magical means': a 'display of artistry [is] explicable only in magical terms' and this is how they come to wield power, as we see them in terms of 'becoming rather than their being'.<sup>15</sup> By attributing this 'becoming' to the artist rather than the audience, Smith inscribes a fascination into the artist-artwork relationship that mirrors the audience's enchantment in the face of not knowing. This is an ebullience that belongs to Smith across genres; the characters and narrators of Smith's written work are always distinctively at the whim of an enchantment with art, an animation of whatever passion takes the speaking subject's interest. There is never a Smithian protagonist – even if fatigued, depressed, grieving – who does not possess or undergo a connection to the world around them via an active attachment to nature or culture; there is always a thread being pulled, a lesson being

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<sup>15</sup> Gell, 'Enchantment', p. 46.

unravelling. The performance of aesthetic enchantment in Smith is deeply animated and deeply critical.

Enchantment is stopped from being *merely* enchantment (that is, an uncritical enchantment) through the passionate potential of the objects to which they affix. In 'Green', *Artful* and *How to be both*, and indeed throughout Smith's work, these enchanted passions represent critical interests in the temporality of reading and writing, overlooked figures from art and literary history. Smith is also involved in dismantling or creating the conditions for examining artifice because she is in some sense dissolving the boundaries between the object of representation and the initial represented object, or, the fictional world and the world that the fiction represents. Of the texts we have just looked at, and a few others: 'Green' theorises the immanence of the aesthetic surface; *Artful* offers a series of interpretations on written and visual artworks both in the lectures that the dead partner has left behind and in the bereaved partner's reading of *Oliver Twist* and, at its end, dovetails with a discovery of the Greek actress Alikì Vougiouklaki; *How to be both* is in many ways a lesson in fifteenth century art history and offers another woman in cultural history, this time the Bulgarian-French singer and actress Sylvie Vartan; *Autumn*, the first in a quartet of what has been dubbed Smith's Brexit novels, educates its readers in the little-known woman of British Pop Art, Pauline Boty. The list goes on. And in addition to the fact that Smith's work is replete with cultural, literary and visual histories, the aforementioned attention to literality espoused in puns and etymologies is part of the creation of this overwhelmingly indexed writing. In short: Smith's fiction and ficto-criticisms contain too much research, and too many passionate or researcher characters to be considered critically naïve, even as the presentation of that research might sometimes have the appearance of naivety or simplicity.

This becomes more complex when we consider Smith as an author figure who does not just write but who also speaks at literary festivals, judges prizes, writes as a commentator in ostensibly left-wing publications and curates anthologies.<sup>16</sup> This has been compounded in two of her recent works: her aforementioned quartet concerned with representing the societal segregations that laid the foundations for the UK's vote to leave the EU in June 2016, as well as a collection of non-fiction statements by public intellectuals and short fictions by Smith in defence of the public library. That the style of Smith's voice remains consistent across these genres and paratexts is significant. Both political and bound in the mystifying logic of the marketplace, Smith's writing offers a privileged platform from

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<sup>16</sup> She has, for example, published in *The Guardian* the *New Statesman*.

which to investigate the role of enchantment in defining the novel's relationship to, and use of, fiction in the contemporary moment.

What I have been discussing under the rubric of enchantment and artifice has been theorised by Rebecca Pohl as enthusiasm. Through Sianne Ngai's theory of tone and Sara Ahmed's theory of citation, Pohl argues that enthusiasm is 'central to the way Smith has been received' in the literary press 'but it is also a signature characteristic of her own writing.'<sup>17</sup> Similar to definitions of enchantment, Pohl defines enthusiasm as a phenomenon of affect whereby the parts that produce it cannot account for its overall effect because 'tone, crucially, describes a totality' that 'remains incommensurate with the particulars that produce it'.<sup>18</sup> But as a marker and producer of literary value it is also 'a double-edged sword: what can seem generous and enabling can also seem uncritical and proselytizing.'<sup>19</sup> Enthusiasm is the right word for Pohl because of the potentially more superficial critical investments that literary institutions represent (they are reviews rather than analyses), but enchantment encompasses the affect of enthusiasm alongside the expressions of magic, mystery and love that are the concerns of the fictions read in this chapter.

The assimilation of loving and watching (and often *reading*) is a recurrent theme in Smith's work. When Anna of *There but for the* notes a number of CCTV cameras 'without even trying' and waves at one she reflects that '[t]o be noticed is to be loved. Who was it who'd said that, again? A novelist from the last century.'<sup>20</sup> But watching and reading can also become suspicious. In *How to be both*, George begins spying on Lisa Goliard, taking pictures of her home and painting eyes on the wall opposite her home. Francescho defaces their own painting, protesting against not being paid enough because of the revealed secret of 'her' true gender, whiting out the black letters of JUSTICE 'till all you could read was ICE', or, eyes (HB, 322). Words can also enact a punishing attention.

But Pohl's attention to the interaction of fiction and marketplace, and the role of enthusiasm in mediating that interaction, remains useful. What is crucial for Pohl is that enthusiasm ascribes and produces value: Smith is more successful in the literary marketplace because of her enthusiasm, and her enthusiasm ascribes value to a particular way of engaging in culture. Reviewers of Smith that emphasise their own enthusiastic reception of Smith are a part of 'the institutions and discourses that produce literary value. This value is partially produced through the affect at play' but value is also produced

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<sup>17</sup> Rebecca Pohl, 'Ali Smith, Enthusiasm, and the Literary Market', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 63 (2017), 694–713 (p. 695).

<sup>18</sup> Pohl, p. 703.

<sup>19</sup> Pohl, p. 710.

<sup>20</sup> Ali Smith, *There but for the* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 62. Subsequent references to T.

through the intimacy that Smith's enthusiasm forges and the sense that it is passing on the enthusiasm through citation: to say that enthusiasm is 'a form of citation' is, Pohl argues, not only to say that 'citations can be enthusiastic in tone, but also that certain kinds of enthusiasm are produced by citation.'<sup>21</sup> Such citations occur not just in the often full pages of epigraphs that begin Smith's books, but also in the characters and story worlds within that look at paintings, read books, and explore cultural histories through artworks and notable or lesser known figures. The logic of this two-directional enthusiasm through citation, Pohl says, is borne in the implication that 'this is close to my heart, so I am close to it; I value this, which gives it value, which in turn validates my judgement.'<sup>22</sup> To Pohl's reading, I would add that Smith's use of citation also reflects on reading's relationship with the unexpected: not only can there be twists in the plot but twists at the level of the word, metaphor and symbol too. We will explore this in the reading of Lisa Goliard.

Smith's enthused citation of writing and figures from the literary, cultural and visual arts then, is not merely a display but also an incitement of enthusiasm from its readers – share in my aesthetic interests and values, says Smith. Seen in this way, Smith's citation is another mode of artifice, another collapse of the distinction between and therefore link between the worlds she writes and the world from which she writes. We can see an example of this in an interview that Smith gave for *The Paris Review*:

I was coming up to fifty years old when an Oxford college wrote to me and asked, Do you want to do this series of lectures, the Weidenfeld Lectures? And I was like, Oxford! Lectures! Well, will I? Since I'm nearly fifty, and surely by now I can own whatever authority I'm supposed to have, surely I know something useful by now, surely I can move into my more mature self, have some wisdom by virtue of experience, et cetera. So I said yes. But the dates for delivering these lectures got nearer and nearer, and I put it off and put it off and put it off, and then the first deadline was looming, really looming, the first one was about a fortnight away and I hadn't written any of them. What I had been doing instead, because I'd become interested in the word *artful*, was reading Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, a book which gave copiously as I was working on *Artful*.<sup>23</sup>

Again, the enthusiastic, exclamatory and conversational voice is present ('I was like, Oxford! Lectures!', 'et cetera', 'looming, really looming'). But in addition to this, Smith tells her interviewer that she had been reading *Oliver Twist* at the time of writing *Artful*. Like its author, then, the protagonist of *Artful* picks up Dickens's novel in the first few scenes of the book. By showing the workings of the fiction – the artworks that inspired and

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<sup>21</sup> Pohl, p. 696.

<sup>22</sup> Pohl, p. 709.

<sup>23</sup> Adam Begley, 'Ali Smith, The Art of Fiction No. 236', *The Paris Review*, Summer 2017, pp. 175–203 (p. 185).

produced them – and conflating the experience of the author with the plot that the character undergoes, Smith upholds a mode of fiction that revels in artifice.

While this ebullience, and what we might now also think of as a type of relatability, has indeed seen her taken into the fold of bourgeois literary institutions and become a co-producer of cultural value that they ascribe, Smith's concept of enchantment is not only starry-eyed.<sup>24</sup> She is, in my reading, also interested in the suspicious impulses that attend enchantment, that is to say, her attention to this enchantment, or remystification, does not elide the paranoid desire to enact surveillance, to uncover, reveal and expose. Yet often the pleasure of interpretation is synonymous with the pleasure of reading that which is visible and which tells of the made-ness of the object. As such, Smith's fictions enact the dialectic of enchantment that critical narratives often stall in the face of, or conclude with. (Indeed, as will become increasingly evident in this chapter, critical accounts of literary interpretation frequently acknowledge that suspicion and enchantment are not opposites but fail to move past this observation.) Focusing on Smith's novels, particularly *How to be both* (2014), but also *There but for the* (2012) and on the 2012 lecture series that were published as *Artful* in that same year, this chapter will consider their common concern with the mystifying and demystifying forces engendered in looking and reading.

The culture that Mrs Rock diagnosed, of capital-M Mystery and calculable expectations, will inform this chapter as it traces the valences of enchantment and disenchantment in literary theory and contemporary debates about literary interpretation. Bearing this scene in mind, I will now turn to reflect on the recent resurgence of interest in the critical histories of mystification and demystification, critique and postcritique, and the many binaries that have been proposed in the last two decades. These terms have all been held to scrutiny and come to feature prominently in debates about reading and interpretation, particularly in debates which disavow the value of critique in contemporary literary studies. Critique – understood as a form of interpretation in which one reads for hidden meanings, tracing those meanings back to all-determining forces – has become metonymic of a professed exhaustion within literary studies; it is argued that critique is the interpretive tool of so-called High Theory and Strong Theory and that we should now utilise other types of reading. Alternative methods include, but are not limited to, Surface Reading, Postcritical Reading, Distant Reading, reading 'with the grain', and Reparative

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<sup>24</sup> Relatable because in this citational practice, Smith is a writer who reads the things we read, or presents us with a reading of things we know that we probably should have read.

Reading.<sup>25</sup> This renewed (albeit polemic) attention to reading is, in many cases, a re-enchantment of criticism because of a common claim to recast and reframe the value of art to lived experience through a criticism that attends to positive rather than negative aesthetic attachments.

What, then, is the place of critique in reading contemporary fiction? Is our historical moment one in which a suspicion of composition (the hallmark of critique) continues to yield valuable new insights, or ought we to be, as numerous critics argue, formulating new methods and critical idioms which attend to the sociability of the contemporary novel? Is Smith's levelling of surface and depth, her re-mystification of mystery, a fiction's response to this critical overemphasis on disclosure? With this critical 'mood' in mind, this chapter will first give an account of the various strands which have recently come to constitute a set of reflections about Interpretation, Reading, or How We Read. These debates are, ostensibly, concerned with How We Read and yet have remained virtually silent on the place of suspicion, paranoia, and re-enchantment within the logic of fiction itself. As Currie's work on metafiction elucidates, self-conscious moments in criticism are dialectically entwined with the mode of self-consciousness articulated in fiction. The second intention of this chapter is therefore to begin the discussion about what fictionality, especially the novel's engagement in suspicion and enchantment, might contribute to our understanding of these debates.

### **Dissimulation or revelation: reading in the twenty-first century**

To interpret is to understand a double meaning<sup>26</sup>

-- Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*

We now know that secular interpretation – even in the guise of critique – has not stripped itself of its sacred residues and that reason cannot be purified of all traces of enchantment<sup>27</sup>

-- Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*

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<sup>25</sup> In order of appearance: Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus; Rita Felski; Franco Moretti; Timothy Bewes; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Citations to specific publications will be given as the chapter progresses.

<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 174.

The recent narrative of critical suspicion, as sketched above, begins with Paul Ricoeur.<sup>28</sup> In his 1965 work *Freud and Philosophy* (translated into English in 1970), Ricoeur characterises Freud's critical method as part of a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. Positioning Marx and Nietzsche on this same axis, Ricoeur groups them under their common incitement to 'look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as "false" consciousness.' (FP, 33)<sup>29</sup> That is to say, they propagate a style of critical thought which is predicated on the sense that our critical faculties – as well as the objects we seek to read or critique – have been shaped by forces that we naturalise, and so cannot grasp unless we invoke the aid of their specific interpretive method. A hermeneutics of suspicion, which these three broadly share, aims to reduce the illusion of false consciousness through the disruptive force of disclosure. In doing so (or in aiming to do so), Marx, Nietzsche and Freud 'clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth' (FP, 33). An example of this might run as follows: through the application of an orthodox Marxist critique, we can uncover the structural powers that shaped the writing of a certain novel, be that a specific political economy, a mode of production, or attitudes toward class and wealth distribution. In doing this, we reduce the ideological force of the text and see what really is at work behind the surface of the novel, potentially locating something that the author did not even know they were beholden to.

Ricoeur's classification of Freud is embedded in a wider reflection on the nature of the symbol and symbolic language. For Ricoeur, 'symbol' crystallises the way in which language 'is from the outset and for the most part distorted: it means something other than what it says, it has a double meaning, it is equivocal'.<sup>30</sup> That we can sense a disparity between sign and meaning, Ricoeur argues, puts readers in front of a forked path. The apprehension of double meaning can provoke one of two responses: a hermeneutics of suspicion or a hermeneutics of recollection. A hermeneutics of suspicion responds to this disparity by conceiving of the *duplicity* of language and therefore sees double meaning as *dissimulation*. But the propensity of language for double meaning, Ricoeur finds, constitutes an additional hermeneutic mode, a 'recollective' hermeneutic where double meaning is apprehended as *revelation*. This hermeneutics of recollection (variously referred to as 'postcritical faith', a 'second naïveté' and a 'hermeneutics of trust') is interested not in

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<sup>28</sup> The terms of the debate into which Ricoeur enters and which *Freud and Philosophy* in part revived is of course to be understood as a longer history of literary interpretation and exegesis. It is specifically the notion of 'suspicion' that critics most frequently attribute to Ricoeur.

<sup>29</sup> The nod to 'false consciousness' highlights the historical context of Ricoeur's work, his rejoinder to a Marxist cultural criticism where false consciousness denotes the hold of ideology over exploited groups in society.

<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur, p. 7.

demystification (reducing illusion) but in the ‘restoration of meaning’.<sup>31</sup> Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of recollection is marked by what we might now think of as an ethical relationship to the text. He suggests that recollection involves ‘care and concern for the *object*’ and arises through opting to ‘describe rather than reduce’ (that is, describe rather than explain away through cause, origin or function).<sup>32</sup> While the remit of ‘description’ is not quite spelled out by Ricoeur here, we can glean something of the experience of this postcritical faith: ‘In my own research’, Ricoeur writes, ‘concern for the object consisted in surrender to the movement of meaning which, starting from the literal sense – the spot or contamination – points to something grasped in the region of the sacred’.<sup>33</sup> Instead, then, of a suspicious reading which looks to configure a ‘spot or contamination’ as a symptom of a text’s governance, a recollective reading is construed by Ricoeur as a type of faith that has undergone a secular criticism but looks to interpretation for the purpose of achieving a second naiveté. That this is at all framed as naivety or faith puts it in proximity to the illusions without owners that Pfaller discusses, critics are aware of the option to read the symbol as dissimulation and may have done so in the past, but have now chosen to see the symbol as revelation.

Ricoeur’s account does not ascribe value to these alternative hermeneutics but frames them as two ways in which readers respond to the symbolic character of language. As suggested by the epigraph, the act of interpretation is an act that is catalysed by the apprehension of a double meaning; the subsequent enactment of that interpretation either responds, in Ricoeur’s view, to the double meaning as a sign of something hidden or something revealed. This inability to acquiesce one to the other leads Ricoeur to an overarching interpretation of interpretation:

Thus we return to our notion of symbol as double meaning, with the question still undecided whether double meaning is dissimulation or revelation, necessary lying or access to the sacred. [...] The difficulty – it initiated my research in the first place as such – is this: there is no general hermeneutics, no universal canon for exegesis, but only disparate and opposed theories concerning the rules of interpretation. The hermeneutic field, whose outer contours we have traced, is internally at variance with itself.<sup>34</sup>

That the apprehension of duplicity may result in a response that the text is engaging in ‘necessary lying’ or that it demonstrates its ‘access to the sacred’ is, moreover, an unwitting

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<sup>31</sup> Ricoeur, p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> Ricoeur, p. 26.

<sup>33</sup> Ricoeur, p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> Ricoeur, pp. 26–7



formulation of fictionality. We will return to this in chapter two. What is significant for present purposes, however, is that Ricoeur *identifies the tension* before he gives attention to either hermeneutic in its singular instance. ‘Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience.’<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur implies that these hermeneutics are not only ‘internally at variance’ but even dialectical. Here we see the phenomenon that will recur throughout this chapter, the phenomenon that, as was discussed in the introduction, also underwrites enchantment: ostensibly alternative modes of interpretation will emerge from the same place, and as such, theorists have found that they overlap substantially in their method or are even enacted by the same critic. Indeed, what causes one to vouch for dissimulation or revelation? It is to this gap that contemporary theorists of interpretation have spoken, and variously imputed desire, or pathologised the right or wrong motives of other critics.

We will now turn to the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who precisely explores how demystification and re-mystification are intimately connected to one another through the role of expectation and anticipation in critical reading. If Ricoeur’s conception of hermeneutics in *Freud and Philosophy* is considered a key text for contemporary readings of suspicion and postcriticism, the crown is contested only by Sedgwick’s ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading’. In this essay (one that she rewrote a handful of times), Sedgwick employs a psychoanalytic terminology from Melanie Klein; ‘paranoid’ and ‘reparative’ reading practices come to replace what were ‘suspicious’ and ‘recollective’ hermeneutics in Ricoeur’s formulation.<sup>36</sup>

Paranoid reading takes its name from Klein’s ‘paranoid-schizoid’ position, the name given to the stage of mental development where the ego is unintegrated and fundamentally anxious, taking flight when faced with external objects that inspire conflicting feelings of anger or love. Associated with negative affect, the paranoid position marks a retreat into an unflinchingly homogenous view of the world; good and bad, self and object are seen not in confluence but project and introject in a series of fantastical relationships. Comparing this to suspicious reading, Sedgwick contends that paranoid reading is the work of an anxious ego that wishes to propagate readings and theories which simultaneously confirm the

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<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur, p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> A ‘paranoid’ practice brings to mind Salvador Dali’s ‘Paranoid-Critical Method’ (PCM) which has curiously not surfaced in any work on suspicious or paranoid reading. Dali’s PCM, developed through a number of conversations with Jacques Lacan, sought to condense multiple, disparate images into one, thereby giving rise to a doubled interpretation (and the conditions for paranoia) for viewers of the image. For an account of how Dali and Lacan altered one another’s notion of paranoia see Hanjo Berressem, ‘Dali and Lacan, Painting the Imaginary Landscapes’, in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Willy Apollon and Richard Feldstein (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 263–96.

existence of, and defend against, knowledge which might topple its rigorously wrought worldview. Furthermore, paranoid reading is, for Sedgwick, the *modus operandi* of Strong Theory: a paranoid reader can never know enough, their theory can never be strong enough and they are perpetually engaged in affixing new knowledge to their pre-existing understandings and interpretive frameworks. Each new addition of knowledge confirms one's original suspicion that '*you can never be paranoid enough*'<sup>37</sup>.

Reparative reading, on the other hand, originates in Klein's notion of the 'depressive' position. This position is perhaps best expressed as an emergence of maturity: it marks the integration of the ego following the acceptance that objects can be the site of conflicting projections – something can be both hated and loved, or can provoke hatred and love. This recognition, which initially manifests in feelings of guilt and sadness, is attended by a reparative impulse, 'with pining for what has been lost or damaged by hate comes an urge to repair. Ego capacities enlarge and the world is more richly and realistically perceived.'<sup>38</sup> To put this back in the domain of hermeneutics, then, we might say that a reparative reading practice is one which can approach the interpretive task without a pre-determined objective (to find how a novel figures in, and confirms, the omnipotent power of x, y or z) and without a self-fulfilling expectation.

Paranoid and reparative interpretive modes, however, are not entirely at odds with one another. Indeed, Sedgwick invests in Kleinian 'positions' because of the fluidity that inheres in the concept; it recognises that people (or in our case readers) are not fixed but can move between paranoid and reparative modes, and furthermore, Sedgwick suggests that they actually necessitate one another in quite profound ways. It is, Sedgwick writes,

not people but mutable positions – or, I would want to say, practices – that can be divided between the paranoid and the reparative; it is sometimes the most paranoid-tending people who are able to, and need to, develop and disseminate the richest reparative practices.<sup>39</sup>

We do not, then, have strictly reparative readers on one hand and strictly paranoid readers on the other. Rather, under Sedgwick and Klein, readers are *mutable* and move between practices; suspicion and negatively-suffused critique can become reparative in intention, as

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<sup>37</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123–51 (p. 127). Sedgwick's essay's insights are partly in response (and in difference) to a Freudian paradigm of paranoia and repressed homosexuality with a complexity that there is not space to attend to here.

<sup>38</sup> 'Depressive Position', in *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, ed. by Elizabeth Bott Spillius, et al (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 84.

<sup>39</sup> Sedgwick, p. 150.

if you have to go that deep into an experience of control to know what it would be to leave it behind. If this is the case, why worry about the distinction at all? Sedgwick's 'sometimes' is an important qualifier here: there is a noted distinction in the extent to which these practices admit the performativity of knowledge. In its iterations of I-knew-that-already, 'it is only paranoid knowledge that has so thorough a practice of disavowing its affective motive and force and masquerading as the very stuff of truth.'<sup>40</sup> Reading, and particularly interpretation, Sedgwick tells us, is shot through with feeling.

The vocabulary that Sedgwick lends to the project of tracing enchantment in theories of reading hinges on paranoia's 'disavowal' of the unknown. Sedgwick outlines the differing temporal models of paranoia and reparation and their relationship with the unexpected:

To recognize in paranoia a distinctively rigid relation to temporality, at once anticipatory and retroactive, averse above all to surprise, is also to glimpse the lineaments of other possibilities. [...] [T]o read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise.<sup>41</sup>

Paranoia and suspicion are modes of critical thinking and interpretation, then, which aim to anticipate and therefore foreclose any unforeseeable event or interjection, paranoid readers are interested in filtering pre-meditated futures into their theories. Crucially, it is not just a relationship to the *future* which distinguishes paranoia and reparation but a relationship to *surprise* and the *unexpected*. Although Sedgwick does not state it in this essay, surprise is notably the only predominantly neutral affect in Silvan Tomkins's affect theory. He conceives of surprise as 'a general interrupter to ongoing activity.'<sup>42</sup> This neutrality is perhaps the appeal of surprise for Sedgwick and the key for its transformative power: it is precisely the avenue through which one can tip from paranoid to reparative interpretation. This event of surprise, moreover, seems to share in the 'surrender' that Ricoeur enacts in response to the 'spot or contamination'; these articulations from Ricoeur and Sedgwick, indeed, exemplify one of the ways in which theories of reading have explored what happens in those moments when our readings yield something we were not expecting, when we are faced with the choice of naming textuality as dissimulation or revelation.

While both paranoid and reparative modes of reading could be said to entail enchantment – they both involve a degree of obsession or rapture – the primacy of

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<sup>40</sup> Sedgwick, p. 138.

<sup>41</sup> Sedgwick, p. 146.

<sup>42</sup> Silvan Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness: Volume I: The Positive Affects*, 2 vols. (New York: Springer, 1962), I, p. 498.

surprise in reparative practices puts it in line with accounts of the phenomenology of enchantment. Bennett, as we recall from the thesis introduction, conceives of enchantment as ‘a surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage.’<sup>43</sup> If suspicion (or paranoia) as an interpretive mode revolves around the tautology of expecting to find out something that you already knew or suspected, then enchantment seems to align with reparation, but *is not reducible to this side of the opposition alone*. Enchantment is not simply the open to the future mode of reparation, nor suspiciously guarded against it. It involves both the accumulation of suspicious clue-following as well as the conclusion-deferral of reparation.

It is worth holding onto Sedgwick’s notion of the mutability of readers, that ‘it is sometimes the most paranoid-tending people who are able to, and need to, develop and disseminate the richest reparative practices’ as an anchor. Following from Ricoeur, Sedgwick’s essay not only affirms the tensions between these oppositions – naivety and knowingness, suspicion and recollection, paranoia and reparation – but also affirms that they should not be unravelled from one another. It seems that this psychoanalytic framing of readers as mutable is as close to a resolution as we can get; the binary can never remain separate.<sup>44</sup> Ricoeur and Sedgwick’s inconclusive positions echo the earlier aphorisms of Theodor Adorno in *Minima Moralia*. Like the double motivation of Ricoeur’s interpretation, Adorno states that it is ‘pointless’ to play concepts of critical naivety and sophistication (where sophistication aligns with the knowingness of suspicion and paranoia) off one another because good faith critical thought ‘lies in a procedure that is neither entrenched nor detached, neither blind nor empty, neither atomistic nor consequential.’<sup>45</sup> Although Adorno speaks of critical thought which is not rooted in textual interpretation, the same problem rears its head. Sophistication, he suggests, is nothing more than a critical affectation which truncates thought and forestalls it in immaterial terms: sophisticated thought ‘comes all too quickly to terms with suffering and death for the sake of a reconciliation occurring merely in reflection’.<sup>46</sup> Thought that is concerned with ‘knowing’, then, like the ‘will find out’ of Mystery, claims resolution in bad faith.

Rita Felski has been Ricoeur’s most prolific interlocutor, and the most prolific commentator on the alleged exhaustion of critical suspicion in contemporary literary

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<sup>43</sup> Bennett, *Enchantment*, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> The irony of this is not lost on me: Sedgwick returns the dialectic to a psychoanalytic domain which, in Ricoeur, is precisely what sparked the naming of suspicious reading in the first place (although Sedgwick is emphatically *not* Freudian).

<sup>45</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), p. 74.

<sup>46</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 74.

theory.<sup>47</sup> Felski's argument can be summarised into the following three points. In the first place, Felski undermines suspicion's status as a dominant critical mode that is singularly capable of synthesising radical interpretation, and therefore perceived as singularly capable of revealing the fallibility, or defiance, of texts to their social conditions. Felski's *The Limits of Critique* operates with the assertion that Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion and critique are, in fact, synonymous. The problem of suspicion and critique is not in the act itself but in the scale of the practice and its subsequent inability to respond genuinely to the unexpected. We have obscured, Felski suggests, our understanding of how enchantment operates in criticism.

Second, Felski argues for a recontextualisation of suspicion and critique as a particular type of affective work which should be understood as offering distinct pleasures. To read suspiciously is akin to being a detective or magician; it offers the pleasure of being in the position of *one who knows*. In fact, Felski precisely makes the case that enchantment can be discerned in the affect of critique: 'critical thinking' she argues, 'conjugates up its own enchantment; the faith in critique is no different, in certain respects, from other forms of faith.'<sup>48</sup> Felski retains Ricoeur's sense of interpretation's dealing in the sacred and appropriates Ricoeur's term 'postcritical'. Postcritical reading, or postcriticism, becomes the name for Felski's ideal interpretation which is attentive to parameters of feeling in criticism. It is, in her reckoning, a gesture to a new type of criticism rather than a ready-made model which has a narrative which can be recounted, but with recourse to Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory, post-historicist criticism and affective hermeneutics Felski marks out postcritical reading as an effort to undo the binaries that she finds throughout literary studies (alterity-sociability, singularity-historicity, and so on). What Felski's framing of critique and critical practice also tells us, in its proximity to the illusionism of a magician, is that critics may feel the task of responding to other critics' illusions strongly. Pfaffner's concept of 'illusions without owners' is at one point exemplified in Freud's case study of 'The Rat Man' that is reminiscent of recent writing on critique. What Freud notes about this patient is how 'he was at once superstitious and not superstitious and there was a clear distinction between his attitude and the superstition of uneducated people who feel

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<sup>47</sup> It should be noted that Felski, in her articles and subsequent book on suspicion (framing 2011-2015), is particularly focused on the development of literary studies in a *US context*. While she does indeed cite UK-based academics who have written about contemporary literary studies, such as Derek Attridge and Helen Small, Felski's characterisations of critique are largely in response to so-called High Theory in the last four decades of the US university. Felski's is a study of the effects of a transatlantic high theory on the last half century of US-centric literary studies in the literary institution today.

<sup>48</sup> Felski, *Limits*, p. 134.

themselves at one with their belief.”<sup>49</sup> I suggest that the task of interpretation often asks critics to make a similar distinction. In this case, critique is someone else’s illusion which critics like Felski maintain by pointing out the contradictions of critique as a critical practice.

Third (and this is intended to be the most salient proposition), Felski is interested in propagating a ‘wider range of affective styles and modes of argument’ than the dominance of critique within literary studies has thus far allowed.<sup>50</sup> In doing this, Felski believes we can develop critical accounts not only of our relationship with texts (for example, the experience of reading), but also of our understanding of how the popularity of certain texts is dependent on an intricate (and messy) web of social factors: how, asks Felski, ‘can we do justice to both their singularity and their sociability, their distinctiveness and their worldliness?’<sup>51</sup> It is the falsity of the binary (between aesthetic autonomy and sociability) which seems to most frustrate Felski.

Although it does not figure so centrally in *The Limits of Critique*, Felski’s 2010 book *Uses of Literature* dedicates a chapter to the consideration of enchantment as a valuable critical approach. Gesturing to mainstream literary theory’s neglect of a phenomenology of enchantment, its ongoing struggle with ‘literature’s awkward proximity to imagination, emotion, and other soft, fuzzy ideas’ Felski considers the nascent avenues of theory’s engagement with enchantment with recourse to queer studies, new historicism and affect theory.<sup>52</sup> What is particularly noticeable are the oblique references to fiction, belief and illusion. Felski argues that the novel is the ‘most frequently accused of casting a spell on its readers’, that modern enchantment arises out of a propensity for ‘double consciousness’ and that modern enchantments are those which retain criticality; as cited in introduction of this thesis, Felski’s critical enchantments are ‘those in which we are immersed but not submerged, bewitched but not beguiled, suspensions of disbelief that do not lose sight of the fictiveness of those fictions that enthrall us.’<sup>53</sup> Again, it is the fact of a reader’s contingent experience of (and capacity for) *fictionality*, a blend of knowing and disbelief, that forms the conditions for the experience of enchantment. If our interaction with fiction already enacts critical enchantment, then turning to theories of fictionality and to fictions

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<sup>49</sup> Pfaller, p. 37.

<sup>50</sup> Felski, *Limits*, p. 3. An aside worth making is that the exhaustion of critique which Felski diagnoses frames the deployment of critique by scholars and students in everyday critical reading practices. In other words it is an institutional exhaustion posed as the mood of a critical era, and its theorisation overlooks questions of generational influence (the fact that theorists are also teachers, or that certain narratives should be taught as rote).

<sup>51</sup> Felski, *Limits*, p. 153.

<sup>52</sup> Felski, *Uses*, p. 59.

<sup>53</sup> Felski, *Uses*, p. 52, 74, 75.

which examine those conditions of reading is crucial for testing these recent readings of critical practice.

### **Reading as decoding in *There but for the***

In Smith's *There but for the* we encounter an instance of interpreting that is explicitly an act of decoding, and an act that can be suffused with negative and positive affect. Set in Greenwich, London, the novel revolves around another enquiry into mystery versus Mystery: a man named Miles Garth locks himself in the spare room of a house in which he was attending a dinner party. After weeks have passed, and media attention has begun to build, a small gathering congregates outside the home, and after a few months, Miles's retreat has turned into something of a media event. An entire ecosystem springs up, including a St John's Ambulance tent, merchandise, a psychic and a treasurer to collect funds from his supporters and followers to keep Miles supplied with provisions. There is both a satire of celebrity and postsecular belief at work, and a fixation upon the importance of seeing Miles's body as evidence of his real-ness. The novel, in four chapters ('there', 'but', 'for' and 'the') is focalised through four characters who have relationships, of varying slightness, with Miles. The instance of decoding comes in the chapter focalised through a nine year-old girl, Brooke. In this chapter, Brooke becomes obsessed with Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, a novel in which Adolf Verloc forges a 'secret' plot for his brother-in-law to carry and detonate a bomb at the Greenwich Observatory.

An aspiring historian, Brooke assiduously sifts the factual and real from the made-up and lies. She keeps a notebook titled 'The fact is', full of 'facts' which litter her narrative. But in the pages that lead up to her plucking Conrad's novel from her parents' bookshelf, Brooke ponders that the internet's unreliability as a source means that 'the phrase should be, not the fact is, but the fact seems to be.' (T, 289) The next fact is about the historical event that lies behind the plot of *The Secret Agent*. Brooke tells that '[t]he fact seems to be, someone tried to blow up this very Observatory right here in 1894!' and that, this failed attempt meant that 'one of his hands exploded off' (T, 289). This is the only fact that Brooke presents with the doubtful caveats of 'seems to be', 'probably', and 'apparently' (T, 289–90). Also in the run-up to reading Conrad, Brooke goes with her parents to see a play about Miles's shutting himself away. She notes, with disdain, that the actor 'did not look anything like Mr Garth' (T, 291) and how this jars with what Gen Lee tells of the efforts of the production team to exactly replicate the Lee's spare room (they 'even sent to

Amazon.co.uk to get some of the very same DVDs that were in the actual room, with the same pictures on the covers, to make it be true and lifelike' (T, 292)). Brooke finds the logic of representation, then, to be a source of confusion; the difficulty that Brooke encounters with Conrad's novel is partly rooted in this difficulty of reading fiction when it relates to the real.

The copy that she finds is a second-hand copy in which someone has circled words throughout the text: transcendental; ergo; maculated; physiognomy; propensity; pensively; finessing, and later half a dozen more words. As a second-hand copy, it contains both the presence of a fiction and the presence of a real reader. And in choosing to decipher the motive or meaning of the circles, Brooke sets out on a detective, and hermeneutic enquiry that focuses on the reader rather than the fiction:

she looked at the list of words on the page to see if the person who had circled them was maybe making a code out of, say, their first letters, because the book after all was about spies and about spying, at least this is what it said in the writing on the back cover that it was about. Tempppf. Or maybe the code was hidden in their last letters. Lodyyyyg. [...]

But the fact was, in reality, it was a mystery as to what had happened with this book and why. It was something Brooke would simply never know and she simply had to settle for that fact, her mother told her a couple of nights later when she was in bed and thrashing about and pulling up all the covers, and couldn't sleep at all for the very much wanting to know. It was her third night of not getting to sleep because of it. (T, 297–8)

We can glimpse the lure of suspicious reading here. The circles are the Ricoeurian spot or contamination that alert the interpreter to the presence of 'double meaning'. Additionally, we can see the physical effects of this interpretive impasse: tossing and turning, unable to sleep, obsessing over the connection between ostensibly unconnected words for several days; this is a reading which exemplifies the closeness of suspicion and a reparative labour of love.<sup>54</sup> Brooke's style of interpretation is linked to the theme of the novel. But it is also in keeping with her interest in wordplay. She spends much of her chapter latching onto the ways in which words and phrases possess both intentional and unintentional double meanings. For instance, when her father tells her that the Conrad novel is second-hand, she exclaims 'Second hand! this was funny': 'First: Because of the clocks and watches at the Observatory in the museum which have second hands, and second: in a sort of weird way because of the man with the hand that exploded off his arm.' (T, 295–6) Jokes, then,

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<sup>54</sup> It is, I would like to acknowledge, easy to locate instances of the reparative in art, because that's often what art *does* – it synthesises. The point of interest, then, is not in the fact or appearance of the reparative but in the way Smith's fictions set about examining the reparative as a 'magic' function of the novel.



provide a way to articulate the unexpected ideas contained in words – in this case, the link between books and time, but also the historical fact of Martial Bourdin who lost his hand and his life in 1894 and the unexpected new inference of ‘second hand’ when the book is about a man who loses his second hand.

While Brooke views the circled words as evidence of a code, something which – if decoded – would reveal additional meaning, this would not be a meaning that tells us more about the novel but about the reader; Brooke is not really trying to read the book at all but the thought process and suspected intentions of another reader (a reader who has, in marking the text, become an interpreter, another sort of writer or authority in the book’s pages). There is a difference here, then, inasmuch as Brooke’s reading looks to locate a critical intention rather than a ‘repressed or obscured reality’ that the novel might unconsciously hold (as Felski’s depth- or distance-reader would), or what Fredric Jameson would call the ‘political unconscious’ of the novel – its incontrovertible bearing of the marks of the political moment in which it was produced.

Brooke’s father suggests what most readers of this scene would likely, by way of common sense, suggest: the connecting factor is surely that they are difficult words, perhaps requiring the use of a dictionary. And although we might agree with the father, or think that to read a book about spies as though it contained a code is naïve, Brooke’s method might be more valuable than we first think. Just as ‘second hand’ takes on an unexpected meaning, so too can these circles take on an additional meaning for a reader of *There but for the*. Brooke’s father’s suggestion sends Brooke to the dictionary, looking up the definitions for some additional words, ‘expediaton’ and ‘augment’, but also ‘[c]oruscation: glittering, a sudden flash of light’ (T, 297). This is where Brooke’s primary research becomes material for a detective critic reader. Indeed, those familiar with *The Secret Agent* will notice an additional similarity that Brooke is not privy to: at a number of points in *The Secret Agent*, Stevie – the brother of Mrs Verloc who, because of his learning disability, is selected to deliver and detonate the bomb to Greenwich – sits at the Verloc’s kitchen table and draws circles.

To look to the first instance of this in *The Secret Agent* – the first mention of coruscation – takes us to a passage that occurs just after Michaelis (a character in whose name we can find Miles) has held forth to his fellow anarchists in a fit of passion on the dissolution of private property which turns into a philosophical rant on political economy –

the subjects that had sustained him during years of imprisonment.<sup>55</sup> Moving away from this scene, Mr Verloc enters the kitchen and, opening the door,

disclosed the innocent Stevie, seated very good and quiet at a deal table, drawing circles, circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggesting a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable.<sup>56</sup>

It is tempting not only to read the novels comparatively by page, but also to wonder whether the definition given of coruscation, ‘glittering, a sudden flash of light’ might not also speak to the experience of the reader who reaches for Conrad’s novel and finds that Stevie’s circles have in some sense, by Smith’s hand, materialised in front of Brooke’s eyes. The open-ended interpretative and affective possibility of a reading which attends to citation is indeed a flashing light, a revelation, here. But the circles that Brooke puzzles over suspend us between knowing and mystery – Stevie’s circles are circles which, like the ones Brooke encounters, cannot be interpreted. They become, then, a kind of magical citation which disclose Stevie just as he is disclosed to the reader of *The Secret Agent*. Is this an intentional artifice? Did Smith have a second-hand copy with these words circled or did she want to draw our attention to the layering of fact on fiction, and fiction on fact that is espoused in the trajectory from Bourdin to Conrad to Smith?<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the likelihood of readers making notes around Stevie’s circling is high, given that fictional scenes of reading and writing often incite a reflexive apprehension of the act of reading, as my own close reading testifies. Without becoming overly lyrical, what we can say is that the proliferation of circling, an act of critical interpretation or a type of intentional and engaged reading, embroils readers of *There but for the* in a reflexive self-apprehension of the act of reading.

But despite forging an interpretive method that is in keeping with the themes of the book, and despite the possibility of our interpretation, Brooke’s grand reading never materialises. Like George’s mystery, Brooke is told that she will not find out. Her attempts here mark an unsuccessful attempt to decode something that has been enacted by a human hand, but it also an attention to words, letters and literality which might be enacted on Smith’s writing itself. In a moment like this where ‘reality’, fiction and mystery are

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<sup>55</sup> I mention this because Michaelis seems allied with Miles in that he is described by the narrator in a religious idiom, he is an ‘apostle’ who is making ‘the confession of his faith’ just as Miles becomes the focus of a religiously inflected attention by his followers. Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, ed. by Michael Newton (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 36.

<sup>56</sup> Conrad, pp. 36–7.

<sup>57</sup> Pohl’s theory of citation figures again here in that Smith’s use of Conrad creates value by attributing value to his novel but also by being seen to be enthusiastic about the ‘glittering’ potentiality of other works and Smith’s work’s connection to it.

reflexively entwined, it is even invited by the text. But even if the reader does not embark on a reading of the lettered codes in Smith's writing, an interpretation that takes in the most superficial of references to *The Secret Agent* will know that the mystery of Miles Garth is subtended by the 'secret agent' of Conrad's text.

A distrust of this type of reading, the decoding and attendant detective-ego of the critic has inspired (the by now polemical) Surface Reading, the subject of a 2009 special issue of *Representations* which was most explicitly crystallised in the introduction by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus. Another proclamation of the exhaustion of critique in literary studies, Best and Marcus look to catalyse a departure from the methods of Symptomatic Reading (which they understand to encompass the methods of Marx and Freud as well as Fredric Jameson's naming of it in *The Political Unconscious*). Arguing that the 1970s and '80s saw the ascent of psychoanalytic and Marxist vocabularies into 'metalanguages', Best and Marcus suggest that twenty-first century criticism remains hooked on the 'power' that symptomatic reading 'gave to the act of interpreting'.<sup>58</sup> Reading not only for hidden and unconscious forces but for the absences and gaps in texts (as posited by Freudian traditions as well as Althusserian and Jamesonian Marxist traditions) is, to Best and Marcus's minds, embroiled in critical egoism, a desire to enact a 'glamorous' critical work.<sup>59</sup> They argue that it is a type of egoism which hinges on the act of criticism turning the interpreter into a figure as valuable as the writer of the original text.

What they pose in place of reading-for-depth is a mode of reading which, as the name intimates, locates textual meaning through a new grammar of the 'surface'. They define this textual surface as that which 'insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*'.<sup>60</sup> Instead, then, of reading the text for absences or elisions which indicate ulterior motives or forces, surface reading posits that we must read what is visible in the text. In their repudiation of textual depth, Best and Marcus might be suggesting something about the highly individuated action of reading. Texts, they seem to say, speak differently to different people – this much is indisputable. However, a mode of reading which allows people to read 'what is visible' to them instantly brings back the fuzzy role of the *unconscious* in reading and interpretation. Surface reading only deflects the unconscious from being detected in the text to being readable in its interpreter. What we see in this series of critical narratives is a common concern or interest in the value of disclosure (unearthing, revealing as a method of critical writing), but particularly for how

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<sup>58</sup> Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations*, 108 (2009), 1-21 (p. 1).

<sup>59</sup> Best and Marcus, p. 17.

<sup>60</sup> Best and Marcus, p. 9.

suspicious, paranoid, symptomatic readings and critique, as well as their various opposites, are all mediations of what can be seen and what can't be seen; what is visible and invisible; what is mystified or demystified by the text and in the eyes of the reader.

If it seems that these concatenations of 'reading' in recent years gesture to caricatures of critical practice and moreover if they seem to elide historical specificity in their overviews and summaries, Timothy Bewes has responded to these claims with an attention to critique's critical and literary history. But more than that, he argues that the problem with naming a critical mode is that it replaces thought with what Gilles Deleuze calls the 'image of thought'.<sup>61</sup> We move from a thinking which is simultaneous with the text to one which is removed from it. The question – or goal – then that he finds paralleled in a Lukácsian theory of the novel is: how can critical reading refuse to make this split, the split between the reader and the read? Bewes's approach 'reading with the grain' – although he argues that advancing a 'new critical orientation' is *not* the objective of his article – is his name for a type of reading which is predicated on an understanding that 'the experience of reading a novel is one of reading an event of reading'; this is a type of reading, then, that recognises the novel's hand in its own formation.<sup>62</sup>

Bewes performs a rereading of Jamesonian symptomatic reading through Louis Althusser, and finds that Jameson's resultant notion of the symptom is based on a misreading of Marxist and, therefore, that Surface Reading, among other theories of interpretation, is premised on a false notion of what symptomatic reading and Marxist critique actually offer. Bewes ekes out an alternative reading of symptomatic reading and argues that it is 'circular' rather than 'topographical', and that the circular logic is that propagated by Marx which 'created the condition for reading the text by reference only to itself'.<sup>63</sup>

Bewes locates his reading in Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, and wagers that 'reading with the grain' is a synthesis that cannot be realised in an aesthetic form alone (and especially not the novel, which Lukács believes to maintain the rift between internal and external even if it appears to be self-theorising) but in the act of reading, and which 'would dissolve the distinction between "the merely existent" and the realm of critical engagement; dissolve, that is to say, the distinction between writer and critic, between, to put it even more provocatively, the activities of writing and reading themselves'.<sup>64</sup> As symptomatic

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<sup>61</sup> Timothy Bewes, 'Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism', *differences*, 21 (2010), 1-33 (p. 13).

<sup>62</sup> Bewes, p. 2; 4.

<sup>63</sup> Bewes, p. 6.

<sup>64</sup> Bewes, p. 3.

reading and its image of thought stands (here he is quoting Alain Badiou), ‘the real’ is ‘never real enough not to be suspected of semblance. The passion for the real is also, of necessity, suspicion’.<sup>65</sup> If we continue Bewes’s overlay of Badiou and the hermeneutics of suspicion, then suspicion is the condition which accompanies a ‘passion for the real’, where the ‘real’ – a re-imagining or re-imagining of humankind – is what is promised by each new hermeneutic. In Bewes’s reckoning, we neglect to read properly for as long as reading is construed as an activity in which an *absolute real* can be located (endeavouring to get to ‘reality’ by throwing off a final false consciousness through the location of a final symptom). The reading that we ought to enact is one that prioritises the present moment of reading above all else, one which gives primacy to the text’s reflexivity and the contemporary experience of that reflexivity. It is, then, one that re-enchants the reader-text relationship through an attention to the critical function of fiction and its role in the act of reading. Bearing this in mind, we will turn to one final critic who also considers art’s discursive fabric.

While the critics hitherto discussed share an interest in the supposed exhaustion of *critical* demystification and collective overinvestment in the act of disclosure, Rey Chow has recently written about this phenomenon in art, beginning her survey with the defamiliarising theatrics of Bertolt Brecht and ending with the hyper violent films of Michael Haneke.<sup>66</sup> In doing so, she is one of few critics who, along with Bewes, have sought to read how the critical act has a correlative process in the demystifying or defamiliarising effects of formal artistic and literary technique. Playing off the Russian Formalist dictum – lay bare the device – Chow makes the case for what she calls ‘mediatized reflexivity’ in Art: a mode of ‘art-as-thought’ where moments of reflexivity are made explicit through their staging.<sup>67</sup> Both Brecht and Haneke share an interest in assailing the viewer and creating works which attend to the structure of their media (for example, Haneke’s films frequently make a subject of video cameras and other recording equipment or otherwise bring attention to the fact of the camera that is being used to create the film itself). This latter reflexivity, she argues, is no longer simply a means of Brechtian defamiliarisation aimed to ‘puncture’ the comforts that inhere in Aristotelian illusionism through concordant plot, but has become a violent mode of uncovering:

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<sup>65</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, cited in Bewes, p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> Indeed, Chow has not been associated with the How We Read debate.

<sup>67</sup> Rey Chow, ‘When Reflexivity Becomes Porn’, in *Theory After Theory*, ed. by Derek Attridge and Jane Elliott (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 135–48 (p. 145; 146).

Like the notion of laying bare, the rhetoric of uncovering underlying conditions is intended to call attention to what has become unthinking (that is, mindless), but when examined closely, the potential for change and changeability (what is supposedly an endless and unpredictable process) that is attributed to art is also underpinned by an opposite kind of desire – that of exposing fundamentals, of resorting things to an absolute, as yet untouched, state. This desire, which is in concert with a type of violent display – indeed, with display itself as a necessary form of violence and violation – may be termed pornographic.<sup>68</sup>

Chow marks this as a symptom of our era's 'metaphysical yearning for the purity of the void' (this comes from a collection of essays entitled *Theory After "Theory"*), an era which maintains its belief that art-as-thought can 'return this reality or ground to its intact – that is, pure and authentic – place in history.'<sup>69</sup> Prescribing a culture of disenchantment that can no longer manifest a Brechtian utopian potential of exposure, the question we need to ask of Chow's analysis (and prognosis) is whether reflexivity, if it partakes in a logic of covering, can be re-enchanted. What we have seen in this is a lingering potential for the 'glittering' or 'flash of light' that attends disclosure, namely when those disclosures work in consort with a claim that there is nothing to conceal in the first place. This, if we recall, is how the narrator of *Artful* puts it in reference to the 'truth' about Cézanne's 'L'Etang des Soeurs, Osny': 'the artifice was what made the place in the picture – as well the picture – truly alive. That way, we knew that it was telling us no lies, it was not deluding us, it was real.' These debates, about mystery and disclosure, play out in Smith's fiction beyond Brooke's stumbling on the 'mystery' of *The Secret Agent* that cannot be solved. We will read the proliferation of anagrams, puzzles and letters that connect form and content in unusual ways, as examples of how artifice offers a re-enchantment of the mechanisms of disclosure and reflexivity that Chow finds lacking. But what these figures of artifice demonstrate, in addition, is the interrelation of demystification and remystification that characterises reading, and the Ricoeurian predicament that remains immovable: that reading responds to double meaning both as dissimulation and revelation.

### **Cheap artifice, anagrams and too-close reading**

While Brooke's method of deciphering – looking for patterns in the letters – is not productive for her reading of the first-hand reader of her second-hand copy, it becomes fruitful when applied to the worlds that she, and other Smith characters, inhabit. Here we return to that elided information, the figure of Lisa Goliard. Smith's writing frequently

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<sup>68</sup> Chow, p. 144.

<sup>69</sup> Chow, p. 146.

makes a theme of suspicion, and what I want to contend is that in spite of the investment in this ‘surface’ meaning and in discussions of interpretation, the novels nonetheless linger over the value of ‘hidden’ meanings. Indeed, while enthusiasm and ebullience in Smith’s writing is apparent, it is the way that this positive affect is brought into relief through suspicion, surveillance and coding that bears investigation here: the decoding is not the overall effect of the work. The pervasiveness of watching and looking – in *How to be both* and *There but for the* – elicit a style of close reading which, as a type of puzzle-solving, turns into the affective pleasure of paranoid reading but also recuperates its puzzles into quandaries and mysteries which coincide with formulations of the Secret of literature, fictionality, and the lesson shared by Mrs Rock and Brooke’s mother: you won’t find out the answer. Lisa may be a figure of surveillance, but she also becomes surveilled in the novel by George, just as George is watched over by Francescho.

Twice in the novel, the arrival of Lisa Goliard (mostly in George’s thoughts but once in person in front of a del Cossa painting) is announced as though it were a stage direction: ‘[Enter Lisa Goliard]’ (HB, 70, 183).<sup>70</sup> Rendered in this way, with the air of another fictional realm, or in a way that formally suggests that she is a character or actress, Goliard asks to be read into. The ‘code’, however, is not in an accumulation of first or last letters, but in the accretion of all the letters: Ali S – God – Liar. This ‘spy’ figure suddenly signifies three ways in which the narrator can be attributed, or how the authority of fiction might be theorised: one can work with the understanding that the fiction comes from an author (Ali Smith), one might argue that fiction is most vividly experienced because of the existence of an otherworldly or omniscient narrator (God), or might choose to conceive of fiction as a construction in which they willingly suspend their disbelief (Liar). That Lisa Goliard encompasses all three simultaneously suggests that *How to be both* permits these concepts of fiction to be simultaneously valid. Even if we read Lisa together as Ali S God-Liar, we are nevertheless presented with an ironic self-portrait of the novelist as one who is aware of the paradox of their own authority. Indeed, that Lisa’s entrance is rendered in a form that encodes a script turns the figure of the author into a character in their own novel. As in the pronouncements on Cézanne, Lisa’s meaning is on the surface. We are not, then, according to Smith’s earlier protagonist, being deceived – but what is the ‘truth’

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<sup>70</sup> Smith, *both*, p. 70, 183. We should note that the stage entrance of Lisa Goliard is part of Smith’s wider interest in discussing actresses and actors in her work. Vartan and Vougiouklaki are both examples of this. Smith’s fictions, I suggest, blur the line between the ‘real’ person who acts and the effects of the acting, the line of artifice that mediates between the real and the fictional and is, therefore, another point of interest for a study of contemporary fictionality. A future project on Ali Smith would consider her writing’s reconfiguration of fictional character as a mutation of the ontology of film and theatre characters.

that we are being shot through with? A truth about the relationship between authors and their characters?

It was said that Lisa Goliard *asks* to be read in this way – there are more reasons for this than the square brackets. There are a number of instances in the novel where iterations of Ali and Liar are spelled out, thus encouraging an attention to the shared letters of these words. One of these iterations occurs when George's mother had tried to write 'LIAR' on a restaurant window where she saw a corrupt politician eating, but she only got as far as LIA- (or, Ali) before being apprehended by security (HB, 68). This prompts George to consult the dictionary for other words beginning LIA- which her mother might have been writing – she finds Liable, Liaison, but also 'Lias', 'Liang' and 'Liard' which George finds respectively, in the dictionary, to mean '[a] sort of stone, a Chinese weight measure, a greyish colour *and* a coin worth very little (it is interesting to George that the word liard can mean both money and a colour)' (HB, 91). Liable and liaison inflect this manoeuvre with shades of authorial responsibility and traversing (liaising) between the extra-fictional world and the story world. But in the addition of Liard, do we also have the suggestion of an author who embeds herself in the narrative in order to revel in the implication of its being a lifeless move which turns white and black interpretations into a mystifying grey, and also knowingly revels in its being a *cheap* manoeuvre? As another device, Lisa's artifice threatens to become the gimmick that inspires a dual investment of intensity and ambivalence. But this authorial appearance is also, paradoxically, a disappearing act. When George looks at del Cossa's paintings, she baulks at the following thought: 'imagine if you made something and then you always had to be seen through what you'd made, as if the thing you'd made became you.' (HB, 165) In this case, the thing that Smith has made – the novel – circumvents this by both inscribing and erasing Smith and by inscribing and erasing del Cossa; they are both there in the act of deciphering, but something that has to be looked through, a negotiation to be made by the reader.

In fact, anagrams lurk elsewhere in Smith's oeuvre. In *There but for the*, the celebrity that whips up around Miles contains a wilful error: Miles is renamed 'Milo' by his earliest followers. When corrected, one of his followers responds that they are sticking with Milo because it 'sounds less middle class' (T, 191). For the reader there is perhaps a little more to it than Milo's broadened capacity to represent. In the move from Miles Garth to Milo Garth we see a move from a set of unlikely anagrams to one distinct anagram, from 'male rights' or 'real rights' or 'right meals' to 'algorithm'. The transition into 'algorithm' may reflect the disenchantment that is diagnosed by some figures in the novel. Terence, the



father of Brooke, offers comment on the Milo-scene in Greenwich: ‘All those people, her father said. It’s terrible. They’re here because they feel so disenfranchised’ (T, 313). In this sense, Milo-as-algorithm foregrounds an interpretation of the novel that sees Miles’s form as more important than his content – what matters to the crowds outside is that *someone* has shut themselves in this room, the value ascribed to this man in particular comes after the fact. This is exemplified by one of the novel’s ‘secrets’ that Brooke and another character named Mark know but that the crowds outside do not: Miles has long vacated the room.<sup>71</sup> Miles’s repetition of a Christ-like narrative will be discussed later, but the basic implication of ‘algorithm’ here is that a diegetic (and intentional) misreading of Miles as Milo repositions him not just as a man shut in a room but as a procedure, an eminently repeatable formulation that is used to solve a problem. In this case, the problem is how to make a character whose function is to tell us something about the society in which we live. Does Miles’s new figuration, then, diagnose something lamentably procedural, repetitive or predictable about the response that he provokes as a character? Something about the reception of the story – the crowd’s and media’s shared desire make Milo a broadly relatable character onto which people can project their fantasies – goes awry, resulting in a problematically algorithmic logic to the appropriation of the meaning of his action.

Indeed, an algorithmic way of thinking seems to stand in contrast to the word that most characterises Smith’s oeuvre: artful, or artifice. If we consider the real-life reader rather than the crowd reader then we might wonder whether, as in the sudden appearance of Ali Smith in ‘Lisa’, the appearance of ‘algorithm’ signals a moment of being caught in a moment of suspicious deciphering. If so, then we are no guiltier than Olive, the protagonist of a 2015 short story by Smith, who sifts through and rearranges letters when gazing on her name on a book’s spine: ‘Olive. O LIVE. I LOVE. O VILE. EVIL O.’<sup>72</sup>

Whatever iteration of this resonates, the overarching claim is that the anagrammatic possibility of Miles or Milo Garth sees him as part of a novel’s discourse of fictionality whose strategy is to utilise an undermined verisimilitude. Miles is not real, and that is why he is useful. Other characters share in this paradox of representation. Brooke possesses an artifice that connects her to the River Thames that runs next to Greenwich: her full name, Brooke Bayoude, contains two names for water bodies (Brook and Bayou).<sup>73</sup> The dinner party hosts, Genevieve (known as Gen) and Eric Lee, signal a ‘generic’ upper-middle class

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<sup>71</sup> Mark is one of the novel’s narrators, the man who brought him to the Lees’ dinner party.

<sup>72</sup> Ali Smith, *Public library and other stories* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2015), p. 64.

<sup>73</sup> ‘Bayou’ is a term in the south of the US that denotes a stagnant or slow-moving body of water which has let out from a main river.

life or are ‘generically’ upper-middle class. Characters, in Smith, are really characters. We will explore this phenomenon with regards to theories of fictionality that are staked on the difference between character plausibility and character artificiality briefly later in this chapter and more fully in response to Coetzee’s author-characters in chapter two.

As Brooke and the Lees demonstrate, it is not only anagrams which are staged but also language games, or, connections between letter and form as well as letter and theme. In *How to be both*, we can trace the letter H through a handful of permutations: Francescho’s narrative is littered with colons that are said to mark where the ‘breaths should come’ (HB, 337) and Smith has spelled the historic Francesco del Cossa as *Francescho*, with an additional H – the sound of an aspirated breath. H is also the name of George’s friend who seems set to become her girlfriend, and who piques George’s interest in the world once again after her mother’s death. H is also ‘helix’ when George and H are revising facts about DNA for an upcoming exam, which in turn denotes the form and content of Francescho’s conjuring into being at the beginning of their narrative:

Ho this is a mighty twisting thing fast as a  
fish being pulled by its mouth on a hook  
if a fish could be fished through a  
6 foot thick wall made of bricks or an  
Arrow if an arrow could fly in a leisurely  
Curl like the coil of a snail or a  
Star with a tail (HB, 189)

And it is also their twisting back out at the narrative’s end, when Francescho is pulled into the breaks between paving stones:

look  
the line where  
one thing meets another  
the little green almost not-there weeds  
take root in it  
by enchantment  
cause it’s an enchanted line  
the line drawn between planes  
place of green possibles (HB, 370)

The lineation of this prose, then, not only speaks to the ‘twisting’ of letters but also the Helix structure of DNA, and therefore also to the breath, to H, which is also represented in the first words of Francescho’s narrative, Ho. This is just one thread of many that could be pulled: another would delineate the connections of bricks and walls, linking the trade of Francescho’s family – ‘a family of wallmakers and brickmen’ (HB, 206) – to Mrs Rock and

the wall of George's bedroom that is falling down.<sup>74</sup> These chiasmic structures ask the reader to read across, to superimpose the narratives on one another in a way that does not simply reiterate a pattern of decoding in which a dominant meaning is revealed, but which animates the word by breathing (:) and coding (DNA) life into the parts that make the whole. As in the lists of the materials that Francescho needs for 'the making of pictures' which includes 'fish bones', 'eggs' and 'the teeth of clean meat-eating animals' among other things (HB, 244–5), *How to be both* renders a fictionality whereby the use of the 'real' results in something artificial which for Smith renders it 'alive' ('the artifice is the thing that makes it alive').

The reflexive attention to literality and puns that we encounter in Smith seems partly accounted for by Monika Fludernik when she theorises language games and punning in twentieth-century writing. *How to be both* and *There but for the* both invoke a 'poetic style that overlays referential meanings with additional patterns of lexical and phonological repetition' as Fludernik finds in Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, but they are distinctly not examples of 'hermetic *écriture*: writing that resists easy accessibility [...] on account of its minimalism' which she associates with Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett.<sup>75</sup> But we can find more useful accounts of this phenomenon if we consider, instead, the work of critics who have theorised the experience of reading with the type of close attention that yields maps of the novel like the one enacted above.

The experience of reading the text as though searching for clues about how to direct an interpretation, and the attendant feeling of having perhaps read *too* closely, is what D. A. Miller analysed in relation to his experience of Jane Austen.<sup>76</sup> In his reading of *Emma* in particular, Miller finds that the name takes on a 'play of signifiers' whereby the letters and phonetics of Emma's name are transposed into those of other characters and literalised in conversation: a character (Mr Weston) remarks that M and A are the two letters of the alphabet which 'express perfection [...] Em – ma. – Do you understand?' and at one point in the novel the characters play a game of anagrams.<sup>77</sup> Miller's conclusion from this 'play of signifiers' is to say that Emma's name 'broaches the open secret of an impossible

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<sup>74</sup> Smith's attention to letters and words seems particularly in dialogue with James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, a novel in which acronyms, anagrams, acrostic poems and recurrent letters permeate the text: for example, the initials of HCE – Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker – and ALP – Anna Livia Plurabelle – which denote the protagonists (if we can speak of such a thing in *FW*) are also reiterated throughout the text, one example being 'How Copen-hagen Ended'. Puns on building and bricks are also recurrent.

<sup>75</sup> Monika Fludernik, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 294.

<sup>76</sup> Here, I borrow the term 'too-close reading' from Frances Ferguson's characterisation of D. A. Miller's criticism. See: Frances Ferguson, 'Now It's Personal: D. A. Miller and Too-Close Reading', *Critical Inquiry*, 41 (2015), 521–40.

<sup>77</sup> D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 61.

identification between the No One who is narrating and the most fully characterized Person in all Austen.’<sup>78</sup> That the name suggests artifice – that it can be deconstructed and traced – in other words, puts it akin to the split of fictionality: there is a tension in knowing that style creates an affectively compelling character and that its mediation through the No One narrating means artifice.

Miller’s reading of *Emma* for questions of style is framed by a theory of close reading. Reading is, he says, ‘an almost infantile desire to be *close*, period, as one can get, without literal plagiarism, to merging with the mother-text’ and in another Ricoeurian ‘variance’ suggests a two-way pull between the ‘ambition to master a text, to write *over* its language and refashion it to the cut of my argument, to which it is utterly indifferent’ versus the ‘longing to write *in* this language, to identify and combine with it.’<sup>79</sup> By Frances Ferguson’s reckoning, Miller’s project tells us about the individualised experience that critical reading offers and how the critical experience – like the authorial one – involves being ‘called’ or ‘hailed’ by artworks. Whereas Miller has commented on a moment of serendipity in another project (when tracing a film cameo, he noticed a music store in the background of the paused shot which shared his name – Miller’s Music Store – and in which a Broadway album – a passion of his – was visible in the window display) whereby he felt ‘almost personally hailed’, Ferguson argues that this type of too-close reading ‘involves deleting that “almost” and insisting on the importance of the ways in which a reader or a viewer is “personally hailed”’ because to ‘dismiss the chiming’ would be to ‘treat those connections as irrelevant details and to insist that criticism be practiced in the mode of the universalizable meanings that can be fully explained to persons in general’.<sup>80</sup> This is also a castigation of the idea, within theories of fictionality, that ‘hailing’ or ‘chiming’ is the general effect of form and genre. As we will see in chapter two, it has been argued that we feel personally involved with, say, a novel because of the fact of the novel containing factors that show it is novel (an author’s name and blurb on the cover, a narrator), or because of the most bare outline of character. Ferguson instead argues that Miller’s effect is to show us that the experience of being hailed can be wrought more particularly than this.

What’s more, Ferguson pits this literary chiming against the disinterested intimate tone of targeted marketing in what she calls ‘intimacy-as-algorithm’, Ferguson acknowledges that too-close reading brings ‘readers to an intimacy both pleasurable and

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<sup>78</sup> Miller, p. 61.

<sup>79</sup> Miller, p. 58.

<sup>80</sup> Ferguson, pp. 538–9.

unseemly with the characters we read but also think of ourselves as knowing’.<sup>81</sup> This takes us back to Sedgwick and surprise, to the moments of the unexpected intervention that figure influentially in critical practice, but Ferguson seems to suggest that these surprises can bring us all the more closely into a paranoid orbit with the object of our attention.

Reading Smith’s *LIA*- alongside Austen’s *Emma* suggests the appearance of anagrams in a twenty-first century novel, then, is not so baffling, and it is certainly not without precedent. Nor is the close, or too-close, mode of reading that the appearance of anagrams initiate. Anagrams and the play of letters were once the obsessive focus of Ferdinand de Saussure’s research. He spent years, from around 1906 to 1911, formulating a theory of anagrams which he believed, at one stage, could become a general theory of poetry. What Saussure noticed was a frequency of phonetic repetitions in vast samples of Indo-European poetry ‘from Sanskrit to Homer, from the authors of pre-classic and classic Latinity to the middle and new Latin poetry’ which often could be read to reveal the name of a God.<sup>82</sup> Saussure’s definition of anagram was more capacious than the exact literality we see in Smith. It is a definition based on *phonemes* as a unit rather than letters. Peter Wunderli, accounting for the difficulty that Saussure may thus have encountered in deciding which phonemes were ripe for his anagrammatic enterprise, writes that

Saussure’s answer was that it would normally be a name or a word of central importance for the text. Since the anagram technique appears to have its origins in religious literature, the most likely candidate is the name of god invoked by the poet, and strenuous efforts are made accordingly to discover his “presence” in the text.<sup>83</sup>

Saussure ultimately abandoned this enterprise, but it remains true that those anagrams were sometimes there in the poetry. In his notebooks, Saussure did not just call these anagrams but also ‘paragrams’ and ‘hypograms’. They all pointed to the ‘encoded dissemination of a key term’ and suspicion that ‘clichés hide below the surface of a text, identifiable only by distributions of ungrammatical phonemic features in the surface text.’<sup>84</sup> In his genetic account of the hypogram, H. Feinsod notes that the critics who ridiculed this naïve study of authorial intention saw Saussure’s theory as ‘the result of subjective modes of reading

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<sup>81</sup> Ferguson, p. 522; 525–6.

<sup>82</sup> Peter Wunderli, ‘Saussure’s Anagrams and the Analysis of Literary Texts’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, ed. by Carol Sanders, trans. by Gudrun Milde (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 174–85 (p. 175).

<sup>83</sup> Wunderli, p. 177.

<sup>84</sup> H. Feinsod, ‘Hypogram’, in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Greene et al, 4th edn (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 649.

rather than intrinsic aspects of a text discoverable by an empirical method.<sup>85</sup> Even so, Saussure's work seems to be a forbear of Michael Riffaterre's work on the hypogram. Riffaterre developed the term to argue that 'any poem is produced around an absent semantic nucleus' and that '[t]he purpose of the poem is not to reveal the hypogram but to hide it.'<sup>86</sup> The presence of the anagram, or the hypogram, then, seems indexical to the rise of suspicious reading practices that expected the meaning of a poem to unfold at the touch of the right word in the first place, and a fully wrought authorial intention in the second place.

Miles Garth and Lisa Goliard, but particularly Lisa, are part of a poetic tradition that can also be glimpsed in fiction, as in the slip between author and authored in Aphra Behn's character Angellica Bianca who, sharing her initials, is believed to have figured as a representation of Behn's views on prostitution.<sup>87</sup> Like Behn, Smith is imprinted in the world of the fiction. But what, then, are these historically poetic structures doing in Smith's fiction? In Smith's hand, these encodings continuously lead us back to questions of fictionality and artfulness. Our reading of Lisa and Miles or Milo *could* lead to a Saussurean search for yet more anagrams in these texts, or for a way to let them figure as hypograms that tell us about the ruling thematic principle of the novels. Indeed, this latter suggestion is to some degree what the rest of this chapter will now examine, but to suggest Lisa and Miles as interpretive principles would be to overdetermine their significance, and to underexamine the continued interpretive possibilities of the twists, Hs, breaths and superimpositions of *How to be both*, and the fact that Miles-as-anagram only works when he has been wilfully misread as Milo. Lisa and Miles, then, are key to Smith's recuperation of enchantment and small-m mystery through narratives that are about secrets, spying or paying close attention, and yet in which questions – why did Miles shut himself in the room? was Lisa Goliard in fact a spy? – often remain unanswered.

Like the insinuation of 'cheap' (liard) in Goliard, it feels almost cheap to stage these anagrams as disclosures in an interpretation of the novels, but this is an experience of reading that they invite, yielding what become speculative pleasures in reward of close attention. Smith's encoded appearance demonstrates how the novel can bring readers to some awareness of their own paranoid or suspicious tendencies; the novel first invites paranoia through its literal stage directions ('[Enter Lisa Goliard]') and permutations of a set of letters (LIA-) and then makes the results of a close reading all too visible; following

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<sup>85</sup> Feinsod, p. 649.

<sup>86</sup> Feinsod, p. 649.

<sup>87</sup> Aphra Behn, *The Rover*, ed. by Anne Russell, 2nd edn (Plymouth: Broadview Press, 1999).

these language games through becomes almost absurd. Staging visibility in this way, Smith demonstrates an understanding of the ineradicable impulse to read with a dose of paranoia, and that this suspicious stance is a step on the route toward something less introspective. The moment of the reader's own paradoxically suspicious enchantment (too immersed, too intent in tracing connections) precisely does not lead to any all-determining knowledge or conclusion about the text; it does not result in a location of the novel's critique, nor in a critique of the novel. Rather, it reminds us that reading relies on the accumulation of more than one thread.

It might help to recall two things here. First, Mrs Rock's idea about mystery being supplanted by Mystery comes as a reminder that we feel cheated when our expectations ('that we *will* find out') are thwarted. The novel both asks us to detect and tells us that we won't find out; these are puzzles that cannot be solved and the fiction offers a pleasure in the artifice of fiction instead. Second, George's pondering which formed the epigraph of this chapter: 'perhaps it is just that George has spent proper time looking at this one painting and that every single experience of looking at something would be this good if she devoted time to everything she looked at' (HB, 156). The novel *invites* us to spend time poring over detail, suggesting that to pay this level of attention through rereading or critical interpretation might yield further unexpected connections between form and content, theme and letter. That is to say, the possibilities opened up by rereading are as much involved in suggesting that pleasure can be derived from incompleteness or the unanswerable as they are in suggesting the value of disclosure and demystification.

It seems appropriate, moreover, to argue that this push and pull in Smith, between the disclosures represented by characters and details as puzzles and the non-disclosures of the real-life puzzles that those characters and worlds undergo, is in part how Smith's literary 'enthusiasm' is delivered. Smith's mysteries, indeed, are often reflexively implicated in images or scenes about books and fiction that exalt the propensity of those forms for double meanings. We have looked at some examples of aspects of this attention to fiction, or to reading, when we noted Mrs Rock's face 'closing' along with her notebook after defining mystery as a closing of the eyes or lips, George ruminating over the relationship between attention and reward, or attention and aesthetic attachment in front of a del Cossa painting (a painter who becomes nothing less than literally attached to her) and in Brooke deciphering the secretive circles in a novel where circles are being used to counterpose the unidirectional bomb plot. But we will now consider this use of the figures of the book and the painting as a means for further consideration of the relationship between mysteries and

the mystical, secrets and secrecy in these two novels. In other words, to think about how the artifice of characters dovetails with mystification and appeals to the magic of art.

### **Open and unopen books: fiction and the secret**

Lisa Goliard, who might be a spy, has a cover story (or it might be a real story) about her occupation: she is a bespoke bookmaker, she makes 'books, one-offs, like artworks, books that were themselves also art objects' (HB, 117). Standing, with Carol, in what she claims to be her studio, Lisa tells Carol of the 'quandary' that her most recent order has brought upon her. Carol relays this quandary to George:

The thing she wanted to show me was a glass box. She was making a set of books for a commission for someone who wanted her to make three of these books then deliver them to him sealed in a glass case. So these books would be full of beautifully decorated pages that no one'd ever be able to look at, without breakage at least.

And she sat there and said, so my quandary is, Carol, do I even bother to fill these books with beautiful text and pictures or do I just rough up their edges so it looks like something's in them. (HB, 118)

This quandary seems to reiterate what George's rumination on the painting suspected: that there is a relationship between value and attention. In this case, however, the problem is whether there is any worth in creating something that will never be looked at. Also, if three books will be displayed and never looked inside, does the interior matter, will it affect the overall value of those books, of what can be discerned from an assessment of their exterior? The image echoes the infamous library of Mr Gatsby, his volumes with uncut pages, signifying that they have never been read; but Lisa would at least plan to rough the pages up and make them better impostors. But what this quandary, as a quandary, tells us is that it is really a question of knowledge about those empty or filled pages, that there will be somebody in the know. We alight, then, upon a question of the closing of mystery, the understanding that something 'will not be disclosed': only Lisa will know whether or not the books have content and, as such, she becomes the location of a knowledge not to be disclosed.

Lisa's quandary responds to an earlier quandary in the book, one which plagues George.<sup>88</sup> She does not know exactly what her mother's last words to her were:

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<sup>88</sup> *How to be both* is filled with quandaries. George's section opens with her mother asking her about a 'moral conundrum' (3) as to whether Francesco del Cossa should have been, as per his demands, been paid more than the other artists who painted the fresco in Ferrara because of his superior skill.



George had seen her contorted in the hospital bed. Her skin had changed colour and was covered in weals. She could hardly speak. What she did say, in the last part of whatever was happening to her and before they put George outside the door to wait in the corridor, was that she was a book, I'm an open book, she said. Though it was equally possible that what she'd said was that she was an unopen book.

I a a u opn ook. (HB, 66–7)

George's mother's last words are a point of mystification, and are weighted with particular significance precisely because they are her last words to George. What stands out here is the 'equal possibility' of Carol being an open or closed book.

In these scenes we are met with a formal configuration of the idea that books contain double meaning, and therefore are met with a possibility of vouching either for dissimulation or revelation, for suspicion or second naiveté. That is to say, both Lisa's and George's quandaries mark a moment in which there is no open or closed book but both an open *and* closed book. They are both premised on (or yield) a double meaning, and turn the symbolic aspect of language into something that resembles a riddle. The idea that a book can be both is, of course, replicated in the formal structure of the novel, its splitting into two halves which have been published in 'both' orders, and so replicates or enhances the contingency that it is diegetically concerned with. This elicits a query about readability, about *not reading*, or, about that which we cannot read.

From one box to another: Miles Garth's disappearance into the room also brings a question of secrecy, of the relationship between certainty and uncertainty, to the fore. Descriptions of his actions and character are strikingly Christ-like, or at the very least, virtuous; as mentioned Miles is an 'ethical consultant', but this sensibility is also evinced when he is one of the only dinner party guests to speak kindly to the uninvited child, when he waxes philosophical over a ringtone's interruption during a Shakespeare production turning it into a parable of communication in the twenty-first century world, and by the fact that he makes an annual visit to the mother of his childhood best friend who passed away suddenly as a young girl.

Both Mark's narration and Miles's virtuous qualities become inflected, then, with the biblical connotation of Mark as one of the authors of the gospels which chart the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. A particularly poignant evocation of the gospels in *There but for the* arises in the insistence that the Milo-followers have upon *seeing* him. The crowd outside the house fixate over Miles's hand and arm, the part of him that they see when a basket of food is delivered to him via a makeshift pulley system. Anna (the protagonist from the novel's first chapter) tells Mark that 'last weekend at the one o'clock basket we

had a hundred and fifty waiting to see the hand come out' (T, 188) and that he 'puts his hand, his arm, out and takes what he wants out of the basket' (T, 189). It is no accident, then, that this fixation upon *seeing evidence* of Miles – his hand, his arm – occurs only pages after Mark's description of a painting he once saw in the window of an antique shop:

The picture is a holy picture, a religious picture of two men. They are turned towards each other and a group of men is watching them. One has his arm, his hand, on the other's shoulders. He is looking at the man lovingly. The smaller of the two men is bending forward slightly. He is putting his fingers, his hand, right inside a wound in the first man's side. (T, 176–7)

The painting that Mark describes here is a depiction of doubting Thomas, one of the most culturally embedded narratives of suspicion. Notably, the aspect which Mark notes of Christ in the above description – 'his arm, his hand' – precisely mirror the body parts of Miles which create the spectacle – 'his hand, his arm'. When Jesus rises from the dead, he appears to all of the disciples other than Thomas, who is not present at the time. Thomas does not believe, when told, that Jesus has risen; it takes Jesus appearing to him personally and presenting the physical wound before Thomas believes in his resurrection. Jesus then pronounces that '[b]ecause you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'<sup>89</sup> The scene of the doubting Thomas is as an explicit example of a transformation of suspicion into revelation. What affirms this biblical parallel even further is that Miles in fact *leaves* the room during the Easter holidays. His disappearance is unbeknownst to the crowd, who continue to believe that he remains inside the room in Greenwich. This brings us again to a question not only of mystery but of the relationship between seeing and believing. Posing Miles or Milo Garth as this Christ-like figure evokes the dichotomy between those who know (like Mark and Brooke), and those who are outside the immediate circle, those who have not touched the stigmata but believe.

These figures, bound by their biblical forbears, embody mystery *proper*, the mystical truth of the bible which Smith's investigations into fictional belief and suspicion in part revolve around. In *The Genesis of Secrecy*, Frank Kermode comments on the gospel of Mark in the bible as the gospel which is 'something irreducible, therefore perpetually to be interpreted; not secrets to be found out one by one, but Secrecy.'<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, he locates a theme of mystery which recalls the etymology of Mrs Rock:

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<sup>89</sup> John 20. 29. This is an image that we will encounter again in relation to Coetzee's *Slow Man*.

<sup>90</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 143.

When Jesus was asked to explain the purpose of his parables, he described them as stories *told to them without* – to outsiders – with the express purpose of concealing a mystery that was to be understood only by insiders. So Mark tells us: “[...] To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn again, and be forgiven”. [...] Only insiders can have access to the true sense of these stories.<sup>91</sup>

The revelation of the secret is relayed to Thomas and to Mark. But the crowd outside who wait to see the ‘hand, the arm’ are the ones for whom the mystery remains mystery; they experience the condition of being faced with the spot or contamination, the impel to find either dissimulation or revelation. Terence, Brooke’s father, diagnoses the crowd’s ‘disenfranchisement’, then, and their fixation on seeing and having real contact with Miles catalyses questions of exegesis and hermeneutics. There remains a problem, as Mrs Rock suggests, in the expectation that we ‘will find out’. With this notion of the parable as mystical, and the previous notion of the open-or-unopen book and *secrecy* in mind, this is a good moment at which to think about the broader import of fictional belief and fictionality in questions of interpretation. I do not want to suggest that the Secret is the only valuable point of inquiry in Smith’s writing, but it brings together a variety of perspectives on the relationship between disclosure and secrecy that has been under discussion.

This set of reflections on access to books, characters and mystical truths puts us in a similar position to one that Mark Currie describes as part of his discussion of fictional knowledge. Currie elucidates the paradox of fictional knowledge, asking how fiction can both intimate that it knows something at the same time as it can obscure this knowledge from our vision or grasp; a novel, therefore, might be spoken of as harbouring unknowable knowledge, or a knowledge that cannot be extricated into a critical language. This language shares clear commonalities with the narratives of suspicion explicated above – namely that fiction is something which requires interpretation but will not yield its knowledge. In circling around these questions, Currie seems to fall on the side of deconstructionist ‘singularity, alterity, ethics’ that Felski speaks flippantly of. But Currie’s analysis is far from ‘genuflection’, and in his discussion of fictional knowledge he produces a model of the relationship between reader and text which, unlike a number of recent polemics, does not pathologise the mind of the reader or critic. First, Currie argues that even in instances of reflexivity, fiction’s efforts to ‘know its blindspots’ will in fact ‘only ever specify the

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<sup>91</sup> Kermode, p. 2. Citation is to Mark. 4. 11-12.

distance between its self-knowledge and the knowledge of a given reader.<sup>92</sup> In other words, fictional knowledge is always indexical to, and contingent upon, the reader: it is ‘the interaction between its conscious projects and its accidental effects.’<sup>93</sup> The coded content of *There but for the* and *How to be both*, then, is only as readable as the amount of ‘proper time’ spent by the reader and what they knew or were expecting to read before their reading.

Second, in outlining two expressions of fictional knowledge, Currie takes us to a question of the Secret of literature. There are both novels which purport to know what they know (ones which operate with a degree of self-awareness or reflexivity), and novels which purport to *not* know what they know (a novel with an unerringly non-reflexive narrator). This is the difference, in other words, between explicit and implicit self-knowledge. Currie argues that there is little sense in conceiving of these as different models, and this paradox (of the difference between explicit and implicit self-knowledge) evolves into a question of surface and depth in fiction which we come to via Derrida’s notion of literature’s secret and the logic of the supplement which underpins it. Referring to a story by Baudelaire in which a man, asked by his friend why he gave so much money to a beggar, responds that the money was fake, Derrida’s claim (which Currie discusses) is that we cannot know whether this man is telling the truth about the counterfeit money (is he merely assuaging his friend’s guilt at having given less?); in fact, not only can we not know, but it is pointless to try to know. For Derrida, this secrecy is the ‘essential characteristic of literature’ which means that ‘we cannot know truth in literature’.<sup>94</sup> Currie explores this claim:

On one hand, there is a claim that, because we can never enquire behind the surfaces of fictional characters, the secret of literature, which literature tells us about, is that it is pointless to try. On the other hand, the absolute inviolability of the secret results from this superficiality. The first claim offers a model of pure surface, pure externality, beyond which it is pointless to enquire, but the persistence of the secret, the very existence of a secret depends on the notion that there is something to enquire into, or something which lies behind the surface.<sup>95</sup>

In other words, ‘the possibility established in the fictional domain, the possibility of surface without depth, is a possibility that the other model, of surface as the externality of depth,

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<sup>92</sup> Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 124.

<sup>93</sup> Currie, *About Time*, p. 123. Speaking of conscious and accidental effects again puts us in mind of Sedgwick’s notion of ‘surprise’ as that which moves one from paranoid to reparative reading. Currie, however, is less interested in conceptualising the affect of reading or the mutability of readers.

<sup>94</sup> Currie, *Time*, p. 134.

<sup>95</sup> Currie, *Time*, pp. 134–5.

cannot get away from.<sup>96</sup> Lisa's 'roughed up edges' exemplify this predicament. This is, for Currie, the task of literary theory, to begin from this inviolability of the secret. The claim here is far removed from the model of surface reading: the focus is on the surface as a productive site of interpretation but as the quandary of interpretation because surface cannot escape its suggestion of depth. *How to be both*, as in recent theories of the collapse between surface and depth, alters this model: Smith's fictions aim for enchantment precisely through a re-enchantment of the literary, of representation by making artifice a focus of the representation.

Unlike Ricoeur and Kermode who share in their reading of revelation or the Secret as *mystical*, Derrida's Secret dissents from this. In 'Passions', Derrida seems to write in direct rejoinder to Ricoeur's double motivation of dissimulation and revelation:

The secret is not mystical.

*There is something secret.* But it does not conceal itself. Heterogeneous to the hidden, to the obscure, to the nocturnal, to the invisible, to what can be dissimulated and indeed to what is nonmanifest in general, it cannot be unveiled. It remains inviolable even when one thinks one has revealed it. [...] [I]t simply exceeds the play of veiling/unveiling, dissimulation/revelation, night/day, forgetting/anamnesis, earth/heaven, etc.<sup>97</sup>

Derrida speaks about the secret in a way that goes beyond literature and indeed beyond the aesthetic. But if we maintain our focus on the secret of literature, then not only does the secret stop being uncoverable if we abandon critique, but it is not articulated in the dialectic of suspicion and second naiveté, or paranoia and reparation, either. Rather, he says, it *exceeds* that play. In other words, if the 'play' of binaries always more or less ends up reinforcing the idea that there is some form of realisable knowledge at stake in that binary, then the secret places a limit on that by showing that something always eludes even the binary.

But is there a valorisation of surface in this formulation? Adam Kelly's 'new sincerity' operates through a reading of Derrida's secrecy as a phenomenon of the textual surface, specifically as it manifests in the reader-text relationship of David Foster Wallace's fiction. Responding, moreover, to Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, Kelly proposes a re-instantiation of the surface as the site of fictional truth whereby 'truth should no longer be understood simply as existing beneath the surface, a contingent absence that can be rendered present via the processes of critique. In contrast, truth may be uncannily on the

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<sup>96</sup> Currie, *Time*, p. 135.

<sup>97</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Passions: An Oblique Offering', in *On the Name*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit (London: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 3–34 (p. 27).

surface, impervious to those processes.’<sup>98</sup> I do not want to suggest that Derrida’s secret or Kelly’s new sincerity, as reformulations of immanent truth, are an answer here. As Derrida and Kelly argue, the secret may not be mystical, it may ‘simply exceed’ the play of the binaries that Derrida lists – but fiction becomes a way to suspend what becomes another theoretical abstraction. These abstractions, indeed, compare with Smith’s notion of the secret, the simultaneously open and unopen books, the anagrammatic characters whose artifice is thematised, and the protagonists of *Artful* and ‘Green’ who observe that the legibility of artifice in Cézanne’s paintings means that it ‘tells no lies’, or pertains to ‘[n]o illusion. That’s it. The surface opens itself.’ The secret, manifested in an expression of aesthetic enchantment, becomes a type of gimmick or device in Smith’s work that is indexical to an enchantment with artifice.

Derrida’s inviolable secret, then, brings us back to the idea that art is a kind of magic wherein accounting for its parts cannot explain the overall effects. Or that, at least, this is how it operates in Smith’s writing. Adorno expresses something like a negative version of secrecy when he says that ‘art cannot fulfil its concept’ because it ‘completes knowledge with what is excluded from knowledge and thereby once again impairs its character as knowledge’.<sup>99</sup> At the same time, the ‘excluded’ material that it uses – magic, which art ‘secularizes’ – ‘actually refuses this process’.<sup>100</sup> In both cases, in art-as-magic and literature-as-secret, what is under scrutiny is the means by which we show that something escapes explanation. Smith’s fiction is, in the final place, more invested in the experience of the secret as a type of artifice which is more productive for its inability to close that gap. That gap, as Francescho has it, is the ‘enchanted line’.

I can’t sustain a reading in this register of aesthetic philosophy and deconstruction for long. What I want to show, rather, is that we can discern a similarity between Derrida and theories of fictionality. The surface-depth fallacy of literature has, indeed, been expressed in non-Derridean streams of scholarly thought. In Gallagher’s thesis on fictionality as a mode of knowing disbelief (we know the fiction is not real, but we nonetheless understand it as credible because it signals its fictionality), the ‘peculiar affective force’ of fictional characters becomes a primary point of enquiry: Gallagher argues that this force is

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<sup>98</sup> Adam Kelly, ‘David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction’, in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles: Slideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 131–46 (p. 134). It is worth noting that Kelly does not attend to or even name the second variant of hermeneutics that Ricoeur discusses – postcriticism, recollection, or second naïveté – but goes straight for Derrida.

<sup>99</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 54.

<sup>100</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 54.

generated by the mutual implication of their unreal knowability and their apparent depth, the link between their real nonexistence and the reader's experience of them as deeply and impossibly familiar. Because we know their accessibility means fictionality, we are inclined to surrender to the other side of their double impact: their seductive familiarity, immediacy, and intimacy.<sup>101</sup>

Gallagher refers to this as a 'knowingness' which stops readers from shunning that which is fuzzy or imaginative (and not real) but rather elicits a 'greater responsiveness and more vivid perception'.<sup>102</sup> The knowledge of artifice, for Gallagher, enhances the experience of enchantment. This is, then, the lesson of the shared condition of Lisa's books and Carol's equally possible open and unopen-ness: it is their appearance as both real characters and non-real people that animates Smith's interest in the form of the book. They can be seen in terms of narrative function and literal translation and yet remain the bearers of affective force.

George's mother expresses this dual surface-and-depth condition of the character when she tells George that being seen and watched, by Lisa and others, had made her feel 'pert':

Pert? George says. What kind of a word is pert?  
The being watched over, her mother says. It was really something.  
But by a spy and a liar? George says.  
Seeing and being seen, Georgie, is very rarely simple, her mother says. (HB, 123)

George's (or Smith's) indiscreet challenge to wonder 'what kind of a word' pert is of course tells us something more about secrecy and its relationship to fiction. As well as the most familiar meaning of this word – lively or animated – pert brings additional meanings through its Latin derivation (from 'apert') through which it means 'open, manifest, public, plain, unconcealed' in the sense of a disclosure.<sup>103</sup> This description, then, attests to the animation of characters under the eye of its author or reader at the same time as signalling this particular character in the terms of Gallagher's condition of the character (Derrida's secret): in her artifice, Carol is unconcealed, hiding no secrets, and yet maintains an animation that makes us look to her for her potential disclosure of meaning in the novel. But this meaning of pert brings us back to the etymology of mystery that began this chapter; pert becomes the opposite of mystery and reiterates narrative's tensions of disclosure and non-disclosure. In plain sight, these connections between form and content,

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<sup>101</sup> Gallagher, p. 356.

<sup>102</sup> Gallagher, p. 348.

<sup>103</sup> 'pert, n.2' *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/140634>> [accessed 7 April 2016]; 'pert, adj., adv., and n.2', *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/141583>> [accessed 7 April 2016].

letter and theme, theory and fiction evince a continued propensity for doubleness as the site of art's magic.

We have explored the claim that words have a symbolic function which means we are faced with double meaning, and that interpreters must choose how to negotiate its double meaning. Smith's fiction, as we have seen, utilises the artifice that inheres in characters and specifically in a way that would likely encourage a reader (certainly this reader) to close read with suspicion in order to accept the mutual knowledge and uncertainty within the fiction's artifice. What's more, I have argued that this artifice, couched in a magical and enchanted idiom, turns the secret of literature into a device which shows how that device is the means through which fiction, or the book, is animated. That is to say, the discourse of artifice in *How to be both* and *There but for the* revolves around tricks like anagrams, 'moral conundrums' and 'quandaries', and reflections or mysteries which bring reading and the physical properties of the book into question but resists the negative affect of the gimmick. But that which remains unarticulable for Derrida, Adorno, Gallagher and Smith all finds expression in a magical and enchanted idiom. It is to some of these professions about the possibility of magic within art in Smith's fiction that we will, by way of conclusion, turn. Indeed, we have already seen this in the mention of the 'enchanted line' in Francescho's narrative. But enchantment also occurs through expressions of aesthetic immersion and a different kind of 'enchanted line' that Smith encountered.

### **The enchanted line: Smith's re-enchantment**

While writing *How to be both*, Smith wrote an article in which she described her real-life experience of seeing one of Franchescho's frescoes (note the un-authored coincidence of the literal embeddedness of 'fresco' within 'Francescho'). It is a fresco made up of three panels, a heaven, sky, and earth. Smith describes its formation:

between the heaven and the earth, there's a blue strip of sky, and in that blue strip the painters of this room have placed floating figures, to stand for astrological symbols, and these figures, in their configuration, in del Cossa's invaluable hand, actually act like a kind of magic. I don't know that there's another way to describe them.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Ali Smith, "He Looked like the Finest Man Who Ever Lived", *The Guardian*, 24 August 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/24/ali-smith-the-finest-man-who-ever-lived-palazzo-schifanoia-how-to-be-both>> [accessed 2 June 2015].



For Smith, the skill of del Cossa not only lends these figures an enchanted quality, but this filters into her own experience of the painting. Smith demonstrates an experience of aesthetic enchantment; it is both an acquiescence to and immersion in the captivating and yet mystifying qualities of del Cossa's fresco. It is important to note that within this expression of enchantment, Smith maps out a relationship for how the 'magic' occurs: it is driven and guided by the technical prowess of an 'invaluable hand' and yet is irreducible to this 'configuration' and 'skill' alone. There is something, indeed, unknowable in operation; the knowledge of the object's technical production fails to account for its effect.

In addition to its provocation of enchantment through aesthetic engagement, the blue strip is also magical because of its 'floating' between the disparate temporalities of heaven and earth. The blue strip seems to emerge from these times as an impossibly otherworldly space, an effect of two irreconcilable times that are superimposed or placed next to one another. It is worth expounding on the fresco as a form: it is a style of painting in which the pigment is applied to a *wet, fresh* layer of plaster. When it dries, it becomes a part of that wall. Frescoes, then, are formal constructions of simultaneity in the way they superimpose layers. This doubled surface, the structure of the fresco, informs the emergent novel's – *How to be both's* – project of re-enchantment, its evocation of that 'kind of magic' which washed over Smith. *How to be both*, we have seen, precisely explores the enchanted nature of that superimposed surface, the superimposition of a fifteenth-century life with a twenty-first century one.

This authorial confession, then, also raises a question about reading. Can we read two things at once, can we be both preoccupied and pay attention, can we suspect but also invest? But this is also a question about the interrelation of enchantment with reading: Smith tells us that when she first saw a portion of this fresco in a magazine, the encounter was unexpected and the painting 'so beautiful that it did something to my breathing and I nearly choked.'<sup>105</sup> It is, first of all, the surprise of the encounter that affects Smith, and just as Smith's encounter and subsequent journey to Ferrara is replicated in the novel by Carol, the surprise is replicated in the novel in other ways that bring the trade-off between technical skill and the unexpected back into view. Francescho compares the use of perspective in painting to the meeting of two people in love:

art and love are a matter of mouths open in cinnabar [...].

This is all in Cennini's Handbook for Painters, as well as the strict instruction that we must always take pleasure from our work : cause love and

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<sup>105</sup> Smith, 'Finest', paragraph 1.

painting both are works of skill and aim : the arrow meets the circle of its target, the straight line meets the curve or circle, 2 things meet and dimension and perspective happen : and in the making of pictures and love – both – time itself changes its shape : the hours pass without being hours, they become something else, they become their own opposite, they become timelessness, they become *no time at all*. (HB, 273–4)

Like the open eyes and cameras which pervade Smith's writing, the mouths are open in a disclosure of mystery, but the attention is on the act, not what it discloses. If something is being disclosed, it is the experience of enchantment. As in Smith's expression of magic, we again encounter a formulation where enchantment is reached through something intended or predestined – the work of skill and aim – but which is also contingent, the paint mixes with the wet plaster, dimension and perspective 'happen' and this puts it at a remove from straightforward causality. There is something unknown or unexpected in this process which puts us back in the mind of Sedgwick's reparative practice (catalysed by surprise) and Currie's fictional knowledge which has both intended and accidental effects. What, then, does this profession of magic do that attempting to theorise the secret cannot do?

If these reflections on making and artifice threaten to lapse into gimmick, then in Smith it instead holds fast to the magical possibility opened up by form, the possibility of superimposing *The Secret Agent* and biblical narrative onto a story about Greenwich and leaving a room without witness. A reading of mystery and Mystery, inflected with what it means to 'spend time' reading (to permit an experience of enchantment), has moved through Mystery as code, mystery as mystical and biblical secret, and the enchantment of reading when faced with the 'spot or contamination' which marks the dual possibilities of the word and character. Indeed, Smith's fiction stages its own reflexive investigation into the epistemological value of concealing, revealing, and exposing, but recuperates this demystification into enchantment. Smith's presence as an author is crucial to this recuperation. While *How to be both*, in its anagrammatic framing of Smith (as a response to its fictional inquiry, through Francescho, into the work of del Cossa) represents one means of Smith's presence as an author in her fictions, so too does her extra-fictional presence – the consistency of her enthusiastic tone across fiction and nonfiction – demonstrates the role that the figure of the author plays in conferring enchantment.

Having now considered suspicion and enchantment, demystification and remystification, as positions or practices that merge into one another, we will consider a number of this chapter's questions – the artifice of characters, author-characters and the double bind of fictional belief – from the perspective of fictionality in narrative and novel theory. Through the late fiction of J. M. Coetzee, which consistently thematises the split

between the real and the fictional, we will encounter a continued problematisation of fiction that did not concern Smith: for Coetzee, the pull of fiction's enchantment and its propensity for interpretive open-endedness is something to be suspicious of. Where Lisa Goliard is part of a novel structure that shows the author revelling in the puzzle-like qualities of fiction, Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello and JC manifest authorial angst and distrust of the novel form and the enchanting possibilities of fiction.

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## 2.

‘I write what I hear’: J. M. Coetzee’s secretaries and the question of fictional belief

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So that is what I was, a book editor, she said. I didn’t know. I thought I was a humble typist. On the contrary, I said, on the contrary.

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By the way, she said, you haven’t put me in your book, have you, and I don’t know about it? I wouldn’t like it if I was there all the time and you didn’t tell me.

[...]

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No opinions about typists, I said. But yes, you are in the book – how could you not be when you were part of the making of it? You are everywhere in it, everywhere and nowhere. Like God, though not on the same scale.<sup>1</sup>

-- J. M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*

In the course of a correspondence with psychotherapist Arabella Kurtz, J. M. Coetzee asks the following, frustrating, question: ‘Are all autobiographies, all life-narratives, not fictions, at least in the sense that they are constructions (fiction from the Latin *figere*, to shape or mould or form)?’<sup>2</sup> It sounds like a childish provocation designed to muddy the waters and throw everything into relativity (‘but isn’t *everything* subjective?’), but Coetzee’s question here is one that chimes with narrative theory’s ongoing project of unravelling ‘narrative’ from ‘fiction’ and of uprooting fictionality from its implied home in the novel. As outlined in the introduction, narrative studies and literary theory alike have long questioned the point at which fictional narrative ends and non-fictional narrative begins (Hayden White’s

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<sup>1</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Vintage, 2008), pp. 176–181. All subsequent references to DBY.

<sup>2</sup> J. M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz, *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (London: Harvill Secker, 2015), p. 3. This correspondence is an extended discussion about the morality of illusions, and the interrelation of fiction and therapy. It is a book in which Coetzee professes a consistent concern with how we adopt fictions uncritically and allow other individuals (and nations) to possess fictions in order to forget wrongdoing and make ourselves feel better on an individual level. Just as the introduction was written during a spate of ‘Narrative’ listserv emails about the novelty of fictionality, the time between a first draft and final draft of this chapter saw Coetzee’s question about fiction come into curious prominence as mouthpieces of the alt-right argued that ‘postmodernism’ – by dissolving the concept of ‘truth’ – was responsible for de-hierarchising interpretation (i.e. all interpretations of one narrative or phenomena are equally valid) and undermining western modes of scientific reason.

‘metahistory’ is one critical corollary of this), but the last five years have seen a renewed interest in examining how the rise of fictionality in the novel and fictionality outside of the novel tell us about what counts as fiction, and how readers respond when they perceive that they are reading, or are otherwise engaging with, a fiction.

Studies of fictionality of course pre-date the debates of the last five years. In *The Distinction of Fiction*, Dorrit Cohn criticises methodologies that conflate generic and non-generic forms of fiction and which, in so doing, posit all instances of narrative as instances of fiction as if the fact of construction was evidence also of embellishment. As if in a rejoinder to Coetzee’s concerns with fiction’s protrusion beyond the novel (his notion that the emplotment of life-narratives might mean that our life-narratives are fictional constructs), Cohn emphasises that fiction ought to be restricted to signify ‘the genre of nonreferential narrative’: fiction belongs to fictional narrative genres which craft a ‘self-enclosed universe ruled by formal patterns that are ruled out in all other orders of discourse.’<sup>3</sup> Cohn argues that the desire to name historical, journalistic and autobiographical artefacts as fictions is ‘weighted with considerable ideological freight. The motive behind it is nothing less than the contemporary critique of the entire intellectual foundation of traditional historical practice – of the entire practice that is based on belief in the factuality of past events.’<sup>4</sup> To call any constructed narrative a fiction is, she intimates, a false equivalence. And if the nonreferential dimension is not essentialised, theorists of fiction risk a mass erasure or dismissal of history and lived experience.

It would not be inadmissible that Coetzee’s passé panfictionality is itself a type of fiction: in this correspondence, he is engaging in a dialogue, a form that Coetzee stages throughout his narrative fiction. Might he be leaning into his doubts in the quest for a higher, collaborative, learning with Kurtz? That Coetzee is an author capable of provoking this second guessing is, as we will see, a significant facet of his carefully constructed persona. The definition of fiction is prone to such ideological straying, and Coetzee has been sensitive to its uses. What was discussed in the last chapter as the enchanting dimension of fictionality – that it involves what Gallagher called the double-bind of characters’ ‘unreal knowability’ and ‘apparent depth’ – frequently manifests as a split or a bridge in Coetzee’s fiction. But these considerations of the structure of fiction are assailed by a suspicion of emplotment or the otherwise immersive qualities of fiction. The fiction of the dialogue and the sense that dialogue (more broadly figured as the coming together of two disparate entities) creates its own intermediary or fictional truth is a recurring focus in

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<sup>3</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. viii.

<sup>4</sup> Cohn, p. 8.

Coetzee's novels, and this chapter will be a reading of those intermediary figures. In the way that Gérard Genette names the paratext a '*threshold*' that marks an "undefined zone" between the inside and the outside', Coetzee's novels are shot through with thresholds that both sustain and threaten to collapse the illusion of fiction.<sup>5</sup>

### Bridging problems

As the opening lines to *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* have it, fiction requires a bridge. The book's first 'lesson' – 'What is Realism?' – begins with a performance of the difficulty it faces, the difficulty of 'the opening':

There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them push on.<sup>6</sup>

One way of reading this is to say that 'nowhere' is the world before reading, the world of the fiction is the far bank, and the bridge (or specifically the act of 'knocking' one together) is the modal shift that is either the author's successful construction of a fictional world, or a reader's suspension of disbelief in order to enter it. The narrator assures us that we have crossed into the 'far territory' (EC, 1) and this first lesson pushes on to introduce its eponymous author-character Elizabeth Costello through a welter of biographical information, notes the skips in time that the narrator has to make in order to fashion the life into narrative, and follows her stay at a North American college where she is to receive a literary prize and give a speech.<sup>7</sup> But it might not be that simple. Indeed, 'knocking together' seems to tell us that this construction is an oversimplification. Another way, then, of reading the above 'problem' and its solution is to see it through the language of Costello who later tell us that she is a 'secretary of the invisible' who produces literature through a process of 'writing what one hears' (EC, 199). Knocking, then, isn't just constructing but the sign of another presence: bridge building is about being spoken to by another or hearing the instructions of another. Writing is about becoming the bridge, the intermediary between nowhere and the far bank – but this mediation is marked by the way it both connects and maintains separation.

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<sup>5</sup> Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (London: Vintage, 2006), p. 1. Subsequent references to EC.

<sup>7</sup> It is no secret that this lesson was first written and delivered as a lecture at Bennington College in 1997, and therefore that the subject of the lecture – a writer-cum-academic who travels to a private US college to deliver a lecture – maps onto the very activity that Coetzee has been invited to undertake is no secret.

This chapter is a reading of how that split is thematised specifically in Coetzee's late work and how its fictionality is comprised through an iterative self-reference that requires reading across fictions and reference to other fictions and literary texts. This reliance on (or interest in) reference is often expressed in Coetzee's work as a form of copying which requires hearing the words of another and thus positions one as the intermediary, the bridge between nowhere and somewhere.<sup>8</sup> Coetzee, I argue, utilises the figure of the secretary to literalise the experience of the author who feels that they produce writing through a process of taking dictation from another, but who also feels that they may copy uncritically or in a pursuit of self-interest. In other words, because the secretary has etymological links to secrecy she (it is almost always a she) appeals to the sense that writing involves intuition and divine inspiration, but is also businesslike, repetitive and not aesthetically invested. As the above epigraph between the author-character JC and his not-just-typist Anya suggests, the mediators or intermediaries of writing are everywhere and nowhere. The secretary is a recurring figure in a set of Coetzee's fictions that span 2003 to 2007: framing critical and commercial types of reader, high culture and low culture, and possessing both metaphorical and literal claims to secretarial responsibility, they fulfil a number of functions. As mediators of writing's technical production, they foreground interlinked processes of authorial inspiration, intention and authority, and they perform writing in both its singular and repetitive forms. But what the secretary also represents for Coetzee, in her position as a mediator of writing, is that words and ideas are always corralled by the words and ideas of others; one cannot escape being the intermediary.

In *The Childhood of Jesus*, published a decade after *Elizabeth Costello*, the protagonist Simón endeavours to explain the peculiar predicament that stops his ostensibly adopted son, David, from learning to count:

David won't follow us. He won't take the steps we take when we count: *one* step *two* step *three*. It is as if the numbers were islands floating in a great black sea of nothingness, and he were each time being asked to close his eyes and launch himself across the void. *What if I fall?* – that is what he asks himself. *What if I fall and then keep falling for ever?* Lying in bed, in the middle of the night, I could sometimes swear that I too was falling – falling under the same spell that grips the boy. *If getting*

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<sup>8</sup> Critical consensus is that there are three periods of Coetzee's fiction, an early, middle and late phase. The early is generally taken to encompass the novels between *Dusklands* (1974) and Coetzee's fourth novel *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983); the middle from *Foe* to *Disgrace* (1999); and the late fiction from *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) to the most recent publication (at the time of this thesis's completion) *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016). For my work, the genesis of *Elizabeth Costello* necessitates a slight boundary crossing – parts of this text were given as lectures as early as 1997 and published in *The Lives of Animals* in 1999 and thereby bring those interstitial texts into the folds of the late phase.

*from one to two is so hard*, I asked myself, *how shall I ever get from zero to one?* From nowhere to somewhere: it seemed to demand a miracle each time.<sup>9</sup>

From nowhere to somewhere: if Simón's account of numeric literacy is analogical to reading and writing fiction, then that analogy is located in the steps that fiction requires us to take to get from one place to another. The threat of 'falling' into the illusion, the 'void', the 'black sea of nothingness' might be the same threat lying under the bridge that *Costello* constructs, but it also echoes the earlier threat that fiction could take over (isn't *all* autobiography fiction?). The language of 'falling' and nothingness in this particular description seems to mark this act of immersion as a negative one. This worry about falling can be discerned elsewhere in Coetzee's late fiction, notably in *Elizabeth Costello* when having just felled a terminally ill man, Costello wonders what one can 'make of episodes like this, unforeseen, unplanned, out of character? Are they just holes, holes in the heart, into which one steps and falls and then goes on falling?' (EC 155). David's worry finds an additional iteration in what Paul Rayment of *Slow Man* calls his tumble into 'the other side' where he finds himself to be a character of Costello's that she is in the process of writing.<sup>10</sup>

What is particularly notable about David's choice of word – falling – and what may underwrite Costello's use of the word too is that he has borrowed the concept from a misreading of *Don Quixote* in which he claims that the Don 'fell' through a 'crack' and that people 'fall through cracks and you can't see them anymore because they can't get out' (CJ, 178). Simón thinks David may have confused this with Don Quixote's descent into the Montesinos Cave, or with someone falling into a grave.<sup>11</sup> Something about the relationship between fiction and reality – or fiction and fiction – has gotten confused. Stories conjure up more stories than we can reasonably process or hold in view. Where else, then, might this idea of 'falling' have come from, and why does it have an erroneous relationship to a fiction of a fiction? Kant, in a footnote to *Observations*, noted a newspaper's account of a misanthrope who had dreamt he was falling though an endless void, and who eventually wakes up with a 'shudder' which compels him to become a moral being. Jonathan Luftig, in a manner consistent with theories of the novel as a producer of moral sensibility, argues

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<sup>9</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (London: Vintage, 2014) pp. 295–6. Subsequent references to CJ.

<sup>10</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Slow Man* (London: Vintage, 2005), p. 122. Subsequent references to SM. Falling is an important vocabulary in both *Foe* (1986) and *Master of Petersburg* (1994) too but my focus here is on the late work because they are more concerned with fiction's capacity for enchantment.

<sup>11</sup> *Don Quixote's* treatment of fantasy and truth will re-emerge at a few points in this chapter, but it will not be the focus. For a reading of the relationship between the body, knowledge and reading that *The Childhood of Jesus* forges through *Don Quixote* see Peter Boxall, 'The Anatomy of Realism: Cervantes, Coetzee and Artificial Life', *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies*, 26 (2015), 89–103 and Urmila Seshagiri, 'The Boy of La Mancha: J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*', *Contemporary Literature*, 54 (2013), 643–53.



that Kant is trying to think about how we rely on fictions to experience that shudder – but the ‘falling’ is that which creates the shudder.<sup>12</sup>

‘Falling’ is also a term from eighteenth-century novelist Henry Fielding, from one of the eighteen authorial introductions to the eighteen books of *Tom Jones*. In Fielding’s use, falling characterises the act of immersion that distinguishes novelists who ‘deal in private character’ from historians who deal with public records and documents. The novelist’s lack of evidence means that it is appropriate for them to ‘keep within the limits not only of possibility, but of probability too’ and it is ‘by falling into fiction, therefore, that [they] generally offend against this rule, of deserting probability’.<sup>13</sup> Falling into fiction is not exactly a negative movement, in Fielding’s introduction, but it is something that requires attention and careful negotiation. Falling into fiction, rather than falling into history via public records, is the ‘dangerous situation’ of maintaining credibility and probability while dealing in un-evidenced character.<sup>14</sup> To fall too far into fiction is to fall into the realm of the incredible and the unlikely. If this capacity to fall is the source of a passionate joy in the aesthetic for Smith, in Coetzee we are met with a novelist for whom fiction presents problems.

But what this possible reference to Fielding tells us about more broadly is that the author’s move to signpost fiction has a historical relation to categorical uncertainty about genres of writing and the authority or credibility of the author. This signposting represents a distinct motivation in Fielding: not just to solicit readers’ engagement but to manage expectations. This engagement, then, is premised on the notion that in 1749 (the year of *Tom Jones*’s publication), the means of accruing readerly investment had to be discussed in order to be won. For Coetzee to trade on the language of the eighteenth-century novel and the performing novelist in particular implies an underlying consideration in Coetzee’s work of the relationship of authors, characters, readers and belief – in other words, an underlying consideration of the terms of fictionality. His intermediary figures are, I will argue, his own investigation into contemporary fictionality. This discourse of fiction does not take place in authorial introductions, as per the eighteenth century, but is instead embedded in a version of the author-as-character that spans a number of discrete fictions and in the language of

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Luftig, ‘Fiction, Criticism and Transcendence: On Carazan’s Dream in Kant’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*’, *MLN*, 126.3 (April 2011), 614–629.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 355.

<sup>14</sup> Fielding, p. 355.

splitting, bridging and crossing that Coetzee comes back to time after time, story after story, novel after novel.<sup>15</sup>

Both *Costello* and *Childhood* speak to the necessary act of investing belief, or engaging disbelief, in order to ‘get’ from nowhere to somewhere and they query the mechanisms of belief and illusion that create and sustain our fictions. Through what mechanisms can fiction encourage a reader to suspend their disbelief or enable an author to reach a state in which they can create (construct a bridge) and reach the far bank?<sup>16</sup> Are our most entrenched concepts, in this case numbers, nothing more than illusions (fictions) sustained *en masse*? It is in this sense that the question of enchantment circulates in Coetzee’s late fiction: he writes fictions that are steeped in other fictions, in literary history, and yet continuously resists falling into them. Instead, attention is always drawn back to the author in the act of deliberating over how to construct or maintain those illusions. An example of this disquieting enchantment occurs in the following moment from *Elizabeth Costello*. In the aftermath of losing her thread (her faith or her conviction in her own ideas) in the Q&A of an academic conference, she shuts herself in a cubicle in the venue’s bathroom and tries to re-conjure the feelings that had provoked her paper in the first place, her railing against an ‘obscene’ novelist who she imagines would have found himself feeling ‘authentic pity, authentic terror’ as he narrativised from the perspective of a Nazi officer:

*Obscene.* Go back to the talismanic word, hold fast to it. Hold fast to the word, then reach for the experience behind it: that has always been her rule for when she feels herself slipping into abstraction. (EC, 177)

The articulation of this word, separate and italicised, tells us both that the word possesses an affective economy of its own, and that it is being separated and repeated in order to bring that economy close for Costello’s refamiliarisation. Words, by conjuring memory and protecting Costello from ‘slipping into abstraction’, can be talismans. But labelled a talisman, there is also an awareness of the superstitious nature of this reliance: the reliance on the word is really a reliance on something else, a perhaps embarrassing reliance on the poetic-critical resonances of language, or on the ritual effects of reiteration and copying. Going aside, going back to the word, may bring Costello out of abstraction, but it also

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<sup>15</sup> Coetzee’s archives show phases of the author categorising new ideas for writing under either ‘story’ or ‘novel’, suggesting ideas that are seen to be more or less dynamic.

<sup>16</sup> This phrase, ‘the far bank’ may be a reference to Samuel Beckett’s 1980 play ‘Ohio Impromptu’. Featuring two identical figures – one a listener and one a reader – the reader’s third utterance (the reader is frequently interrupted by the knock of the listener) goes as follows: ‘In a last attempt to obtain relief he moved from where they had been so long together to a single room on the far bank. From its single window he could see the downstream extremity of the Isle of Swans.’ Samuel Beckett, ‘Ohio Impromptu’, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 2006), pp. 443-48 (p. 445).

reinforces the wounding conundrum that she frequently comes up against in this text: that her critical faculties rely on the successful construction and maintenance of an illusion, on a primitive relationship to the emotional force of language that she cannot always account for.

What I have just called affective economy resonates with the evidence that theorists of fictionality often cite as evidence of the relationship between belief and fiction: Coleridge, writing in 1817, famously named a ‘poetic faith’ that emerges from the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ even when met with ‘persons and characters supernatural’ because that otherworldliness nevertheless contains ‘a semblance of truth sufficient’ for a readerly projection and identification.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, while Coleridge speaks of a supernatural rather than realist mode of invention, what is significant here is the naming of the identification as a general poetic ‘faith’. It is the willing suspension of disbelief that constitutes aesthetic faith and it is, then, as Mannoni theorised and Pfaller discusses, the awareness of contradictory knowledge (a truth that is known to be a semblance of truth) that enables the illusion of the fiction to be maintained. During explains that once ‘we suspend disbelief in order to respond properly to supernatural fictions’ it becomes the same as any fiction and any act of disbelief: ‘it is impossible simply to believe in the reality of fictional events, whether they are supernatural or not.’<sup>18</sup> Where in chapter one, enchantment was considered through its proximity to magic, this chapter moves toward a consideration of the dynamic of belief that inheres in enchantment, particularly as it has chimed with recent debates in narrative theory about the dynamic of belief that inheres in fictionality.

### **The near-death of the author**

Beyond Coetzee’s challenges regarding ‘belief’ in the illusion of fiction, his novels often involve formal challenges to naturalised reading habits and frequently feature characters and author-characters who are ageing, ailing and nearing death. *Elizabeth Costello* is not really a novel but a collection of eight ‘lessons’ and a postscript, many of which were given as lectures or published as discrete texts. In these texts, and in *Slow Man*, Costello is often pale and faint. *Slow Man*, which sets out as if to chart the recovery of Paul Rayment after a road traffic accident results in the amputation of his right leg, and his ensuing ‘unsuitable passion’ (SM, 85) toward his married nurse Marijana, the plot is soon subtended by a reflexive narrative of authorial inspiration and production when Costello rings the doorbell,

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<sup>17</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. by Adam Roberts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 208.

<sup>18</sup> During, p. 49.

and enters puffing and wheezing, to Rayment's home in unlucky chapter thirteen. Costello seems to announce herself as the author of Paul, and reads out a near-exact copy of the opening lines of *Slow Man*. From then on, the gimmick or concept of fiction-writing and the fiction itself are put into tension. Or more specifically, Costello's attempt to write is in tension with the novel's themes of family, migration, and Paul's refusal of a prosthesis.

The entrance of Costello into *Slow Man* embeds the author's being and creative frustrations into the story world and foregrounding the extent to which that story world is constructed through the references available to that writer. This is highlighted, for example, in the opening lines that I described as a 'near-exact' copy: in the opening paragraph of *Slow Man*, Rayment 'flies' (SM, 1) through the air whereas in Costello's reading of her draft version he 'tumbles' (SM, 81) through the air. This change in word choice reflects a song lyric that occurs to Costello in the course of the narrative ('Sad. He flies through the air with the greatest of ease, this daring young man on his flying trapeze, and he feels sad.' (SM, 83)). That this reference is marked out in the novel's introduction ('he flies through the air (*flies through the air with the greatest of ease!*)' (SM, 1)) reinforces both the idea that the story world in *Slow Man* is in the process of being written and that the experience of writing encompasses unexpected resonances with cultural artefacts (whether high or lowbrow) that take on new purposes. *Slow Man* serves as a particularly pronounced touchstone in this chapter because it provides its critic with an additional context about writing: *Slow Man* was the first novel that Coetzee composed on a computer rather than in hand- or typewritten drafts and so its reflections, as we will see, on disposable and cheap stories seem to speak to the new availability of the copy, paste, and backspace keys.

In *Diary of a Bad Year*, a 2007 text that features an ageing author named JC who is at work on a set of his 'opinions' that are to be published, each page is at first divided into two then three sections, representing a different aspect of the writing life: the commissioned book manuscript of 'Strong Opinions' and the 'Soft Opinions' that he writes for his secretary Anya, and the private thoughts of, or conversations between, JC and Anya. Taking it upon herself to rewrite phrases and edit his language, and imploring him to write something more interesting, Anya justifies her interventions by arguing that 'a typist is not meant to be just a typing machine' and advises JC that if he were to 'tell a few stories' he would 'come across more human, more flesh and blood' (DBY, 68). Anya, then, copies but also adds – and that she uses the language of 'flesh and blood' (which recalls a term from narrative poetics that is most commonly ascribed to descriptions of the reader) further demonstrates how writing, or editing, becomes an experience of being both the reader and the writer.

By splitting the page into discrete forms of expression (a ‘finished’ artefact for public consumption, an unseen diary, a letter, first-person narration), *Diary* creates a disordered reading experience; this split page, ostensibly, shows how voices and ideas make their way from one person to another, or from one side to another, from people to page. But do we, for example, understand the strong and soft opinions as instances of fictionality or factuality? How do we navigate the cognitive and visual split, do we read one section all the way through in order to grasp one continuous narrative, or do we stick to what we know and read each portion as it comes? Coetzee’s ‘novels’ make various efforts to convey that they do not sit comfortably within that definition, and by staging writing and editing as concurrent processes they ask their readers to invest different types of disbelief based on the fiction of their production.

Secretaries operate in all of these texts. Costello, in front a panel of judges who are to decide whether or not she can pass through a set of gates, must give a statement of her belief in order to gain their permission. Her statement of belief begins with the following declaration, via twentieth century Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz: ‘I am a writer, and what I write is what I hear. I am a secretary of the invisible thing, one of many secretaries over the ages. That is my calling: dictation secretary’ (EC, 199).<sup>19</sup> This conflation of authorial inspiration with the dictation of divine knowledge is then enhanced by her claim – when she intrudes in *Slow Man* and reads her draft of the novel’s opening – that she is ‘not in command of what comes to’ her and that she had ‘heard those words’ (SM, 81). In addition to this configuration of the author-character as a medium or conduit of writing, Anya’s transcription of JC’s work in *Diary* positions her, at first, as ‘his segretaria, his secret aria, his scary fairy, in fact not even that, just his typist, his tipitista, his clackadackia’ (DBY, 28) who transcribes via written and tape-recorded drafts (although she begins to serve a more mystical function that confers a Platonic belief rooted in feeling). There are also parallels drawn between the repetitive labour of the computer programming work undertaken by the fictionalised Coetzee in *Youth* with that of ‘a bored clerk in Dickens sitting on a stool, copying musty documents’ but who also experiences ecstatic epiphanies atop Hampstead Heath, suggesting again that the secretary emblematises a tension between repetitive and creative labour.<sup>20</sup>

Despite substantial scholarly attention to Costello, the implications of this reference to Milosz and the dually mystical and laborious role of the secretary has never been the

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<sup>19</sup> My research at Coetzee’s archive shows the first recorded instance of this poem in a notebook from 1995, which dates the question of creative copying to before Costello existed as a character.

<sup>20</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Youth* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 80. Subsequent references to Y.

subject of an extended reading. Mike Marais's study, which takes the Miłosz poem as its title, opts instead to place its focus on the connotation of the 'invisible' and its gesture to the way that authorial inspiration is an experience of being mastered: Coetzee's fiction, he says 'dwells obsessively on an alterity that is figured as being absolute in its irreducibility' and suggests that the 'writer is a slave, a secretary who writes under dictation'.<sup>21</sup> This is, however, an underestimation of the purview of the secretary and the author-as-secretary.

Indeed, there is another connecting thread to these examples which has been mentioned but not explicitly addressed: these fictions often invoke an author-character who bears some form of relation to Coetzee. This is the near-death of the author, then, not only because the characters are always injured or ageing, but because they raise a partial image of the author figure of Coetzee too. JC of *Diary* shares not just initials but biographic similarities (an ageing writer, retired in Australia and inspiring some vitriol from the mainstream press after a public reading in Adelaide).<sup>22</sup> In these texts, however, the secretary is sometimes aligned with Coetzee (as with Costello) and sometimes not (as with Anya). It is a difficult critical terrain to inhabit, to read authorial intrusions and author-character resemblances without descending into unproductive observations about metafiction or reflexivity, especially in relation to Coetzee, where it seems too written about to be worth further comment. Zoë Wicomb has proposed a chiasmic similarity between Coetzee and Costello – the 'crossed "Es" and phonic repetition/difference between "S" and "Z"' which 'serves to foreground the author function' through an 'axis' that 'reminds us of [Roland] Barthes's focus on the process of reading and the crucial role assigned to intertextuality in the production of meaning'.<sup>23</sup> Jarad Zimble argues that the focus on narrative composition by way of metafiction is a characteristic of the late work. Noting the representation of a disenchanted realm in his middle fictions where an 'effect of the style' is that 'we come to feel a lack in our own world, a lack not of religion or God or a tired morality, but rather of a particular sense of the world's depth and of ourselves', the late fictions indicate a 'turn away from the world and towards art' and are unprecedentedly concerned 'with elements of fiction writing and storytelling'.<sup>24</sup> Peter Boxall has suggested this literary reflexivity to be a symptom of Coetzee's focus on the unarticulable 'shared space between one being and

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<sup>21</sup> Mike Marais, *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. xiii.

<sup>22</sup> Details of this incident as they occurred both in real life and in *Diary* can be found in Peter D. McDonald, 'The Ethics of Reading and the Question of the Novel: The Challenge of J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*', *Novel*, 43 (2010), 483–99 (pp. 495–6).

<sup>23</sup> Zoë Wicomb, 'Slow Man and the Real: A Lesson in Reading and Writing', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 25.4 (2009), 7–24, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Jarad Zimble, *J. M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 200.

another, between human and animal [...] which requires a new form, a new kind of metafiction to attain thinkability.<sup>25</sup>

David Attwell, like Wicomb, has written on the Barthesian influence. Beyond the specific figure of Costello, Attwell conceives of Coetzee's reflexive streak as a result of Barthes's and T. S. Eliot's poetics of impersonality. In a critical biography that examines the materials from Coetzee's archive, Attwell argues that, for Coetzee, 'the self is always present' in writing, 'but as narrative rather than as raw truth' and that 'if we are to understand Coetzee's creative process – first we need to see the self inside the fiction, and then we need to see how, in telling the story, Coetzee reaches for the aesthetic and achieves something larger and more representative' than that self (that is to say, a story more representative than the story of the individual).<sup>26</sup>

Derek Attridge has argued that to label this 'postmodern playfulness' would be to overlook the 'much more important engagement in his work with the demands and responsibilities of writing and reading' and of the literary writer.<sup>27</sup> Contending that Costello shows how writing fiction requires 'self-division' for the purposes of exploring 'the uncertain origins of the words that one finds oneself writing', Attridge suggests that Coetzee's motivation lies in the pain that 'there is an unbridgeable distance between the person who lives in the world and the person, or impersonal force, that produces the words.'<sup>28</sup> Lucy Graham has discussed this same closeness with specific attention to the gendering of Coetzee's author-characters. Graham rejects the notion that Costello is an elaborate mask for Coetzee or that his ventriloquism through Costello represents 'mere evasiveness' and argues that *Elizabeth Costello* 'should be seen in the context of a tradition of female articulation in Coetzee's oeuvre' that comprises a number of women who 'write and reflect on the processes of writing' thus 'interrogating discourses of authority and origin' in a way that is singular to the medium of fiction.<sup>29</sup> Attwell also adopts a metaphor of the ventriloquist's dummy and calls Costello an 'uncanny puppet through whom Coetzee is able to mirror back to society its expectations of the writer as public figure, and subject

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 110–11.

<sup>26</sup> Attwell, *Face to Face*, p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 199–200.

<sup>28</sup> Attridge, p. 200. Attridge exemplifies the 'haunting illusion' (200) of this separation with recourse to the image, at the end of 'He and His Man', of the author and character who pass one another like ships 'too busy to wave' (J. M. Coetzee, 'He and His Man'

<[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-lecture-e.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-lecture-e.html)> [accessed 20 June 2017], final paragraph).

<sup>29</sup> Lucy Graham, 'Textual Transvestism: The Female Voices of J. M. Coetzee', in *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, ed. by Jane Poyner (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006), pp. 218–235 (pp. 218–19).

them to his own inscrutable, and occasionally unscrupulous, effects.<sup>30</sup> Attridge's comment on the pain of the 'unbridgeable distance' between authors and their characters and Coetzee's 'self-division' in fiction will be particularly pertinent in what follows. What is consonant across these accounts and others, is that Coetzee uses literary texts as an arena in which to perform a type of politics in fiction that can only be enacted through the language of fiction.

What is clear is that there has been a great deal of scholarly energy spent commenting on the permutations of authorship in Coetzee's work, but a reluctance to situate this within a sociological view of literature. Doing this will enable a reading of bridges and splits as a problem of enchantment beyond Coetzee's authorship. We should also be attuned, then, to Brouillette's counter-claim, her materialist reading of Coetzee's manipulation of authority which 'always deconstructs the possibility of any honest self-scrutiny [...], in a way that tends to justify his own position, albeit ambiguously.'<sup>31</sup> Brouillette says this in a critique of Coetzee's absence from political life, or from taking a political position outside fiction, but what this means in the case of author-characters, and Costello in particular, is that the 'insist[ence] on a necessary space of ambiguity and ethical indecision becomes something that only a more distanced global sphere can accommodate.'<sup>32</sup> Brouillette's sense of Coetzeean ambiguity, then, is that it is exactly a device, a strategy, to evade commenting on politics (for Brouillette, apartheid) anywhere else than in fiction. Brouillette restores the 'evasive' mask of Costello to Coetzee's face.

Building on Brouillette's intervention, it is my suggestion that Coetzee's enterprise of the self in authorship can be better understood as a marker of fictionality – specifically, that Costello is one aspect of how Coetzee casts fiction as an intermediary space and act of bridging. Fictions that take the author as a subject are one way in which authors espouse their relationship to the experience of writing and the authority it confers. That is to say, the narratives that we recognise as concerned with the contours of their own relationship to fiction tell us a secondary story about the role of authorial intention and the author's relationship to the creative process. This is, in part what Attridge, Attwell, Graham and Wicomb all suggest. But what they obscure is that he achieves this through an ongoing projection of ambiguity into the definition of fiction. Indeed, what if in critics' efforts to save Coetzee from the embarrassments of metafictional device and deliver him as the father of an earnest literary philosophy, the value or techniques of the devices of literary

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<sup>30</sup> Attwell, *Face to Face*, pp. 103–4.

<sup>31</sup> Brouillette, *Marketplace*, p. 125.

<sup>32</sup> Brouillette, *Marketplace*, p. 125.



fiction have been overlooked? Theories of eighteenth-century fictionality in the novel often highlight the importance of authorial intrusions in signposting fictionality and soliciting belief. In turning to theories of fictionality that, as per Skov Nielsen et al's laments, affix to the novel rather than fictions broadly conceived, we can discern the formal strategies that Coetzee engages to examine the fictions that mediate reader and author, author and character. It is my contention that the dissonance of belief which is discussed in the rise of fictionality is a discourse that Coetzee's intermediary figures reckon with.

### **Eighteenth-century fictionality and Coetzee's serial fictions**

While recent debates about fictionality have been figured as a correction to the perceived overemphasis on the literary application, or literary origination, of the concept (theorists have endeavoured to separate studies of fictionality from studies of the novel in the English realist tradition and reinstate it as a quality of invented stories and inventions more generally), here we will attend to the eighteenth-century novel context and consider how eighteenth-century fictionality, combined with the recent non-generic focus, speaks to Coetzee's novels. The eighteenth-century novel, and eighteenth-century novelists (especially Defoe), have held a particular significance for Coetzee's work. *Foe* rewrites *Robinson Crusoe* but also begins to encompass other Defoe novels. Coetzee's Nobel Prize speech 'He and His Man' reconfigures 'Robin' (Crusoe) as an author who has written a character 'Defoe'.<sup>33</sup> Vermeule has contended that *Elizabeth Costello* represents a meditation on reason which is an 'explicitly eighteenth-century meditation' and suggests more broadly that his fictions are 'strongly patterned on eighteenth-century fictions', posing Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* as the most important intertext for his work.<sup>34</sup> But Coetzee's response is not just to eighteenth-century novels but to fictions (namely *Don Quixote* and Dostoevsky) for which, at least from Coetzee's perspective, the question of fiction is pronounced, or fictions which are doing something new with the question of bridging and thus enable him to refract questions about fiction from within other fictional paradigms. Vermeule's focus is on character archetypes and power dynamics between those characters, but we will be focusing instead on the narrative of the rise of fictionality in the eighteenth century, the case against fictionality as a specifically eighteenth-century phenomenon, and

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<sup>33</sup> Coetzee, 'He and His Man', paragraph 39.

<sup>34</sup> Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), p. 217

its lessons for reading contemporary authors who make a subject out of their relationship to authority.

Skov Nielsen et al emphasised that an act of fictionality ‘provides a double exposure of the imagined and the real’ and that it often hinges on an apprehension of intention, whereby that intention ‘radically alters our reception’ of the communication.<sup>35</sup> As we speculated in the introduction, at what point do we recognise we are in the presence of fiction in the case of the novel? This question is an important one with regards to Coetzee’s work, because he has made efforts to intervene at the level of publishing to try and disrupt the potential influence of paratextual information. In 2013, for example, Coetzee announced to students at the University of Cape Town that he had endeavoured for his then new novel *The Childhood of Jesus* to be published ‘with a blank cover and a blank title page, so that only after the last page had been read would the reader meet the title, namely *The Childhood of Jesus*.’<sup>36</sup> While the effects of this manoeuvre on interpretation may have been less radical than Coetzee hoped (there are paratexts available beyond the book cover), he has nevertheless embedded his signposts of fictionality by similarly reflexive means. Coetzee has done this not only through his use of author-characters but also in the unusual longevity of Elizabeth Costello as a character who spans two decades of Coetzee’s writing career (a new Costello novel is rumoured to be in preparation), and in the genealogy of his writing whereby fictions are given in place of lectures or speeches and, in the case, of *Elizabeth Costello* are subsequently collected as novels.

Catherine Gallagher’s work continues to be relevant here. Gallagher’s temporal placement of fictionality has come under fire, but in what follows I want to emphasise that her critics do not diminish ‘disbelief’ as a fundamental principle of fictionality. To recall: Gallagher argues that this emergence of the novel form was, first of all, conditional on the emergence of fictionality, a mode of temporary cognitive investment that was developed through forms of public discourse which asked people to invest temporary credit in ideas (for example, financial speculation necessitated a mode of provisional investment). In this time, readers developed a cognitive capacity amenable to apprehending fiction in the novel. It differed because it claimed to be about plausible characters and plausible lives, often bearing titles that announced its focus on particular characters (e.g. *Pamela*, *Tom Jones*, *Robinson Crusoe*) who were nevertheless to be understood as ‘fictional nobodies’.<sup>37</sup> But it is

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<sup>35</sup> Skov Nielsen et al, ‘Ten Theses’, p. 68; 67.

<sup>36</sup> J. M. Coetzee, ‘J. M. Coetzee visits UCT to read from his new work’, February 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXufoko-HgM&hd=1>> [accessed 17 March 2017], 5 minutes 4 seconds.

<sup>37</sup> Gallagher, p. 353.

in marking out the change in authorial presentations of characters that she claims to locate fictionality. Between Defoe's insistence that Robinson Crusoe was based on a real individual in 1720, and Richardson's claim, in 1742, that he was not writing specific people, Gallagher asserts that 'a discourse of fictionality appeared'.<sup>38</sup> The rhetorical positioning of character by the author then, is important.

Criticisms of Gallagher's thesis have included Monika Fludernik's assertion that Gallagher's 'rise of fictionality is actually more the rise of a particular kind of novel protagonist in a novel setting' and James Phelan's reconfiguration of Gallagher's disbelief into a theory about the 'double consciousness' of reading.<sup>39</sup> Phelan's double consciousness, which borrows Peter J. Rabinowitz's figuration of the authorial and narrative audience, suggests that readers do not merely undergo a willing suspension of disbelief in which they see characters as paradoxically incomplete but plausible people. Rather, he argues that readers of fiction participate in two distinct modes of engagement, a belief that is comprised of a superimposed attention: readers participate both as narrative audience and authorial audience.<sup>40</sup> As narrative audience, readers are attuned to the affective dimension of fictional characters and the logic of the story world: as if inhabiting the narrative under an 'invisibility cloak' the narrative audience perceives 'autonomous somebodies acting in pursuit of their own ends'.<sup>41</sup> Whereas the narrative audience partakes in the magic of the narrative, the authorial audience remains attuned to the world from which these fictions are produced: 'in the authorial audience, the reader remains aware that the characters, events,

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<sup>38</sup> Gallagher, p. 344. Sandra Sherman also makes this distinction between Defoe on the one hand, and Richardson and Fielding on the other, as the point at which literary fiction becomes reified in the novel. For Sherman, Defoe represents the 'final anxious moment when fiction is uncontained'. Indeed, as I have been arguing, Coetzee's attention to the discourse of fiction often hinges on references to authors and for who the truth-status of their writing creates an anxiety. Moreover, Gallagher is by no means the first critic to align the cognitive experience of fictionality with that of market speculation and public finance. Sherman argues that Defoe's prefaces to his fictions 'assert the status of his texts as artifacts of the market' *precisely because* it was produced in a time when a dominant mode of fiction – finance – had been overworked and overwrought. Sandra Sherman, *Finance and Fictionality in the Early Eighteenth Century: Accounting for Defoe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 13; 72.

<sup>39</sup> Monika Fludernik, 'The Fiction of the Rise of Fictionality', *Poetics Today*, 39 (2018), 67–92 (p. 67); James Phelan, 'Fictionality, Audiences, and Character: A Rhetorical Alternative to Catherine Gallagher's "Rise of Fictionality"', *Poetics Today*, 39 (2018), 113–29. Remarkably, Phelan does not acknowledge the pre-existing use of this term in W. E. B. Du Bois's work. Du Bois's double-consciousness, an expression of the split African American self will return in our reading of Morrison's fictionality.

<sup>40</sup> For Rabinowitz, the authorial audience is a way of seeing the figure of the author in terms of 'social convention rather than of individual psychology. In other words, my perspective allows us to treat the reader's attempt to read as the author intended, not as a search for the author's private psyche, but rather as the joining of a particular social/interpretive community; that is, the acceptance of the author's invitation to read in a particular socially constituted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers.' Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (London: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 22. The narrative audience, on the other hand, is the role that the text 'forces the reader to take on'. Peter J. Rabinowitz, 'Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences', *Critical Inquiry*, 4 (1977), 121–41 (p. 127n14).

<sup>41</sup> Phelan, 'A Rhetorical Alternative', p. 122.

and story world are *invented by someone for some purposes*’ and therefore ‘keeps novelistic fictionality tethered to the actual world.’<sup>42</sup> For Phelan, this is a feature of novelistic fictionality which distinguishes it from rhetorical deployments of fictionality outside the novel form. Phelan, then, brings out the dual focus of readers in Gallagher and emphasises the specificity of those readers – the authorial audience is a culturally produced audience. But this dual focus also draws our attention to the experience of two-ness that Coetzee insists upon as a feature of reading and writing and which poses the reader or writer as the intermediary between nowhere and the far bank. We will come back to this.

As per Fludernik’s criticism that Gallagher’s rise of fictionality is the rise of a particular kind of protagonist, much of Gallagher’s thesis is indeed dedicated to considering the credible non-referentiality of characters in Defoe, Fielding and Richardson. Fludernik takes this, along with Nicholas Paige’s work on fictionality, to mean that Gallagher is concerned with ‘the *fictionality* of the protagonists in novels’ rather than fictionality as a condition that depended on its reception by readers.<sup>43</sup> Despite, then, Gallagher’s ‘emphasis on readers’ recognition of the new genre of fiction’, Fludernik argues that Gallagher’s ‘reductive focus on “nobodies” privileges fictive entities on the story level rather than textual features and evidence for the actual reception of texts’.<sup>44</sup> Fludernik says that in Paige’s work he gives some indication of reception by examining authors’ prefaces in early novels which ‘position writers in relation to audience expectations’.<sup>45</sup> This is the most substantial contestation to Gallagher’s emphasis on disbelief. While I agree that Gallagher’s thesis centres on the rise of a particular kind of character that invited disbelief, I want to correct Fludernik’s misreading of Gallagher and note that she, like Paige, examines authors’ paratextual commentaries and even posits that these prefaces signal fictionality: Gallagher states that between Defoe’s insistence that Robinson was based on a real individual in 1720, and Richardson’s claim, in 1742, that he was not writing specific people, ‘a discourse of fictionality appeared’; Gallagher’s fictionality is based on the claims of authors that position them in relation to readers in the same manner as Paige’s fictionality.<sup>46</sup> Fludernik’s interventions are helpful for us, then, in their affirmation that authorial presentations of, and authorial intrusions to comment on, character are a marker of fictionality, and that the role of authorial intention and its relationship to (or even foreknowledge of) readerly reception deserves our critical attention.

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<sup>42</sup> Phelan, ‘A Rhetorical Alternative’, p. 123.

<sup>43</sup> Fludernik, p. 75.

<sup>44</sup> Fludernik, p. 82.

<sup>45</sup> Fludernik, p. 83.

<sup>46</sup> Gallagher, p. 344.

Fludernik's suggestion that Gallagher's thesis of fictionality is in fact a thesis of the 'nobody' protagonist is corralled by other criticisms. With reference to Françoise Lavocat (who dates the discovery and use of fictionality as far back as Aristotle's *Poetics*), Fludernik cites Gallagher's erroneous location of fictionality in the eighteenth century, and argues that the English novel's realism was in fact the 'consequence of a climate that resolutely banned the supernatural from the real world and relegated the fantastic and exotic' to its Others and, most significantly, posits that the rise of fictionality is in fact a recalibration of fictionality by factuality.<sup>47</sup> Fludernik attends to early modern fictionality and argues that the most pressing development in the print culture of this time was not in fictional genres but rather 'its invention of genres that provide descriptions of the real world':

This trend occurs in response to the public's craving for factuality, which gave fictional genres a recipe for boosting sales by pretending to supply factual information.

It is only from this perspective that early modernity marks a real watershed in the literary record, a watershed enabled by the print medium, literacy, and the influx of new information in the wake of geographic and scientific discoveries. The dominant discourses for the popular readership (excepting theology and philosophy) were fictional, and rather than observing a rise of fictionality, one should therefore postulate a *rise of factuality*.<sup>48</sup>

What Fludernik tells us here is that fiction was not framed by metafictional strategies because fiction was *new*, per se, but because there was a new tension between the fictional and the factual that it was in the financial interests of authors to exploit. By the nineteenth century, the point at which 'factuality' had become dominant, fiction could 'divest itself of the pseudofactual cloak' and 'revert to its original purpose of diversion and (moral) instruction'.<sup>49</sup> Gallagher's argument about disbelief and plausibility, then, along with Fludernik's correction, continues to hold traction for the purposes of reading Coetzee's fictionality (and contemporary fictionality) as a discourse that suggests not only the author's mediation of the factuality or fictionality of their fiction, but also that fictionality confers an anticipation of reception and the foreknowledge of the disbelief they'll solicit.

It is similarly through instances of eighteenth-century authorial intrusion and authors seeking to mediate the reader's reception of their fiction that Simona Zetterberg Gjerlevsen has theorised fictionality in the novel – in other words, through reflexivity and metafiction. Through her study of 'illusion disturbing devices' – a phrase she borrows anachronistically from Henry James to describe the intrusions of eighteenth-century novels

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<sup>47</sup> Fludernik, p. 85.

<sup>48</sup> Fludernik, pp. 83–4.

<sup>49</sup> Fludernik, p. 84.

– Gjerlevsen argues that fictionality had to be ‘intentionally signalled’ in this way in order ‘to be distinguished from other rhetorical resources and discourses, such as lies.’<sup>50</sup> (It is worth clarifying that while it is the case that these reflexive functions are valuable for Gjerlevsen’s handle on the function of these authorial intrusions, the existence of fictionality does not rely on the existence of these reflexive impulses.) What is particularly compelling about Gjerlevsen’s argument is that the reflexive marker of fictionality is said to be performative: ‘intrusions’ in Gjerlevsen’s analysis ‘signal and discuss fictionality at one and the same time.’<sup>51</sup> To be sure, these markers of fictionality are not suggested to be applicable to any and every epoch of the novel. Gjerlevsen articulates our earlier inference, from Gallagher, that the cognitive capacity for authorial invention and readerly reception is historically contingent: ‘signs of fictionality can change: they are historically variable and dependent on contextual relations. What techniques of fictionality signal is the unchanging and defining feature of fictionality: invention.’<sup>52</sup> Fictionality, then, has techniques. What unites a number of these theorists is their understanding of fictionality as a rhetorical strategy: Coetzee, Morrison and Smith are indeed all writers who engage in this ‘strategy’ or rhetoric of invention *in* the genre of the novel in order to consider the mode of reading and belief solicited *by* the novel form. Beyond this, what lies at the root of fictionality is the experience of ‘disbelief’ or ‘double consciousness’ that is initiated by a reader’s engagement with a character (and a world) they know not to be real, but also by the tension produced in the knowledge that the fiction is in some sense also about our world (and therefore in the tension between fact and fiction).

We could read the discourse of fictionality in Coetzee’s work in a number of ways: through Coetzee’s use of eighteenth-century fictions or through Costello, whose referentiality to her author J. M. Coetzee across fictions, challenges the notion of a ‘nobody’. Indeed, we could surmise that rather than convey his queries about the nature of fiction and the authority of the novelist in authorial prefaces Coetzee uses fictions as paratexts, and uses Costello, to do that work. But I want to follow up on my comments about Phelan’s authorial and narrative audience and propose that Coetzee’s late work modifies the role of the narrative audience so that the narrative audience is also an authorial audience: this procedure makes the question of referentiality newly pronounced, and draws attention to literary studies’ own lack of vocabulary for such a transition. Coetzee’s continual references to other authors or artists suggests that these references are not to be

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<sup>50</sup> Simona Zetterberg Gjerlevsen, ‘A Novel History of Fictionality’, *Narrative*, 24.2 (2016), 174–89 (p. 176).

<sup>51</sup> Gjerlevsen, p. 179.

<sup>52</sup> Gjerlevsen, p. 179.

understood as a pool of singular reference, each waiting to be unearthed by an encounter with a critic, but rather as an accumulation of references that are returned to across fictions and literary texts. This blurring of belief between fictions and fictionality, authorial and narrative audience is also enacted in Coetzee's references between his own fictions. In the Costello texts and *Diary*, he forges a type of serialised fiction that evinces the long gestation and longitudinal value of characters and ideas.<sup>53</sup>

Coetzee's short story 'As a Woman Grows Older', published in the *New York Review of Books* in 2004 (before Coetzee starts writing *Slow Man*), evinces a number of links to both *Slow Man* and *Diary*. These links not only suggest a long period of gestation for these texts but also recall Coetzee's reliance on the figure of the secretary. The story is about Costello, who is with her son and visiting her daughter in Nice, France. After being teased by her children about whether she is trying her hand at forms of non-fictional writing in the late stage of her writing career, Costello affirms that she is not: 'I still confine myself to fiction, you will be relieved to hear. I have not yet descended to hawking my opinions around. *The Opinions of Elizabeth Costello*, revised edition.'<sup>54</sup> These decried 'opinions' are surely a forbear of JC's 'strong' and 'soft' opinions in *Diary*. Endeavouring to prove them wrong, she describes a story (specifically stories and *not* a novel) that she is in the early stages of planning or thinking through. It involves a man who hires a sex worker the night before a job interview, and after being offered and accepting the job, discovers that the sex worker is an employee of the company 'working as a secretary or a clerk or a telephonist'.<sup>55</sup> This story soon falls apart under her son's scrutiny and Costello backtracks, saying that '[s]he does not have to be a secretary' and that the story might in fact be about how the sex worker turns out to be a daughter of his cousin who he visits in the city of his new workplace.<sup>56</sup> There are two links here to *Diary*: Costello's rejection of 'hawking [her] opinions' around as a writer-cum-public-intellectual and the hazy idea for a story about the sexual dynamics of a man and woman who – although she does not have to be a secretary

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<sup>53</sup> Jan Wilm, for example, has written on how the 'ruminative discourse' that takes place between characters in Coetzee's fictions function as 'a form of slow dialogicity that is conducive to activating a slow reflexive text-reader dialogue and a slow microdialogue in the reader's mind as well.' (Jan Wilm, *The Slow Philosophy of J. M. Coetzee* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) pp. 153–4.). It is my sense that Wilm has underexamined the theories of fiction that mediate those relationships between reader, text and author.

<sup>54</sup> J. M. Coetzee, 'As a Woman Grows Older', *The New York Review of Books*, 15 January 2004 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/jan/15/as-a-woman-grows-older/>> [first accessed 28 February 2014]. NB the story is contained on one webpage with too many paragraphs to warrant giving a paragraph reference. At last check before submitting the thesis (10 September 2018) the web page was still active and is searchable through Ctrl +F.

<sup>55</sup> Coetzee, 'As a Woman'.

<sup>56</sup> Coetzee, 'As a Woman'.

– has to be marked as the professionally less powerful partner who wields social power in some sense.

A close, too-close or paranoid reading of ‘As a Woman’ also reveals a foreshadowing to *Slow Man*. Costello suggests that they go for their last dinner together at a restaurant somewhere on Avenue Gambetta. This fictional location has a rough transliteration from the Latin and Italian as ‘approach’ and ‘little leg’ respectively, and thus acts as a crude fashioning of the injury that befalls Paul in *Slow Man*; Paul Rayment and his amputated, truncated, little leg. ‘As a Woman’, then, is a fiction that turns the invisible narrative of writing – the recording of ideas that don’t always make it into the final draft, the long durée of ideas that need a longer period of gestation before they can be made sense of and turned into fictional narrative – into a discernible connective tissue between sequential projects. We can see, too, how Costello’s equivocation between possible stories become articulated in her requests for help with narrative direction in *Slow Man*.

An additionally expansive instance of this fictionality, which hinges on the secretary and belief, occurs when Costello’s initial statement about being a secretary is not accepted by the panel, and she composes another statement that tells of the lifecycle of frogs who inhabited the area in which she spent her childhood:

At night you would hear the belling of tens of thousands of little frogs rejoicing in the largesse of the heavens. The air would be as dense with their calls as it was at noon with the rasping of cicadas. [...] In the dry season they go underground, burrowing further and further from the heat of the sun until each has created a little tomb for itself. And in those tombs they die, so to speak. Their heartbeat slows, their breathing stops, they turn the colour of mud. Once again the nights are silent.

Silent until the rain comes, rapping, as it were, on thousands of tiny coffin lids. In those coffins hearts begin to beat, limbs begin to twitch that for months have been lifeless. The dead awake. [...] What do I believe? I believe in those little frogs. [...] They exist whether or not I tell you about them, whether or not I believe in them. (EC, 216–17)

It is a beguilingly specific case study to use for a statement of belief, but it takes us to two places: to more fiction (Aristophanes, and Beckett’s use of Aristophanes) and to more of Coetzee’s fictions (in this case *Slow Man*). Aristophanes’s play *The Frogs* stages the journey of Dionysos to the underworld in order to bring Euripides back from the dead. The eponymous chorus of frogs inhabit the passage between the world of the living and the dead, calling ‘brékekekex, ko-ax, ko-ax’ as Dionysos rows through the River Styx.<sup>57</sup> In *Watt*, a page is dedicated to a series of kraks, kreks and kriks amongst a number of em-dashes.

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<sup>57</sup> Aristophanes, ‘Frogs’, in *Aristophanes: Clouds, Women at the Thesmophoria, Frogs*, trans. by Stephen Halliwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 151–234.



At the beginning of *Slow Man*, Paul's conveyance from the scene of his accident to the hospital is described in a way that brings the call of the frogs and their deployment as an allegory of belief into dialogue with the writing of authorship:

He is being rocked from side to side, transported. From afar voices reach him, a hubbub rising and falling to a rhythm of its own. [...] Something is coming to him. A letter at a time, *clack clack clack*, a message is being typed on a rose-pink screen that trembles like water each time he blinks and is therefore quite likely his own inner eyelid. (SM, 3)

The clack clack clack echoes the brékeks and kriks of Aristophanes and Beckett, and as the reader will know in retrospect, it is the sound of the secretary of the invisible in action. When Paul tries to sit up, moreover, he finds he cannot, he feels 'as if he were encased in concrete' (SM, 3). Costello's frogs, too, are encased in their own tombs. This relationship between intuition and concrete arises again when Costello claims that she is in Paul's home because she is following intuitions. Paul ruminates on this. 'Following up intuitions: what does that mean, in the concrete?' (SM, 85). Might the screen that 'trembles like water' even suggest the oncoming rains, the River Styx, or whatever the body of water might be that lies between here and the far bank? In any case, the 'clack clack clack' refigures Aristophanes's frogs and their signalling of a passage between two distinct worlds, a nowhere and the far bank, in the sound – the author typing – that signals the knocking together of a bridge. The frogs are a figuration of the middle space between 'here' and 'the far bank', a figuration of the intermediary space between the living and the dead. But the fact that Costello has displaced her experience of being spoken to onto Paul (something is coming to *him*) overlays the character with author – there are two presences here. We know Costello is a fan of her Beckett references in this novel (she and Paul are, according to her, 'like tramps' in Beckett (SM, 205)), and so the fact of Beckett's copying of Aristophanes is part of this overlaying. The typing of the message behind Rayment's eyelids, then, and the conveyance to another realm are related; Paul is one of Costello's frogs, one of Beckett's frogs, one of Aristophanes's frogs, part of a chorus of frogs.<sup>58</sup> But more than that, these references are made to a text which is itself a reference or act of copying – in this case Beckett's copying of Aristophanes – or becomes a moment in which Coetzee copies himself, reaching for a familiar point at which he can become the intermediary again. Is

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<sup>58</sup> I cannot help but draw attention to a crossover between the texts in which Costello makes her appearances: permitted a peek at what lies behind the gate in *Elizabeth Costello*, Costello expects, 'despite her unbelief' something 'unimaginable: a light so blinding that earthly senses would be stunned by it. But the light is not so unimaginable at all. It is merely brilliant [...], say, a magnesium flash sustained endlessly' (EC, 196). The magnesium flash, the flash mechanism used in early photography, speaks to Paul's vocation at the same time as inscribing the authentic fictional self he is implored to augment, he is to be 'merely brilliant'.

Costello also one of these frogs, undergoing a slowed heartbeat, a stopped breath, until Coetzee summons her again?

While we can, in part, understand Costello's recurrence as an ongoing authorial meditation on the responsibility of the author and the onus of being looked to as a public intellectual, what this recurrence also highlights is that literary theory does not have an established way of reading recurring characters in contemporary fiction, or reading an invention that is sustained across discrete texts. But we can look to earlier work on an adjacent issue in order to consider what is at stake in writing this way. Indeed, if we consider Coetzee's recurring fictions (the path from lectures to Costello to 'As a Woman' to *Slow Man*) as a form of serialisation, then we can repurpose Rachel Ihara's argument about Henry James. Ihara argues that James's discussion of serial commissions showed him to be 'clearly attuned to the crucial role magazines played in his career.'<sup>59</sup> It was, for James, 'a mere money question' (his own words), that meant he would endeavour to 'secure prior periodical publication for his novels.'<sup>60</sup> This brings us back to the ideology of the Romantic writer versus the profession of authorship that Brouillette argues is crucial for a reading of Coetzee. While Coetzee's archive is open, there has not yet been scholarship which attests to whether or not Coetzee solicited publication for the parts of *Elizabeth Costello* or for 'As a Woman', how many solicitations he might have rejected, and what his process of deliberation might have been. But we can safely assume that he increased his revenue in doing so. Considering this as an issue of creativity and writing rather than of economic mindedness, the reliance on Costello might represent an easy access for Coetzee, a way of entering back into the fictional worlds that he has constructed, or demonstrating that his experience as a writer revolves around a particular set of attachments. What this reading across fictions tells us about, in part, is the experience of the contemporary author who, in his own words, tends to be 'rather slow and painstaking and myopic' in his thinking and so feels that his business with certain characters or images might not be finished; if the bridge has already been knocked together and it works, then why not use it again?<sup>61</sup> An instance of self-reference, Coetzee's fictions and the autobiography of the writer become blurred.

But what is the experience for the reader? Costello becomes familiar and therefore might be met with a degree of ambivalence. Does she become more or less fictional in her repetitions, more or less believable? When this likeness changes its hat, asks to be known as

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<sup>59</sup> Rachel Ihara, "Rather Rude Jolts": Henry James, Serial Novels, and the Art of Fiction', *The Henry James Review*, 31 (2010), 188–206 (p. 190).

<sup>60</sup> Ihara, p. 190.

<sup>61</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. by David Attwell (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 246.

JC rather than EC, does this meet with aversion because of its access and familiarity (he is still an old writer, still living in Australia, still fixated on questions of sex and love, still some form of Coetzee), or with a sense of renewed interest? The age, in fact, might be an important point. As Yoshiki Tajiri has suggested, there is a substantial relation between Edward Said's 'late style' and Coetzee's novels from the late-twentieth century onward in the characteristic of 'self-quotation'.<sup>62</sup> Is the feeling, then, of being out of ideas related to the use of the secretarial Costello who already knows that her work has become derivative? Costello, in 'As a Woman' feels herself to be the 'cliché of the stuck record, that has no meaning anymore because there are no gramophone needles or gramophones' and who, in *Slow Man* laments that stories like Paul's, stories of unsuitable loves, are 'two a penny' (SM, 82).<sup>63</sup>

This split that we have been tracing, between the professional novelist who thinks about publication and the ideologically pure writer who thinks about Beckett and Aristophanes and frogs, is not necessarily contradictory. Richard Walsh notes that Anthony Trollope, who had a 'notoriously businesslike attitude to his art' involving a daily quota of pages to write, also exhibited 'an unusually strong sense of obligation to the integrity and autonomy of his characters.'<sup>64</sup> So Trollope's awareness of the labour of writing and his aim to be efficient co-existed with, or was even borne from, his sense of duty as a scribe. What warrants our attention, then, is Coetzee's relationship to the 'duty' of writing and how he offsets the dual sense of business and aesthetic obligation to the figure of the secretary. In other words, it is through reading the secretary that we can trace the way that fictionality in Coetzee's work moves between the concerns of the real life author and the immersed world of the fiction, between the experience of being spoken to and copying. Attending to the secretary reframes the above bridging between fictions as a problem of copying. But far from posing these dictation secretaries as analogies for his experience of writing as a mode of being spoken to, Coetzee has made comments that emphasise the act of writing, the becoming an intermediary, as a solitary act. It is to this disavowal of authorial communion that we will now turn.

### Secretaries I: dictation and dialogism

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<sup>62</sup> Yoshiki Tajiri, 'Beyond the Literary Theme Park: J. M. Coetzee's Late Style in *The Childhood of Jesus*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 39 (2016), 72–88 (p. 80).

<sup>63</sup> Coetzee, 'As a Woman'.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Walsh, *The Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2007), p. 138.

The idea that the reader becomes double in the act of reading has a correlative duality in the experience of the author. What Coetzee suggests, through the attention to forms of bridging, is that just as readers can become immersed and be the bridge, so too can authors. Critics have commented on this as a ‘self-division’ that Coetzee enacts in order to examine the responsibility of the writer, but in Coetzee’s hand that self-division is not always a division intended or desired by the writer (self-division might be the result of falling into fiction or copying).

It is in the former that novelists begin to feel themselves as *writers* in the Romantic tradition rather than authors, as conduits in a literary economy. This experience, of divine inspiration, is the one that Costello, via Miłosz, professes as her own. Costello makes a series of claims to the judges about what it means to be a secretary. It means, she says, that I am not ‘to interrogate, to judge what is given to me. I merely write down the words and then test them, test their soundness, to make sure I have heard them right’ and that these are words borrowed from a ‘secretary of a higher order [...] to whom it was dictated years ago’ (EC, 199). According to Costello, the type of exchange involved in secretarial writing is not about reading but about listening – Costello ‘hears’ the words that she is to write down. And we should note, too, the work that ‘soundness’ does here: like the construction of the bridge that is predicated on an act of knocking, soundness speaks both of the correctness of those words (the correlation between what was heard and what has been written) and the quality of their sound (an ontological “sound-ness”).

The poem to which Costello refers is similarly interested in writing as an activity that requires listening:

I am no more than a secretary of the invisible thing  
That is dictated to me and a few others.  
Secretaries, mutually unknown, we walk the earth  
Without much comprehension. Beginning a phrase in the middle  
Or ending it with a comma. And how it all looks when completed  
Is not up to us to inquire, we won’t read it anyway.<sup>65</sup>

Miłosz’s poem outlines a conception of authorship which is otherworldly (dealing with mysteriously invisible forces) but also of this world (walking the earth). These secretaries are mediators, they are conduits of the invisible, and they are not the most privileged readers of what they write (they ‘won’t read it anyway’). This model of authorship might be conceived of, then, as a type of mediumship. Miłosz’s speaker highlights the double function of the secretary, appealing to the mysticism within the labour of writing. Writing

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<sup>65</sup> Czesław Miłosz, ‘Secretaries’, in *New and Collected Poems: 1931-2001* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), p. 343.

in sudden bouts, this secretary is recording fragments which come forth unbidden, but this is a matter-of-fact process rather than a highly cathected one. Not reading one's writing comes to stand for the unintentional or unanticipated effects that the writing might have on the reader (unanticipated because the knowledge of readers is contingent) but the ending on 'anyway' shows this to be an unconcerning prospect. When Costello calls herself a 'secretary of the invisible', then, she implicates herself as a writer who is not entirely in control of which ideas will become realised in text, but it is nonetheless her job to see these ideas through to an end, even if she feels it not to be her job to 'inquire' into or bear responsibility for them. And what is also notable is that Costello has taken dictation from, or copied, a poem about dictation or copying. Like the frogs in Beckett and Aristophanes, Coetzee and Costello call on fictions that function as markers of fictionality or bridging themselves.

The secretary is uniquely positioned in literary history to thematise the dual experience of writing as mystical or divine on the one hand, and materially bound and laborious on the other. In their etymological link to secrecy (the secretary is one who has been entrusted with a secret, handles a divine or mysterious knowledge passed between a god and mankind) – and as suggested in the reference to Milosz – the secretary is a conduit or vessel for higher knowledge. But the secretary is also practically speaking a scribe and scanner, both a reader and writer, and as such relates both to (or bridges between) the writer's production of fiction and the process of editing as well as the position of the reader. This expansive purview of the secretary has been discussed in histories of late-nineteenth and early- to mid-twentieth century female information workers, particularly within studies of cultural modernism. They have often been theorised, moreover, by way of the technologies that they use and after which they are sometimes named – the typewriter (Anya doesn't just do the typing, she is the *tipitista*). In Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, the typewriter 'unlinks hand, eye, and letter [...]. Instead of the play between Man the sign-setter and the writing surface, the philosopher as stylus and the tablet of Nature, there is the play between type and its Other, completely removed from its subjects.'<sup>66</sup> In Kittler's view this physical severing has psychic consequences akin to a disenchantment of language. Of this 'unlinking' between hand and eye, Morag Shiach points out that it also severs 'the illusion of an immediate link between language and the

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<sup>66</sup> Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800 / 1900*, trans. by Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 195.

self' in the act of writing.<sup>67</sup> As such, technologies like the typewriter (here she is thinking specifically of its figuration in British literary modernism) 'had the capacity to reconfigure both patterns and places of labour, to re-draw the boundaries between public and the private, between work and home, and between repetition and creativity.'<sup>68</sup> The notion of the typewriter and its 'unlinking' calls to mind the 'self-division' that Attridge names, but the focus here is on the technological mediation of that self-division and the attention it brings to the experience of writing. It is not, then, exactly the case that Coetzee divides the self in writing but that the means of division are also means of experiencing oneself as an intermediary between hand and eye, mind and type. Or rather, it is an experience of doubling, of being more than one.

Arguing that current theories of 'distant reading' (and specifically their claim to novelty) have a history in the female information worker, Natalia Cecire has linked the history and rise of female information work to the production of stereotypes about women readers. Like the worker who processes rather than analyses, the female reader is similarly imagined as an 'automaton' who is

not so much reading as scanning, taking in words in enormous quantity without the will or critical acuity to "master" them. And in return, the literature destined for her "consumption" is equally automatic in quality: formulaic, repetitive, predictable. It is as automata that the female writer and female reader alike are imagined as ideally suited for information work.<sup>69</sup>

Predictable literature, Cecire tells us, is the price that women have paid for being considered to read for feeling, or for reading uncritically. Both Costello and Anya share in their experiences of unmasterful or predictable writing or reading. While Costello feels herself to be a stuck record, Anya shows her lowbrow tastes when she suggests that JC write 'reminiscences of [his] love life? That is what people like best – gossip, sex, romance, all the juicy details' (DBY, 67).

Pam Thurschwell and Leah Price have argued that the secretary operates in the split between 'inspired minds and automatic hands' and 'does not securely personify one of those poles so much as negotiate between the two, making manifest the economic transaction that produces the aesthetic artefact.'<sup>70</sup> Gesturing to the novel's capacity to self-theorise, they contend that the secretarial workspace does not 'just provide a safely distant

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<sup>67</sup> Morag Shiach, *Modernism, Labour and Selfhood in British Literature and Culture, 1890-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 61.

<sup>68</sup> Shiach, p. 99.

<sup>69</sup> Natalia Cecire, 'Ways of Not Reading Gertrude Stein', *ELH*, 82 (2015), 281–312 (p. 296).

<sup>70</sup> Leah Price and Pamela Thurschwell, eds., *Literary Secretaries/Secretarial Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 1.

dumping-ground for all those aspects of writing and reading which aesthetic experience filters out' but also 'provides literature with a safely distant space in which to explore (or onto which to refract) questions internal to its own theory and practice.'<sup>71</sup> Secretaries, then, don't just take care of the administrative ends or its conveyance from manuscript to bookshelf; rather, their appearance in literature can be a reflexive gesture to the way that the process of editing or anticipation of critical reception enter into the writing long before it has left its author's hands for the printer. In addition to anticipating the text's reception, then, the secretary becomes a means of reflecting on the process of writing *in* writing, capitalising on their simultaneous claim to the external and internal frames of writing. As such, their appearance might ask us to hang our readerly belief on a different conceptual hook.

A series of related oppositions have arisen in the figure of the secretary that partake in a wider economy of the relationship between the writing self and the critical fiction in Coetzee's work. The opposition between 'inspired minds and automatic hands' that Price and Thurschwell raise, or the opposition between creativity and copying that Shiach notes; the opposition between scanning and reading that Cecire articulates; all foreground the opposition between the experience of ritual writing and writing as work. These oppositions are everywhere in Coetzee, often taking place specifically through the figure of the secretary, and in ways that keep the critical function of the fiction in focus. But rather than considering the conceptual undertow of the secretarial reader-writer, critics have posed her as a not-quite-device that came to Coetzee's rescue at the time in which his career increasingly demanded the opinions-oriented public performance that JC eventually takes on in *Diary*, or have concentrated on taking a stance on the meaning of the author-character closeness. As Attwell has argued, it was when the demand on Coetzee to 'become the public intellectual became more and more intolerable' that he 'turned to the resources of fiction, or switched on the power of fiction, to regain control' and reflect, to readers, the level of scrutiny he faced.<sup>72</sup> But this story of the reflexive impulse is also framed by Coetzee's recurring figurations of the intermediary experience of writing. Writing involves faith, but what kind of faith?

The dispassionate writing practised by Milosz's lyric subject, Costello and Anya alike marks a careful attention to detail but it also involves a peculiar notion of belief. Just as Milosz's secretary absolves responsibility for what is written, Costello makes multiple comments on the moral obligations of belief in her statement at the gate that recalls the

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<sup>71</sup> Price and Thurschwell, p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> Attwell, *Face to Face*, p. 103.

language of Gallagher's disbelief. She states that 'a good secretary should have no beliefs' because it is 'inappropriate to the function' and (this is many critics' favourite) that 'I have beliefs but I do not believe in them. They are not important enough to believe in. My heart is not in them' (EC, 200). To be an author, then, is to invest temporary credit, to operate with disbelief. In this case, to be a novelist-secretary is to take dictation, but from who? Costello has an answer prepared for this (although none of the judges ask her for one): '*By powers beyond us*' (EC, 200). This is the kind of statement that has led critics like Marais to consider Costello's relation to narrative ethics and hospitality, but Coetzee, the real-life author who we encounter in non-fictional writing, throws a spanner in the works.

I want to resist an over-reliance on Coetzee's extra-textual words as if these utterances are any more or less insightful than the fiction, but there is one moment in *The Good Story* that we would be remiss to omit from a discussion of writing-as-dictation. Here, Coetzee is speaking of the differing meanings of dialogue in writing and therapy:

for true spiritual progress (let me use this term for the time being) to take place, true dialogue may be indispensable [...]. In the therapeutic situation there must be two persons, whereas stories are written (dictated) by one person. The difference is as simple as that.

I am rowing against a certain tide here, I am aware of that. Let me note two currents in the tide. The first is the claim (by certain critics) that there is such a thing as the dialogical novel. The second is the claim (by many writers) that writing, at its most intense moments, is a matter of being dictated to rather than of dictating – that there have to be two persons or two souls in the room for a poem (in the widest sense) to get composed.<sup>73</sup>

Later in this correspondence, Coetzee says that reading offers a similar semblance of dialogue or two-ness. When reading is at its most intense moments, when readers are most engaged (inhabiting the voice of another), it is because the artist has successfully constructed a 'phantasm' that the reader can inhabit.<sup>74</sup> The experience is that of 'speak[ing] to yourself (your self) from outside yourself'.<sup>75</sup> Coetzee, then, reconfigures narrative theory's idea of the implied reader and the implied author to something more occult.

On the one hand, Coetzee's claim here is pedestrian – writers do not enact the same process as therapists, reading or writing a book consists of different conditions than being in therapy does. Coetzee is making this claim in order to say that fictions might not be able to divest us of our illusions in the way that therapy can. But the ramifications are bigger than that. Indeed, on the other hand, Coetzee's claim here seems to suggest that the

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<sup>73</sup> Coetzee and Kurtz, pp. 52–3. My reasons for wishing to resist an over-reliance on the words of the author will become clear in chapter three.

<sup>74</sup> Coetzee and Kurtz, p. 179.

<sup>75</sup> Coetzee and Kurtz, p. 179.



experience of being dictated to is a fantastical one and disavows the possibility of dialogism as a fantasy of dialogism along with it. To be spoken to ‘by powers beyond’ is a fiction of Costello, a fiction of authors. The tide that Coetzee rows against is one that many critics would have seen him rowing with. While he is not explicitly disagreeing with dialogism, he is nevertheless problematising it. Is it the case for Coetzee that the fabric of the novel is not self-theorising? By placing one body in the room of writing, Coetzee returns us to the image of the solitary writer who is sequestered away from the realities of the book’s material production but demystifies the role of imagination. He is not suggesting that he truly collaborates with a second soul, so where does this dictating other exist? This image of the author is contorted even further when we note that Coetzee reaches for the term ‘poem’ rather than ‘fiction’ or ‘novel’ – there is a de-genrifying logic at work here that prioritises a poetic-aesthetic experience of writing rather than a novel-bound experience.

It is worth reiterating the implications of the form of this exchange, it is a correspondence between two bodies, two souls. While the form of this book, and the fact that there exist other published collections of letters between Coetzee and novelist Paul Auster, would suggest that we can read something from Coetzee speaking as Coetzee here, the precedent that Coetzee has set in other common extra-fictional authorial contexts (his fiction-speeches and the use of pseudo-philosophical dialogues throughout his oeuvre) suggests the necessity of reading these correspondences as an additional Coetzeean fantasy of staging a philosophical dialogue that allows him to take up positions that he does not himself believe for the purposes of advancing the conversation; he has fictional beliefs but he doesn’t believe in them. This is what Pfaller would call, via Freud, a *croyance* (belief) as opposed to a *foi* (faith).<sup>76</sup> Coetzee might, then, be more of a vessel than he lets on here. From Vincent P. Pecora’s perspective, Coetzee’s fixation on dialogue is borne out of his Calvinist upbringing in an apartheid state, and therefore his doubled belief that he is ‘someone who must live in a state without grace.’<sup>77</sup> Reading Coetzee’s work within a trajectory that sees the novel as a force of secularisation whose history has supplanted religious history, Pecora argues that Coetzee’s dialogue represents reaching after a ‘true confession’ in the knowledge that complete confession does not exist but also that the necessary process ‘does not come from the sterile monologue of the self or from the dialogue of the self with its own self-doubt’ but rather ‘from faith and grace.’<sup>78</sup> The very genealogy of Coetzee’s novels, he says, reflects this. That they are often composed from

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<sup>76</sup> Pfaller, p. 36.

<sup>77</sup> Vincent P. Pecora, *Secularization Without End: Beckett, Mann, Coetzee* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), p. 88.

<sup>78</sup> Pecora, p. 93–4.

already-published work is part of Coetzee's 'ambivalent' and 'disenchanted' view of the novel which 'allows us to understand both the meaning of disgrace, or abjection, in all its permutations, as well as the powerful, persistent, yet permanently foreclosed human yearning for redemption from that condition' precisely through that manipulation of the novel form.<sup>79</sup> Coetzee positions himself as one who cannot believe in the fiction of grace or the fiction of the dialogue with the self, but the tension pronounced by theories of enchantment is that the knowledge that one should *not* believe in an illusion encourages one to believe in it all the more.

But if we are to follow through on the inferences of what Coetzee says to Kurtz, then what bears comment here is not only the roguish behaviour of Coetzee, supposing himself to be rowing against the tide, but that this is Coetzee the novelist speaking precisely to the activity that his secretarial readers and writers enact in the fiction – they are dictation secretaries. While Costello's claim is that she produces literature by taking dictation from *powers beyond her*, Coetzee's point demystifies this and proffers that stories get written through an elaborate set of phantasms. Coetzee's nod to writing as the 'dictation' of one person, then, is particularly pertinent to *Slow Man* and *Diary* in which the act of writing, reconfigured as an act of editing, becomes collaborative.

Coetzee queries the possibility of the dialogic novel as well as the experience of being dictated or spoken to. Dialogism, a concept from Mikhail Bakhtin, posits the novel as a form that accrues meaning through a series of dialogues, or dialogic encounters. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin argues that the structuring principle of the novel is its 'indeterminacy', its operation through 'a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present).'<sup>80</sup> Bakhtin speaks of the 'plastic possibilities' of the novel form, and the 'elastic environment' of the novel: it is fundamentally interactive with regards to both its internal life (that is, the multiplicity of characters' and narrators' knowledge – morality, locations, temporalities, and metaphoric or symbolic resonance all relate and interact with one another and create dialogism) and external activity (the contents of the novel's discourse can discard and take on new meaning as the world and reader around the text changes).<sup>81</sup> Of the first point, its internal logic of dialogism, Bakhtin says that '[f]ewer and fewer neutral, hard elements ("rock bottom truths") remain that are not drawn into dialogue'.<sup>82</sup> In other words, the

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<sup>79</sup> Pecora, p. 88.

<sup>80</sup> Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1984), p. 7.

<sup>81</sup> Bakhtin, p. 276.

<sup>82</sup> Bakhtin, p. 300.

novel is less and less capable of being a mouthpiece for its author's ideological position. Of the latter phenomenon, the novel's interaction of external and internal environments, Bakhtin explains that the novel's

living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.<sup>83</sup>

If this is the theory of the novel that Coetzee resists, one that sees an open-ended referential possibility and therefore an unending series of points of back and forth between reader and text, in what way does Coetzee's conception of the phantasmical experience of the writing self and the afterlives of the written word differ? Is this a sanction on the interpretive freedom of the reader?

I said that critics of Coetzee would cast him as an advocate of the dialogical novel. Indeed, frequently cited statements from Coetzee's "extra-fictional" oeuvre often profess a reliance on the role of the unexpected or unanticipated in writing. In a 1990 interview in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee spoke of how '[t]he *feel* of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road.'<sup>84</sup> It is as if Coetzee has taken Mrs Rock's lesson to George to heart, and wants no forgone conclusions. This contrasts with writing literary criticism, a task in which Coetzee finds that a goal 'has been set for me not only by the argument, not only by the whole philosophical tradition into which I am implicitly inserting myself, but also by the rather tight discourse of criticism itself.'<sup>85</sup> Although Coetzee's emphasis on 'feel' seems to signal his distrust of such fuzzy sentiments, statements of this kind have nevertheless been foundational for an array of criticism which reads Coetzee in line with Levinasian and Derridean ethics which hinge on its idiom of responsibility and the 'something' as the form of the unknown Other.<sup>86</sup> The point of conflation between this statement and Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic novel lies similarly in the imminently expected emergence of 'something': both deal in an openness to something unknown, a responsibility to something outside of the self. Incidentally, it is in the course of this same answer that Coetzee utilises a Bakhtinian idiom to explain his dislike of criticism as a close-ended pursuit. He comments on how, if he were a more 'creative critic' then he would

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<sup>83</sup> Bakhtin, p. 276.

<sup>84</sup> Coetzee, *Doubling*, p. 246.

<sup>85</sup> Coetzee, *Doubling*, p. 246.

<sup>86</sup> In addition to Attridge and Marais mentioned above, formative works in this line of criticism includes Carrol Clarkson 'J. M. Coetzee: Ethics, Politics, and Writing', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 46.1 (2013), 147-152.

‘work toward liberating the discourse – making it less monological, for instance’ but that as it stands, fiction is the place where he ‘plays (or works) with ideas’.<sup>87</sup>

Carrol Clarkson doesn’t buy Coetzee’s anti-dialogism. She theorises Coetzee’s engagement with invisible others (writers and artists that he reads and responds to) or his notion of being spoken to as an ‘explicit dialogue’ which results in each word becoming ‘dialogic in Bakhtin’s specific sense of the term’ (citing Bakhtin’s proposition that ‘although only one person is speaking’ each word ‘points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person’).<sup>88</sup> It is through his ‘playing up this dialogic potential’, Clarkson finds, that Coetzee ‘raises a countervoice, producing a discourse inflected by an invisible interlocutor’, which ensures that ‘[a]n ultimate and unitary authorial voice is thus no longer assured.’<sup>89</sup> Coetzee’s references (his ‘intellectual *involvement*’), then, enable ‘him to [develop] a refined literary-critical discourse of his own, and to conduct prose experiments in prose fiction himself with a heightened degree of consciousness about that process.’<sup>90</sup> Clarkson’s strange phrasing, that Coetzee conducts ‘prose experiments in prose fiction himself’ demonstrates that Clarkson, too, is aware that Coetzee’s interlocuting revolves around a rhetoric of the self.

All of this is not to suggest that Coetzee is actually, unwittingly, a believer in the dialogic novel after all, but rather to show how authorial appeals to the mystery of writing enable a range of critical projections about the contingency or interactivity of reading. One can easily forget that the road – at the end of which the charge of ‘something’ lies – necessitates travelling, and that for Coetzee it is a road travelled alone. But there does seem to be a disjuncture between the implied sanction on the freedom of the interpreter which is at odds with his authorial sensibility that deals in the ‘feel’ of the unexpected. Indeed, as Clarkson evidences, Coetzee’s anti-dialogism is contravened by the clear applicability of dialogism as a concept in Coetzee’s fictions: they abound in citation and reference to other works of literature. If we have to make sense of Coetzee’s rowing against the tide of dialogism, then it comes down to Coetzee’s desire to name the communion between writers and texts, between audiences and writers, as fictions. Dialogism, for Coetzee, disenchant the experience of being spoken to in the act of writing or reading the novel.

### **Being spoken to: the fiction of a fiction**

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<sup>87</sup> Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, p. 246.

<sup>88</sup> Carrol Clarkson, *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> Clarkson, p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Clarkson, p. 8.

Costello comes to Paul because her attempts to write what she hears have begun to fail her. Although she had ‘heard those words’ (SM, 81), the opening words of the novel, she is now unsure how the plot will proceed or what the value, or lesson, of Paul might be. Telling Paul that he ‘occurred’ to her – ‘a man with a bad leg and no future and an unsuitable passion’ (SM, 85), Costello evidences a bias toward the mysterious elements of writing: ‘This is how I have built my life: by following up intuitions, including those I cannot at first make sense of. Above all those I cannot at first make sense of’ (SM, 85). We have explored these claims in relation to the secretary, but the experiences of pursuing intuition and being spoken to occur in other ways, and in a manner that suggest the problem of creativity to be a consistent, incumbent, concern. In *Youth*, in 1960s London, the writer attends an exhibition of abstract expressionist paintings. Having had no luck with the Jackson Pollock (despite giving it fifteen minutes to ‘penetrate him’) he moves along to Robert Motherwell’s ‘Elegy for the Spanish Republic 24’<sup>91</sup> which consists of nothing more than ‘an elongated black blob on a white field’:

He is transfixed. Menacing and mysterious, the black shape takes him over. A sound like the stroke of a gong goes out from it, leaving him shaken and weak-kneed.

Where does its power come from, this amorphous shape that bears no resemblance to Spain or anything else, yet stirs up a well of dark feeling within him? It is not beautiful, yet it speaks like beauty, imperiously. Why does Motherwell have this power and not Pollock, or Van Gogh, or Rembrandt? Is it the same power that makes his heart leap at the sight of one woman and not another? Does *Elegy for the Spanish Republic* correspond to some indwelling shape in his soul? What of the woman who is to be his fate? Is her shadow already stored in his inner darkness? How much longer before she reveals herself? When she does, will he be prepared? (Y, 92–3)

There is a lot that could be said here about the libidinal energies ascribed to this experience and its convergence of the aesthetic, the edifying and the (attempted) romantic. That the spectator, too, is not attempting to locate the technique of the painter but focuses instead on the experience of enchantment marks this as a different type of aesthetic experience than Smith in front of Cézanne, or George in front of del Cossa. But what I want to focus on in this instance is the ‘sound like the stroke of a gong’ that has a physical effect on the writer and begins the series of questions. It is likely a reference to Rainer Maria Rilke’s ‘Gong’, a 1925 poem that attempts to distil the instant in which an artwork changes its

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<sup>91</sup> Despite the book’s substantiation of the painting’s name to what should be a reliable source (‘so says the label’ (Y, 92)) the series that this painting is part of is actually called ‘Elegy *to* the Spanish Republic’ not ‘for’. This seems to represent another means of creating a disjuncture between the real and the fictional in the author’s autobiography.

subject from one medium to another (from raw material to an aesthetic rendering) and which emphasises the ‘correspondence’ between viewer and viewed (or soul and artwork) that Coetzee feels above. This is Stephen Mitchell’s translation of the first stanza:

No longer for ears . . . : sound  
which, like a deeper ear,  
hears *us*, who only seem  
to be hearing. Reversal of spaces.  
Projection of innermost worlds  
into the Open . . . , temple  
before their birth, solution  
saturated with gods  
that are almost insoluble . . . : Gong!<sup>92</sup>

As in the ‘correspondence’ between Coetzee and the Motherwell painting in *Youth*, the aesthetic event that takes place in ‘Gong’ catalyses a ‘Reversal of spaces. / Projection of innermost worlds / into the Open’. Judith Ryan suggests that this metaphor of sound signifies ‘the way in which art translates actuality into something simultaneously more ethereal and more permanent.’<sup>93</sup> But it is not only metaphorical. Ryan believes it emerged from Rilke’s interest in the phonograph, the first audio technology which not only recorded sound but could also replay it. The phonograph therefore forges a new relationship between the invisible and sensible that is based on copying, but this is copying with a difference – the reversal (or the inscription) adds something previously unthought or insensible.

As an instance of being spoken to, Coetzee’s correspondence with the Motherwell painting takes place in the course of a fictionalised autobiography, but the experience of address, being called upon by an artwork – which is also presented as an experience of enchantment – is mediated by another artist and specifically by another poem which roots the experience of being spoken to in an iterative technology. We’re back at square one. The experience of an apparently authentic aesthetic experience is shown to speak with the language of another’s theorisation of being spoken to. As Clarkson says of Coetzee’s dialogism, the experience in front of the Motherwell painting raises a countervoice and produces ‘a discourse inflected by an invisible interlocutor’ which does away with an originary point of authority. We see more of these markers of iteration when Costello laments to her children, in ‘As a Woman’, that by becoming the cliché of the stuck record, the word ‘bleak’ has ‘become attached’ to her: ‘It is like a little mongrel that trails behind,

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<sup>92</sup> ‘Gong’, in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. by and trans. by Stephen Mitchell (London: Picador, 1987), p. 283.

<sup>93</sup> Ryan, p. 165.

yapping, and won't be shaken off. I am dogged by it. It will follow me to the grave."<sup>94</sup> Paul, too, remarks that the fictional world he suspects that he now inhabits is 'identical' with the world he used to inhabit 'except that one now has Elizabeth Costello around one's neck, or someone like her' (SM, 122). Again, the world of the fiction contains markers of fictionality; but Costello and Paul's experience of unfinished fiction is that bad copying can result in assailants as well as intermediaries.

But from the perspective of fictionality, a discourse of mediumship is a rhetorical strategy that re-orientes our attention to the present-tense experience of the author in the act of writing rather than the abstracted concept of voice and its structuring of novel authority. This instance of an author discussing where writing comes from can be illuminated by Walsh's solo work on fictionality, briefly mentioned earlier for its treatment of Trollope's paradoxical attention to the business and metaphysics of writing. Walsh has discussed the phenomenon of authors who say that they are mediums, or were spoken to by their characters or another phantasm or spirit of writing, posing this as a divestment of responsibility for narrative creativity. He describes this as a rhetorical strategy that negotiates between the ideological and material traits of authorship, between the experience of 'the mysteries of narrative creativity and the practical realities of the profession of the novelist' and which thus 'serves to negotiate the tensions between material interest and disinterestedness, and so also between the subjective, ideological occasion of communication and the claim to impersonal truths.'<sup>95</sup> In this sense, claims to mediumship become a means of anticipating and thus negotiating the reader's identification not just with the world of the fiction but with the novel, of which the novelist is an implicated part. It is an author posing as narrative audience.

For Walsh the novelist-as-medium is just one point on a spectrum of how novelists relate to the act and experience of creation, between 'the mysteries of narrative creativity and the practical realities of the profession of the novelist'.<sup>96</sup> Beginning with an account of Alice Walker who, in the introduction to *The Color Purple*, 'thanks' her characters for 'coming' to the fiction and writing it, Walsh locates this prefatory bow within a literary history from Walter Scott, through Anthony Trollope, Henry James and Elizabeth Bowen to Donald Barthelme who all claim varying levels of responsibility for what they have written; this is, he says, one point on a spectrum that spans found poems, automatic writing and authorial intrusions. Across this spectrum, the role of the artist is 'that of a mediator

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<sup>94</sup> Coetzee, 'As a Woman'.

<sup>95</sup> Walsh, *Idea*, p. 132.

<sup>96</sup> Walsh, *Idea*, p. 132.

between that source and the reader, one whose claim is not to have originated meaning, but to have gained access to it, discovered it, or identified it and sanctioned its authority.<sup>97</sup> It is not enough to say, then, that Coetzee examines the duty or authority of the author but rather that this examination should be understood as part of a history in which authors have been traceable or untraceable in their work, and how they have expressed that relationship. Coetzee's use of Costello, then, is on one end of a spectrum that has Yeats's use of Georgie Hyde-Lees, engaged in automatic writing, at its other end.

Walsh draws two conclusions that are particularly compelling for our discussion of dictation as an expression of fictionality. First, he suggests that in labelling oneself a medium the author enacts a shift in which they reposition themselves as a reader: 'the author is not a figure *behind* the text, but one on the same side of it as the reader. The novelist as medium is a kind of privileged first reader.'<sup>98</sup> This seems to directly contradict Milosz's secretary who 'won't read it anyway'. Second, Walsh suggests that the novelist-as-medium phenomenon is not really about the magic of mediumship at all but rather is a dialogue that the author has with themselves about the production of their fiction. Walsh says that this discourse of authorial impersonality is 'a fiction of the fiction, a representation of the novelist's relation to the narrative rather than to the reader.'<sup>99</sup> As such, the rhetoric of mediumship is evidence of a reflexive impulse that tells us about the experience of writing as an anxious and often unfulfilling or disappointing one:

Authorial control of the course of the narrative indicates the extent to which the narrative understanding in the novelist's conception proves adequate to its realization, whereas the loss of that control, that foreknowledge, indicates the extent to which the creative process is a revision of the narrative understanding of its premises – or simply the discovery of other, more compelling narrative meanings. In other words, the novelist's creative work is never simply original, and in fact it is only a process of discovery when it is least experienced as the author's own; which, of course, is why an experience that might be expected to cause novelists nothing but frustration is so highly valued by them.<sup>100</sup>

Novelists have forged a myriad of ways to divest their responsibility for the narrative because the process of creation is a frustrating one. Coetzee's notebooks, recently made available at the Harry Ransom Center, show this authorial frustration. About three years into his writing career, he laments that '[e]very morning since 1 Jan 1970 I have sat down to write. I HATE it.'<sup>101</sup> The inability to fully realise the ideal narrative in writing – not because

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<sup>97</sup> Walsh, *Idea*, p. 135.

<sup>98</sup> Walsh, *Idea*, p. 131.

<sup>99</sup> Walsh, *Idea*, p. 141.

<sup>100</sup> Walsh, *Idea*, p. 147.

<sup>101</sup> J. M. Coetzee, quoted in Attwell, *Face to Face*, p. 49.



of a failure in channelling ideas but because of their changeability (dare I say, their dialogic potential) once conjured to the page – results then in a ‘fiction of the fiction’ that subtends or intrudes into the ‘original’ fiction to the extent that the notion of an original idea or original fiction disappears. We saw an example of this in Costello’s edit of ‘tumbles’ to ‘flies’ in order to take on a reference to a popular song. But it is, of course, Coetzee’s characters, and not Coetzee himself, claiming mediumship. When Costello labels herself a writer who ‘follows intuitions’ we are seeing what Walsh calls ‘the fiction of fiction’ enacted *in* fiction. This also highlights, then, what Thurschwell and Price called the refraction of writing onto another space, which helps repetition and unoriginality become the discovery.

The figure of the secretary mobilises a discourse of fictionality and authorship internal to the novel, and shows that the figure in the act of reading or writing always ends up as the intermediary, neither the original nor something new but the phonograph which is somewhere in-between. Francescho of *How to be both* named this an ‘enchanted line / the line drawn between planes’. The line is dynamic for Coetzee too, but it serves as a more solemn investigation of the line between life and fiction. Another way of reading this line, the intermediary position of the secretary where beliefs are invested and sustained temporarily, is to see these as expressions of the cognitive space between wisdom and ignorance that is said to be the place both of reparative critical readings and fictional belief, but which in Coetzee’s fiction takes on an additional inference as a space of infliction and injury. This will guide our final reading.

## Secretaries II: between wisdom and ignorance, blessing and belief

The Medium! Between! [...] [T]he median – that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled!<sup>102</sup>

-- J. M. Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country*

Costello’s aforementioned rhetoric of having beliefs but not believing them takes us to another expression of fiction as a condition that operates between knowing and naivety, and gives an additional inflection to intuition as well as conferring an enchantment to the experience of being the intermediary. When Costello says that she has beliefs but does not believe in them, she echoes Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium*; Diotima talks about the

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<sup>102</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country* (London: Vintage, 2015), p. 145.

transformative spirit of love (its mediation between this realm and another), and describes this spirit as a philosopher who occupies a middle state between wisdom and ignorance. Diotima – whose words are recounted by Socrates, who is being voiced by Plato, in a convolution of mediation and memory – speaks of possible middle grounds between knowing and not knowing, this mode of knowledge is called ‘correct belief’:

I am talking about having a correct belief without being able to give a reason for it. Don’t you realise that this state cannot be called knowing – for how can it be knowledge if it lacks reason? And it is not ignorance either – for how can it be ignorance if it has hit upon the truth? Correct belief clearly occupies just such a middle state, between wisdom and ignorance.<sup>103</sup>

We find ourselves, here, back in the language of Adorno, Sedgwick and Felski, and all those who have theorised the intersections between critical knowledge and aesthetic attachment: to occupy the middle state is, as one in love, to deal neither in knowingness nor ignorance but in performative knowledge.

Michael Funk Deckard and Ralph Palm have identified Costello’s mode of belief as a Humean one: they are beliefs without proof or evidence which we are nonetheless inclined to hold because of an undefined *feeling* of the need to believe or correctness of that belief. And yet it is not a lie because it feels to be truthful. For Costello, as for Hume, this mode of ‘opinion or belief is nothing but an idea, that is different from a fiction, not in the nature, or the order of its parts, but in the *manner* of its being conceived’ in that it ‘*feels* different from a fictitious idea’.<sup>104</sup> At some indiscernible point, fiction becomes a conviction. It is also worth recalling Kareem’s configuration of wonder. Kareem, also via Hume, brings his articulation of belief to focus on the eighteenth-century novel. Kareem argues that the solicitation of wonder by these novels aimed at evoking a ‘suspension between belief and disbelief’ and between ‘perception and comprehension’ wherein those suspensions came to be ‘savoured as an aesthetic end’ in itself.<sup>105</sup> Kareem thus encapsulates the very sense of something that is *different* to fictitious belief in the very experience of fiction. In other words, there is already a vocabulary for Coetzee’s fictional renderings of becoming the intermediary, and it is rooted first in a history of theorising types of belief

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<sup>103</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, ed. by M. C. Howatson and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield, trans. by M. C. Howatson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 37. The editors note that ‘correct belief’ has also been translated as ‘true belief’ and ‘right opinion’ but that all, in their view, have the same meaning. (p. 37, n148) To add to this convolution of voicing and mediation, Plato is believed to have been a scribe for Socrates.

<sup>104</sup> David Hume, from *A Treatise of Human Nature*, cited by Michael Funk Deckard, and Ralph Palm, ‘Irony and Belief in Elizabeth Costello’, in *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*, ed. by Anton Leist and Peter Singer (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 337–56 (p. 345).

<sup>105</sup> Kareem, p. 22.

that are not rooted in rationality, and second in a history of theorising enchantment in the novel.

Anya's work as a secretary brings out an additional inference of Diotima's speech for Coetzee's work. Anya, a homemaker, is aligned with multiple forms of what Cecire outlined as unmasterful women's work, but her secretarial duty is cathected with JC's attraction to her, and she begins to take on a Platonic form – she is the beautiful secretary, the beautiful mediator. Indeed, despite starting as a 'tipitista' or 'clackadackia', Anya comes to take on a more caring role: as the fiction's plot develops in the lower two thirds of the book's pages, we see Anya protecting JC from her partner Alan's plans to embezzle him, and when she splits from Alan and moves out of their shared apartment complex, she discreetly passes her contact details to the building manager in case JC is taken 'into hospital or worse' because she doesn't 'like to think of him all alone, facing, you know, the end' (DBY, 222) and she promises that she will 'clean up afterwards [...] and put everything in order' (DBY, 226). Between this, Anya's coaxing of JC to evince his 'flesh and blood', and her reminder that she is more than a machine, we are not just seeing the demand of a reader who has poor taste or reads for pleasure, but the mediator's hand in helping to realise the right story, or, the story that wants to be written. Diotima, according to Plato, speaks of Love as a spirit and philosopher who mediates between deities and humans (who are otherwise 'completely separate'): 'through the mediation of spirits all converse and communication from gods to humans, waking and sleeping, is made possible.'<sup>106</sup> Mediators, says Diotima, make conversing and communing possible and they are, therefore, another figuration of the bridges that constitute fiction. Like Barthes's ideal reader, the mediator 'accumulates languages, he lets himself be infinitely and tirelessly traversed by them: he is that traversal.'<sup>107</sup>

Perhaps nowhere is Anya's role as a mediating spirit clearer in *Diary* than when JC tells of a bad dream in his first-person narrative:

Last night I had a bad dream, which I afterwards wrote down, about dying and being guided to the gateway to oblivion by a young woman. What I did not record is the question that occurred to me in the act of writing: *Is she the one?* (DBY, 59)

Anya, then, is the mediator, the Platonic vessel both for the realisation of JC's writing, and his conveyance into 'oblivion'. In passing over his drafts to Anya, the relationship becomes something like a therapeutic one. In a discussion of Kleinian positions, Coetzee tells Kurtz that '[i]ntegration must be possible – we would all be half-mad, split creatures if it were not

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<sup>106</sup> Plato, p. 39.

<sup>107</sup> Barthes, 'On Reading', p. 42.

– but how one achieves it and gets to “the truth” I can’t quite see.<sup>108</sup> In the Anya-JC relationship, we are led to believe that the closest access to meaning, or fictional truth, comes when we put our words through another. Anya is that vessel, the mediator, into which JC puts the raw materials, his handwritten scripts and dictations to test the ‘soundness’. And in doing so, she is rendered ‘nowhere and everywhere’ in his work.

Costello, too, as the secretarial author is not only a mediator for the real-life Coetzee, but also finds that she needs to pass her words through the man she writes of – to see if they ring true. When Costello arrives in *Slow Man*, not only does she proceed to shift the terms of belief in the novel – by reading aloud its opening pages – and affirm her experience of writing as dictation, but she immediately and explicitly analogises her partially automated labour with a canonical instance of an unbelievable belief.<sup>109</sup> In our final example of Coetzee’s bridging problems, Costello is no longer just a secretary but is also a doubting Thomas. Costello wants to shake Paul’s hand:

She reaches out her own right hand and he takes it. For a moment the plump and rather cool feminine hand rests in his own, which he notices with distaste has taken on the livid hue it does when he has been inactive too long.

“So,” she says. “I am rather a doubting Thomas, as you see.” And when he looks puzzled: “I mean, wanting to explore for myself what kind of being you are. Wanting to be sure,” she proceeds, and now he is really losing her, “that our two bodies would not just pass through each other. Naïve, of course. We are not ghosts, either of us – why should I have thought so?” (SM, 80–1)

Costello gets to do what the authors Walsh described can only write of in fiction – she meets and speaks with her character and is able to observe him, take notes on him. What does it mean, though, that Costello needs to pass her words through Paul? I want to read this grasp, the image of Thomas and the idiom of blessing that it brings forth, as a final example of bridging as a means of constructing belief. More specifically, I want to use this appropriation of iconography, and its incumbent correlation of wounding, absorption and belief, as a way to read how fictional belief, specifically as it pertains to character, is predicated on a cut or a wound.<sup>110</sup> It is, in other words, an example of the bridge which

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<sup>108</sup> Coetzee and Kurtz, p. 99.

<sup>109</sup> That these first twelve chapters possess metafictional qualities might only come into as much focus in retrospect, or on a rereading of the text, but their specifically literary formulation is noticeable from the first reading. Knocked off his bike, Paul sees and thinks of words, seeing ‘*limber* or *limbre*’ is ‘on the horizon’ (SM, 1) and he hears a ‘clack clack clack’ as the letters ‘E-R-T-Y [...] F-R-I-V-O-L [...] E [...] Q-W-E-R-T-Y’ (SM, 3) are typed out behind his eyelids. As Patrick Denman Flanery has argued, the writtleness of *Slow Man* is clear from the beginning. (Patrick Denman Flanery, ‘Limber: The Flexibilities of Post-Nobel Coetzee’, *Print, Text and Book Cultures in South Africa*, ed. by Andrew van der Vlies, (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012), pp. 208–224.)

<sup>110</sup> Stephen Mulhall argues that the narrative voice, a detached but internal voice ‘which is and is not Rayment’s, is always trying to find le mot juste, is in a position to recall etymologies and register a palimpsest

connects but also maintains the rift between nowhere and the far bank. That the figure of the doubting Thomas, moreover, has become cultural shorthand for a sceptic (Felski uses it to caricature the suspicious reader) renders this image well-disposed for a discussion of the terms of belief, and the instant in which that belief is forged.

Insistent on making a physical connection, Costello's touch – and Paul's reception of it – not only recalls the biblical narrative of doubting Thomas, but mimics the very image of Caravaggio's 'The Incredulity of Saint Thomas' (Figure 1). Costello reaches out her right hand just as Thomas does to Christ. What is particularly notable in this description is how, prompted by Costello's incitement to touch hands, Paul finds his hand 'livid' because he has been 'inactive too long' (SM, 81). We might read this as a suggestion of Paul's mere brilliance, or the fact that his character is not yet fully realised.

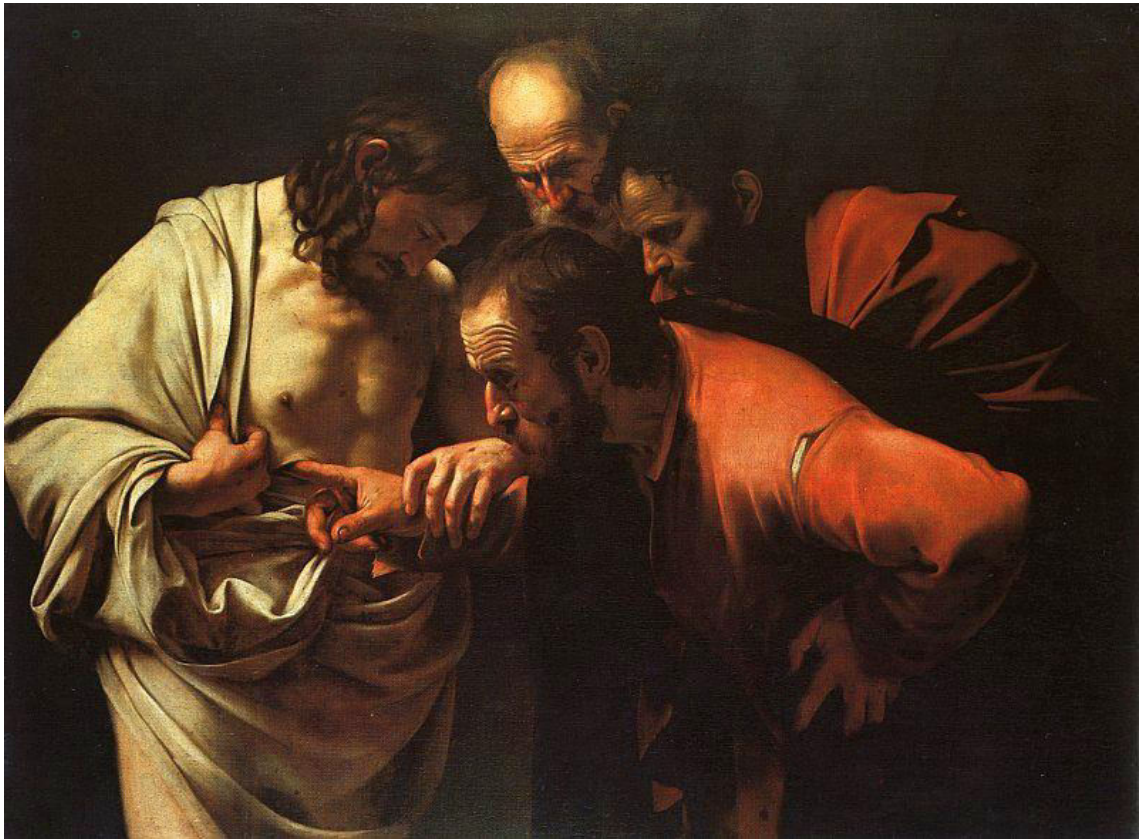


Figure 1: Caravaggio, 'Incredulity of Saint Thomas', Oil on Canvas, c. 1601-2

Whereas the biblical story of Thomas tells of a revelation based on seeing Christ's wound, Caravaggio's painting retells this as a revelation based on touch. A depiction of the moment at which Thomas relinquishes his disbelief in the resurrection of Christ, Caravaggio's Thomas has his finger guided into the wound in Christ's side by Christ

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of higher and lower cultural reference points'. Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee & the Difficulty of Reality in Literature & Philosophy* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 243.

himself as two figures look on.<sup>111</sup> Howard Hibbard has noted its ‘surgical detail’ and ‘shockingly realistic’ nature which he calls an ‘artful artlessness’.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, details abound in the painting: the tear in the shoulder of Thomas’s clothing which mirrors the wound in Christ’s side, the lines of Thomas’s forehead which register his surprise, Thomas’s steadying hand on his own thigh – the only other hand visible in the scene – which has the effect of highlighting the unexpected nakedness of Christ’s thigh, the nail on Thomas’s thumb, the folds in the clothing and particular arrangements of the fingers, and the ears of each man. Michael Fried has suggested that the detail both invokes and dispels the possibility of interiority: ‘Incredulity’ is one of four Caravaggio paintings in which ‘the emphasis’, he says, ‘falls strongly on the implication of psychic and/or spiritual “depth”’ but the level of detail and the intensity of the absorption stops that depth from being possible.<sup>113</sup>

Fried’s reading of the painting stresses that, at this stage in his career, Caravaggio was painting with an enhanced expectation of reception and in doing so, maps out a similar story of the painter-subject-spectator relationship that shares in Coetzee’s experience as an author who anticipates reception by an erudite audience. Caravaggio was one of a handful of Italian painters who, in the late-sixteenth century, were at the vanguard of changes in patronage which saw the rise of ‘ambitious and highly cultivated collectors’ as well as ‘personal galleries’ for the display of those works.<sup>114</sup> This ‘encouraged the development of a particular kind of painting’ that became the ‘dominant form of the picture’ with which we are familiar now:

not small but not outstandingly large, often religious in subject matter but not necessarily devotional in intent, framed and portable rather than fixed permanently in place, open to compositional and interpretive innovation, and typically, as in Caravaggio’s case, executed with a care that signaled the painter’s alertness both to the cultivated tastes of his elite viewership and to the circumstances of display that would make possible unusually close scrutiny of the finished artifact (also to the competitive market in which he or, much more rarely she, was forging a career).<sup>115</sup>

Caravaggio’s expectation of ‘unusually close scrutiny’ and viewers with ‘cultivated tastes’ speak to the trajectory of Coetzee’s career between *The Lives of Animals* and *Slow Man*, a time of increasing public appearance and attention from mainstream literary institutions. As

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<sup>111</sup> What’s more, it is not certain that Thomas is even looking at Christ’s wound in this image. His eyes, rather, seem to be glazed over, staring into the middle distance, as if in shock (or temporarily blinded) by his revelation. The hand and eye, in Kittler’s phrasing, are unlinked.

<sup>112</sup> Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983) p. 168.

<sup>113</sup> Fried, p. 100.

<sup>114</sup> Fried, p. 83.

<sup>115</sup> Fried, pp. 83–4.

Attwell has said of the Coetzee-Costello relation, Coetzee reached for Costello specifically at the time when he experienced a greater demand to step into the role of public intellectual. Attwell notes that the ‘metafictional impulse’ of *Slow Man* frequently arose in Coetzee’s draft manuscripts, but that it was usually resisted and worked around. In the process of writing *Slow Man*, however, when ‘Coetzee reached what had become a familiar moment of doubt with *Slow Man*, when he reached that typical point of crisis at which the metafictional impulse asserts itself, on this occasion he opened the door and let Elizabeth Costello in.’<sup>116</sup>

It is both the capacity of Coetzee’s fictional worlds to bear scrutiny and the scrutiny brought to bear on Costello that have served as a focus of this chapter. In the previous chapter, we considered the outcome of scrutiny through close reading and alighted on the double-bind of characters whose accessibility announced artifice (George’s mother described herself as ‘pert’, gesturing to the ‘unconcealed’ nature of her artifice). But that same accessibility implored us to believe in the possible depths of those characters. This is the bind that we encounter in Paul. In *Slow Man*, ‘bless’ signals a condition of character that hinges on the trace left by the incomplete representation that signals fictionality, the bridge that shows we are between nowhere and the far bank, or which suggests that intuitions might really only revolve around cuts that we already know to exist (or, in other words, that we copy). *Slow Man* utilises an idiom of blessing that takes us back to Christ’s address to Thomas: ‘blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed’.<sup>117</sup> As in this biblical usage, ‘bless’ is most commonly heard in its Christian sense. To bless something or someone is to consecrate or anoint it, perhaps to bestow protection, or to mark a person out as a chosen one, a believer. But the OED explains that its etymological meaning was bloodier than that: to ‘mark (or affect in some way) with blood (or sacrifice); to consecrate’.<sup>118</sup> This account goes on to explain that the development of the word in English was taken over by the Christian sense of eulogising and praising, but this development was otherwise in the French. ‘Bless’ also has roots in the Old French verb ‘blecier’ meaning ‘to injure, to wound’.<sup>119</sup> Blessure, in current usage, means ‘injury’. Paul, who is French by birth, gestures to this derivation when he speaks not of his leg, but his heart, as having ‘a *blessure*’ because he does not have any children (SM, 155).

*Slow Man* plays to this dual meaning. The doctors who attend to Paul in the immediate aftermath of the accident tell him that the repercussions of the accident are ‘not

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<sup>116</sup> Attwell, *Face to Face*, p. 243.

<sup>117</sup> John 20. 29.

<sup>118</sup> ‘bless, v.1’ *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/20165>> [accessed 12 April 2017].

<sup>119</sup> ‘bless, v.2’ *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/20166](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/20166)> [accessed 12 April 2017].

*serious*. In fact, it is so much the reverse of serious that he can count himself lucky, fortunate, blessed' (SM, 6). Straight away, the amputation of his lower right leg is linked to the idea that he has been chosen. Later, as Paul reflects on his Catholic upbringing and Marjiana's Roman Catholicism, Paul ruminates that he has failed 'to perform what man is brought into the world to perform' which is, to have children, to 'seek out his other half, cleave to her, and bless her with his seed' (SM, 33). The proximity of *bless* and *cleave* continues to address this double-bind of the blessing, with cleave meaning to separate with a cut, but also to cling together. In a similar sense, the 'blow' that 'catches him from the right' (SM, 1) Paul in the description of the accident is not just blow as in a strike and the opening of the first pages catching from the right, but also blow as in an animating breath. This is another dimension of the question of bridging: the cleave, the bless or blow that will connect but also separate.

We encounter a double-bind, then, in the character who is 'blessed' and therefore in Paul Rayment especially: he is at once marked out as a chosen one upon whom Costello has 'alighted' but is also brought into existence through narration and fiction *solely because of* his injury. What's more, the moment of the grasp – in which his hand was 'livid' – was a formalisation of being marked out. If we look back to 'Thomas', then, we see all at once a blessing and a blessure; this moment of revelation relies on the existence of a wound and its mirroring in the tear in Thomas's shoulder, but for Christ to be a Christ worth retelling for posterity, he has to be marked, injured. The investment of belief, the building of the bridge, depends on the simultaneous blessing and blessure. Reading a character in a novel, whose body has been injured and whose story has been alighted on by a woman from another story who claims to be writing the story, brings us to the question of whether there is an inherent link in fiction between being a character and being inflicted by a blessure? In the case of Paul Rayment, he is at once marked out as a chosen one upon whom this author-character has alighted and decided to narrativise, but that drive to narrativisation means injury; the infliction and the narration are locked in a struggle of claims to origin. The wound both tells of our scepticism and asks for our investment. To be blessed is to believe in spite of not knowing, which is ultimately what Costello does not do. She has to make the empirical connection, and so Costello's naming herself and assuming the posture of the doubting Thomas thus casts her as the writer who did *not* believe, and whose meeting with her character is an errant act that tarnishes belief into fictional belief.

Doubting Thomas is just one reference, one explanation of the authorial disposition in *Slow Man* – a novel that abounds in references that Costello is trying out – and so its interpretive possibilities should not be overstated as though it were the



structuring principle for the entire novel. But it does bear remarking that it is this enduring image of faith, which belongs to a moment in art history in which artists were increasingly expecting ‘close scrutiny’ and were loosed from painting with specifically ‘devotional’ intent that underpins this single text in Coetzee’s oeuvre in which he – experiencing ‘a typical point of crisis’ – chose a reflexive gimmick, in this case metalepsis. In the final place, *Slow Man* insists on the fantasy of the author’s ability to know their character and undermines its efficacy, the metalepsis does not deliver for Costello. *Slow Man* ends with Paul and Costello parting ways; Paul dons some glasses ‘again’ to see Costello clearly and kisses her ‘in the formal manner he was taught as a child, left right left’ (SM, 263). But these glasses have never been mentioned before, they are a new detail. With the kiss’s emphasis on the left rather than right, the remaining leg rather than the amputated one, and the detail of the glasses, *Slow Man* reframes the reader’s access to Paul. This donning of an unexpected prosthesis – the glasses rather than the leg – is another iteration of the way that fictions involve copies in order to find new forms; Coetzee’s use of Costello, for all its reiterations, finds a resolution that confers the successful construction of Paul’s character.

Elizabeth S. Anker has recently asked whether Coetzee’s ‘creative theory’ and his ‘innumerable false leads’ ultimately lead the critic into a type of criticism that is a ‘parade of gimmicks and ploys?’: ‘When all is said and done, is Coetzee setting us up? Whatever weariness Coetzee (and Coetzee criticism) induces thus seems to echo a more pervasive mood within theory – a mood that equally responds to disappointments, roadblocks, and dead ends.’<sup>120</sup> Speaking here of the fictional and erroneous historical references that make up *Childhood*, Anker expresses her confusion with Coetzee: is she supposed to respond with sincerity or with light-heartedness? I think we are barking up the wrong tree if we ask whether the existence of so many references is a ‘set-up’, but there is something resonant in Anker’s articulation of the tug between the seemingly earnest fictional endeavour of Coetzee’s fiction and its repetitive self-reference and reference to other literary texts. This chapter has read that tension as an endeavour, in Coetzee’s fictions, to examine the dissonance of belief that fictionality raises. Debates about the role of belief in fictionality, and dialogism in novel theory, have helped us to see how Coetzee’s iterative self-reference, which requires reading across fictions and reference to other fictions and literary texts, speaks to the disbelief or double consciousness that takes place in the act of reading. Anticipating his authorial audience, an increasingly academic and scrutinising reader,

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<sup>120</sup> Elizabeth S. Anker, ‘Why We Love Coetzee; or, *The Childhood of Jesus* and the Funhouse of Critique’, in *Critique and Postcritique*, ed. by Elizabeth S. Anker, and Rita Felski (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2017), pp. 183–208 (p. 206)

Coetzee's use of the secretary and other figures of bridging hold those tensions of reader and writer, wisdom and ignorance, copying and originality, belief and disbelief in place.

In the move from Smith to Coetzee we saw the loss of enthusiasm in public speaking, the cultivation of a protective ambiguity, and a move from a joy to a distrust of the artifice of fiction. In what follows, we will read a novelist whose career frames a similar trajectory to Coetzee's, but who presents us with a different problem of fictionality and enchantment. Leaving behind Coetzee's refusal of straightforward access to the figure of the author, we will see how Morrison's availability, in interviews and in public, has meant that readers use her words, often uncritically, in place of making meaningful connections between her authority as a reader and the authority of her fiction.

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### 3.

#### Reading with Toni Morrison

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I would like it to be clear at the outset that I do not bring to these matters solely or even principally the tools of a literary critic. As a reader (before becoming a writer) I read as I had been taught to do. But books revealed themselves rather differently to me as a writer.<sup>1</sup>

-- Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

I'm background [...]. My humming encourages people; frames their thoughts like when Mildred Pierce decides she has to go to jail for her daughter. I suspect, soft as it is, my music has that kind of influence too. The way "Mood Indigo" drifting across the waves can change the way you swim. It doesn't make you dive in, but it can set your stroke, or trick you into believing you are both smart and lucky. So why not swim farther and a little farther still? What's the deep to you? Of course, I don't claim that kind of power. My hum is mostly below range, private; suitable for an old woman embarrassed by the world<sup>2</sup>

-- Toni Morrison, *Love*

There was a tongue-in-cheek moment in the introduction, a moment of recognition which highlighted that – newsflash – writers are also readers. Toni Morrison is one such reader. Or rather, Morrison is a novelist who has spoken at length about her own reading practices, about her experience of the implied or imagined reader when writing, and of her ideas about the significant role that readers of fiction possess when it comes to producing the meaning of a novel (and her own novels in particular). In addition to these remarks, gleaned in interviews and various critical writings, reading has often been a subject of Morrison's fictions. As the epigraph from *Love* exemplifies, Morrison's narrators often ruminate on the enchanting qualities that they possess (this narrator's 'music' might 'set your stroke'), encouraging its reader to reflect on the act of reading,

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 3. Subsequent references to PD.

<sup>2</sup> Toni Morrison, *Love* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 4. Subsequent references to L.

and the mechanisms of narrative fiction that incite involvement or mimetic identification. By framing her influence in terms of enchantment, this narrator (named L) links the enchantments of narration with those of the lulling tones that music (and specifically a popular jazz song) is capable of. These words are among the novel's first, and as such, L sets an expectation of what is to come: namely, that the question of interpretation (and of who frames or structures our reading) is at the fore.

But L is not exactly, or not only, talking about reading. She is talking about how she understands her minimally uttered presence (her humming) to affect those around her. She is a ghost narrator, and in this introduction she is reflecting on that presence both in her time alive and in her effects as a spectral presence. Her reference to the 1941 novel, or 1945 film, *Mildred Pierce* stops this imagined reader from being too general, signalling that her narration belongs to a particular cultural moment. L is an 'old woman embarrassed by the world' who feels irrelevant, or whose authority is irrelevant. Moreover, as we will see, her decision to express this through the analogy of swimming turns out to anticipate the novel's investment in the affective register of the ocean and the effects of its swell on characters. That this expression of enchantment is capacious enough to also invite and support the projection of a self-conscious reader demonstrates the effects of Morrison's recurring narrative structure: Morrison frequently writes narrators who operate at a different level from the diegesis and who speak both to it and to us, and which has the effect of drawing us into a confused but not obfuscating relation with the levels of character, authorship and authority in the narrative. In particular, her post-millennial novels play host to a repeated narrative structure in which the diegetic world is framed by the presence of an otherworldly or authorial narrator who makes suggestive comments on the means by which we (the reader) might interpret the narrative, and which have the effect of suspending the fictional world between complete representation and meta-representation. *Love* and Morrison's 2008 novel *A Mercy*, both to be taken up as subjects later in this chapter, combine multi-perspective narratives with a recurring authorial narrator.

Moments like the above are partly responsible for what this chapter will argue is Morrison's insight into workings of contemporary fictionality. In a variety of ways, Morrison's reputation as a writer is shot through with her presence and authority as a reader; I will argue that the combination of her fictional and extra-fictional work has produced a critical narrative in which her readers theorise the act of reading with a specific emphasis on the Morrisonian incitement to active and participatory reading, but

through an overwhelming citational recourse to extra-fictional Morrison rather than the fiction itself. In conversations with colleagues I have joked that this is my chapter on the ‘bad side’ of enchantment, by which I have been trying to articulate what is at stake when the author’s relationship to the fiction is naturalised, when critics read fiction with an uncritical conflation of the author with their fiction. In discussing the work of Coetzee and Smith we have, to some degree, accounted for the relationship between author and character, but in addition to reiterating previous chapters’ focus on fictional readers and reading, this chapter will consider what happens when authors are read alongside or into their fictions, and will trace the tendency, and the inference of the tendency, of Morrison scholarship to organise itself around reflexive questions of reading and will pose it as a mode of critical enchantment that indicates a deference to the figure of the author. It will then locate this tendency in Morrison’s anticipation of being read and interpreted, as well as in a longstanding critical discourse of race as a marker of literary authenticity.

To speak of Morrison as an author, or of her extra-fictional work, is not straightforward. Indeed, not only do scenes of reading, writing, and interpretation abound in Morrison’s novels, but she has given hundreds of interviews and written literary criticism in which she speaks to her particular conception of what constitutes the act of reading, she has offered interpretations of her own fiction, and critics have routinely amplified not just Morrison’s comment about reading but have often, extracting from those same interviews and critical writings, cited her contempt for literary criticism and institutions of literary reading. In the above statement from *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison appeals to the authority of readers and writers in a different way. Tracing the elided ‘Africanist’ presence in American literary history and critiquing its absence from critical discourse (thus inaugurating a reputation as a reader adept in symptomatic reading), Morrison demonstrates how reading the latent content of white American narratives through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – reading ‘significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts’ – brings the contours of a narrative that ‘a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness’ (PD, 6) into view. When she says that she began to read as a writer, then, Morrison is indicating that her knowledge of, and ability to empathise with, the experience of the writer gives her a special insight into how fictions are created, how thoughts make their way to the page. What is particularly telling about this is that her ability to discern the Africanist presence is based on her

knowledge that the writer is never not conscious of what they write: writers ‘tell other stories, fight secret wars, limn out all sorts of debates blanketed in their texts’ and she is certain that they ‘always know, at some level, that they do this’ (PD, 4). I say this not to refer to Morrison for answers about her authority, but to show the sensibility of the author to which critics have responded. Writers know what they do, writers have intentions, what Skov Nielsen et al would call a ‘strategy’ for their ‘invention’.

All of these imbrications between writer, text and reader go some way to explaining the frequency with which readers of Morrison consider reading *in* Morrison. But it is also contextualised by the broader trajectory of Morrison’s career, which has included decades as an editor, a teacher and academic, an unabating prominence on the world literary stage, and the fact that Morrison was both the first African American woman and African American *period* to win the Nobel Prize.<sup>3</sup> Morrison’s particular iteration of the fact that writers are also readers therefore brings an additional inflection to our ongoing consideration of reflexivity in fiction and in criticism: what is our experience of fiction when it is not only framed by a reflexive narrator but also has the backdrop of a novelist who has amplified their belief in the presence of the reader? What are the effects of Morrison’s presence on the plausibility of, and investment in, the fiction? The same could be asked of any authorial presence, rather too large a question as this is, and so there is a certain response that we can perhaps configure as the real question here: if the effect of Morrison’s presence has been that Morrison critics often read reading in Morrison, or read with recourse to Morrison, rather than reading Morrison’s fiction then what do critical invocations of the author tell us about the effects of authorial availability (and what we will later consider as authorial mediumship) in studies of fiction?

### **“Reading” in Morrison**

The effect of Morrison’s interrelation of author and reader has been a repetitive critical narrative that runs as follows: Morrison is a writer who solicits particular modes of reading that bring her readers to an awareness of the cognitive process that they are undergoing in the act of reading. In other words, it has been argued that Morrison’s fictions produce and analyse the experience of engaged and active reading. Among the

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<sup>3</sup> These contexts are sometimes provided as prefaces (i.e. a ‘timeline’) in academic texts, but there has remained a reluctance to speak, for instance, on the possibility of what it means to write fiction as an editor.

most recent (and especially twenty-first century) commentators on Morrison's work, a significant number of interpretations respond precisely to the author's elicitation of a reflexive reading practice, or have rendered their revisionary critical practices through Morrison's fiction for the purposes of exposition. For the most part, criticism has focused on the mode of reading elicited by Morrison's early-middle fiction – particularly her 1987 novel *Beloved* – but there has been a handful of scholarship that considers the modes of reading in Morrison's later fiction, too.<sup>4</sup>

Critics in this line of argument have included H. Porter Abbott ('the palpable unknown' which is itself a re-working of James Phelan's 'reader-resistant' and 'stubborn narrative' both of which find articulation in *Beloved*), Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus ('surface reading'), Amy Hungerford ('supernatural reading'), David James ('participatory reading'), Heather Love ('reading close but not deep' or 'descriptive reading'), Paula M. L. Moya ('schematic reading'), C. Namwali Serpell ('adjacent reading') and Jean Wyatt ('call and response').<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that these critics are unaware of the reasons that they are considering the mode of reading (because Morrison in some sense invites it), but rather that they do not, other than Serpell, seem to notice it as a shared critical interest among other scholars of Morrison's work. It is as if the enchanting knowledge of technique has compelled critics to furnish a name for Morrison's famously intimate and ambiguous prose. What's more, this continued attention to the type of reading that Morrison solicits is evidence of an intuitive response to Morrison's fictionality, that there is a specific *use* or *strategy* in her fiction's attention to the act of reading. Of the critics listed above, Moya alone has sought to consider Morrison's attention to reading as a strategy that is specifically concerned with race. Moya's 'schematic reading' suggests a parallel between the diegetic focus on reading and interpretation in Morrison's late fiction and the sociological import of her narrative strategies. Moya suggests that Morrison's late fiction both encourages and enables a competence in reading race, regardless of the reader's ethnicity. Therefore, critical engagement with Morrison's fiction enables us, in Moya's view, to understand

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<sup>4</sup> I am characterising Morrison fiction into three phases: an early, middle and later stage. The earlier fiction are those that frame her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) up to the publication of *Tar Baby* (1981), with the middle period comprising the *Beloved-Jazz-Paradise* trilogy (1987–1997). This deviates from Jean Wyatt's classification. Wyatt poses only an early and late section and, as I will later discuss, locates a shift in the use of narrative ambiguity after *Paradise*. I take this, and the fact that Morrison marks the end of an intentional trilogy, as the point between the middle and later work.

<sup>5</sup> Full citations and page references will be given as these theories are discussed throughout the chapter.

how ‘literature can help to build racial literacy.’<sup>6</sup> As this outline of Moya’s project suggests, the way that Morrison’s work stages scenes of reading becomes both a lesson in reading race and an enquiry into ‘how contemporary reading practices are implicated in the historically-derived and institutionalized system of ideas and practices that is race.’<sup>7</sup> In reading Morrison’s fiction for its practical, cognitive effects, Moya situates Morrison’s reflexivity as a pedagogic narrative strategy.

In addition to inaugurating a number of hyper-defined critical modalities and provoking critical responses that attend to the experience of reading, critics are often quick to cite Morrison’s own words on how literature (and even her own novels) can be read, or what sort of critical experience reading literature can offer. John Duvall has leaned toward a mixture of the literary and non-literary in his work on Morrison’s postmodernism in which he argues that Morrison’s fiction charts an autobiographical account of her ‘struggle to become an author’.<sup>8</sup> In this work, he uses Morrison’s interviews and critical writings (particularly *Playing*) to provide the justification for his reading. Suggesting that in *Playing*, Morrison advocates for a mode of symptomatic reading that locates the unconscious thoughts of the white author as a way of reading the black subject in American writing (‘the subject of the dream,’ she writes ‘is the dreamer’ (PD, x)), Duvall thus finds his justification for reading Morrison’s fiction as a latent meditation on her identity as a black woman novelist. Jean Wyatt begins her project, on the dynamic of love in Morrison’s late fiction, with a threefold citation to Morrison-in-interview on the first page of her book alone, two of which present the author speaking on the topic of love.<sup>9</sup> Most staggeringly, in James’s work on Morrison as an author whose fiction asks its reader to notice and respond to its artifice, Morrison’s fiction is referenced just thirteen times, whereas James’s citation to extra-fictional Morrison accounts for seventy eight citations.<sup>10</sup> Morrison criticism, in other words, is deeply under the influence of the words and voice – written and spoken – of Morrison herself. The inference of this is that we do not know how to read Morrison,

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<sup>6</sup> Paula M. L. Moya, *The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Moya, p. 138.

<sup>8</sup> John Duvall, *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p. 22. Duvall also performs what we will later examine, via Ann duCille, ‘critical demeanor’ when he thanks, via his acknowledgements, his department head for allowing him to run a module on Morrison instead of his African American colleagues. He realises, he says, that his department head had come under fire for this.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Wyatt, *Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison’s Later Novels* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2017), p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> David James, *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)



that we are bad at reading Morrison or, less accusatively, that critics have not fully considered the effects of Morrison's authorial availability on the experience of reading her fiction. To be sure, there is no inherent problem in citation or in reading the author. The problem arises, rather, when critics claim to be interpreting and telling us about novels but are involved in reading and telling us about the figure of the author and their relationship to the act of writing. In attending to the author's critical sensibility as a marker of fictionality rather than conflating it *with* fiction I propose that a less tautological or circumscribed reading will ensue.

The kind of fictional elicitation that critics respond to when they gesture to interactivity in Morrison is demonstrated in, for example, the epigraph to this chapter, from L who ruminates on the power that she might hold over the pace of the reader's engagement. Another commonly noted anticipation of reception and interpretation can be found in her 1993 novel *Jazz*. A novel that tells of a husband, Joe, and his waning attention from his wife Violet toward a much younger woman who he later murders, the final paragraphs of narration turn to address the reader – you – and waxes jealous over the reunion and renewed passion of Violet and Joe:

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 fingers 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.<sup>11</sup>

This gesture is in one sense about the pleasure of close attention. In another, its apostrophe – its turning away from its earlier temporal plane and terms of address – brings our awareness to the sensation of the book held in our hands, its pages and our manoeuvring of them. To have this grasp, the voice tells us, is to enter into a relationship of making and remaking, and what's more, the voice tells us that that remaking is what it wants. That this permission comes at the narrative's end rather than its beginning accentuates the focus on response and remaking, it guides us toward an interpretive rather than simply experiential relationship with its contents: the bulk of

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<sup>11</sup> Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 229.

pages now reside in our left hand and we are being asked to recast the narrative that we have almost reached the end of, rather than to allow our cognitive spend to fold at the same time as the words stop coming. It is an incitement to reread. This passage, then, invites a mode of active reading that the group of critics above have all in some sense sought to theorise. *Jazz* is not just for reading but for rereading and responding to. It reveals its artifice and invites you to participate in the meaning of that artifice.

This is amplified in other ways. Morrison's earlier work often contains puzzles and conundrums; her 1983 story 'Recitatif', for example, is a story about two the youthful friendship and adult alienation of two girls, one white and one African American. The trick in the story, however, is that there are no descriptions to enable the reader to resolutely discern the race of either character, and so 'Recitatif' becomes an exercise in not knowing, an irresolution between the narrative's seeming clues and its ambiguity.<sup>12</sup> This chapter, after surveying examples of Morrison reading as a writer and reading her own work in extra-fictional contexts, will take Morrison's reputation for ambiguity and the reader's co-creation of meaning as rote. By necessity, there will be a number of crossovers between the mystery, artifice, and suspension of writer and reader as intermediary that Morrison shares with Smith and Coetzee respectively, but this chapter will add a new aspect to reading critical enchantment through an attention to the contexts of Morrison's critical reception.

While we might view the 'meta' gesture of *Jazz* with a view to the metafiction and *awareness* of metafiction that was well established in the novel by this time, and that had already been theorised by critics like Waugh, there are other ways to read this metafiction, namely as a symptom of the increasing overlap of producers and receivers. McGurl has, precisely by accounting for the convergence of writers and readers in postwar America, read *Beloved* with an attention to the context of Morrison's transition from editor to becoming a salaried professor. In particular, reading Morrison's work as a teacher results in a rereading of the character 'Schoolteacher', who teaches through dictation, against Morrison's creative writing program 'Atelier' at Princeton, which was not 'the usual workshop model that socializes and externalizes the act of writing in various ways, but a program where students and visiting artists of various kinds collaborate on projects leading to an actual public performance.'<sup>13</sup> Morrison, McGurl intimates, practiced what she preached.

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<sup>12</sup> Toni Morrison, 'Recitatif', in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: 1945 to Present*, ed. by Nina Baym et al. 7<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Norton, 2007), pp. 2685-98.

<sup>13</sup> McGurl, p. 352.

Defining a particular Morrisonian critical enchantment which goes beyond the fact of her fiction's elicitation of a self-conscious mode of interaction and engagement, and to understand what the critical deference to Morrison's own criticality means for the interlinking of contemporary authorship and fictionality, requires us to similarly attend to the imbrications of writer, author, medium and critic that Morrison's career encompasses, and to delineate this alongside common conceptions of Morrison's relationship to her own creativity and writing. It is to these contexts that this chapter will now turn.

### **Morrison's paratexts: teacher, editor, critic**

Morrison's career has included decades as a teacher of literature in US colleges including Texas Southern University, Howard University, SUNY Purchase, SUNY Albany and a number of visiting lectureships. Eventually settling as a professor at Princeton University in 1989, where she has remained ever since, Morrison has worked as an editor at Random House and worked on fiction of her own throughout (and before) all of these positions. Is the sociological import of Morrison's fiction, its ability to 'build racial literacy', then, subtended by the types of pedagogy that structure the literacy-building of university seminars? Her success as a novelist has also seen her invited to address the meetings of professional organisations (the National Conference of Boards of Education in 2009), speak at political fundraisers (an Obama fundraiser in 2008) and a variety of arts events (speaking, for example, at a Slam Poetry event in 2006).<sup>14</sup> Criticism of Morrison's fiction not only lingers on and close reads the hallowed words of the writer, but the reputation of Morrison seemingly casts an aura that emanates from the parameters of the material book and elicits a type of critical reverence. As such, this is a reputation based on an interrelation of literary authority, critical practice, and the respective mystifications of those modes of communication.

In addition to a number of shorter essays there has been one book-length publication, the aforementioned *Playing in the Dark*. Indeed, as a rereading of North

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<sup>14</sup> These examples of professional appearances are excerpted from the section 'Speeches and Lectures' in the author's archive that opened at Princeton University in 2016. A full list of holdings, which show the extent of Morrison's performance as a public intellectual across sectors, is available at <https://findingaids.princeton.edu/collections/C1491>. The full remit of Morrison's career has not yet been read more thoroughly in relation to the fiction, perhaps, because of the lack of available records for these activities until now. In this chapter's conclusion, I suggest some questions that should be addressed in relation to the archive to begin doing the work of understanding Morrison as a reader.

American literary history, Morrison's work in *Playing* is also a meditation on, and reconfiguration of, critical reading practices. She remarks, for example, 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 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. (PD, xi)

She says, too, that although 'the positioning of the reader has justifiable claims' to make interpretations of the imaginative world of those literary works which invite 'rereadings' and 'future readings as well as contemporary ones', the 'author's presence – her or his intentions, blindness, and sight – is part of the imaginative activity' (PD, xii). The pun on responsibility concatenates this claim to the interpretive labour of the reader, and is indicative of the principle by which Morrison has since been read.

As an editor (a reader and even co-producer of the literature of other writers), Morrison has been responsible for the publication of a corpus of African American writing that we now recognise *as* a corpus. Working for a Random House subsidiary from 1965, Morrison started working for Random House proper in 1968 in the scholastic division before moving into editorial work under the multiply accoladed literary editor Jason Epstein shortly afterwards. It was during this time, framing 1970–88, that Morrison brought a number of African American writers into print, although she continued to work on editorial projects after her formal departure from Random House (publishing the work of Toni Cade Bambara's was one such project). Cheryl A. Wall has listed some of Morrison's output, commenting on its unparalleled distinction:

Toni Cade Bambara, Wesley Brown, Lucille Clifton, Leon Forrest, Gayl Jones, Nettie Jones, June Jordan, John McCluskey, and Quincy Troupe. No other editor before Morrison or since has boasted a comparable list of African American writers. As an editor, she helped to define two decades of African American literary history.<sup>15</sup>

To this list we can add Morrison's publication of Angela Davis's work and her hand in *The Black Book* – a visual documentation of the emergence and development of African American experience and culture.

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<sup>15</sup> Cheryl A. Wall, 'Toni Morrison, editor and teacher', in *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, ed. by Justine Tally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 139–48 (p. 139).

As already suggested, the ventriloquization of Morrison partially emerges as a result of, or in dialogue with, the substantial theories of reading and comments about reading that Morrison has made over the years. Repeated phrases and pronouncements of Morrison's include 'the structure is the argument', 'the language must not sweat', and (on the subject of forging a black art through the use of 'found things') '[i]t must look cool and easy. If it makes you sweat you haven't done the work. You shouldn't be able to see the seams and stitches'.<sup>16</sup> Surfacing over and over again, these neat pronouncements of Morrison's aesthetic and authorial sensibility can be – and have been – repeated to support various approaches to reading her fiction and have been plucked both from interviews and from Morrison's critical oeuvre.

Morrison's 1988 Tanner Lecture 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken' is an earlier critique of the Africanist presence in white North American literature that *Playing* later takes up more fully, and of the exclusion of fully realised African American subjectivity in that tradition. In 'Unspeakable', however, Morrison spends a significant portion toward the end of the talk explaining the rationale behind the structure of her first five novels. These rationales are cast with multiple references to an imagined reader. In her reading of *The Bluest Eye*, for example, Morrison describes her decision to enact an 'unstaging' of the novel by summarising its forthcoming events within its first pages so that the narrative 'wouldn't theatricalize itself'.<sup>17</sup> She refers to this as the narrator's sharing of a secret and situates the disclosure in the political climate in which the novel was written. The book's opening narration, she says, was thus 'in some sense':

precisely what the act of writing the book was: the public exposure of a private confidence. In order to fully comprehend the duality of that position, one needs to think of the immediate political climate in which the writing took place, 1965-69, during great social upheaval in the life of black people. The publication (as opposed to the writing) involved the act of exposure; the writing was the disclosure of secrets, secrets "we" shared and those withheld from us by ourselves and by the world outside the community. [...] The intimacy I was aiming for, the intimacy between the reader and the page, could start up

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<sup>16</sup> Elissa Schappell and Claudia Brodsky Lacour, 'Toni Morrison, The Art of Fiction No. 134', *Paris Review*, Fall 1993 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1888/the-art-of-fiction-no-134-toni-morrison>> [accessed 30 September 2015]; Thomas LeClair, 'The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison', *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. by Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) pp. 119-128 (p. 123); Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Culture* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993), p. 181

<sup>17</sup> Toni Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature', in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1988), pp. 121-63 (p. 146).

immediately because the secret is being shared, at best, and eavesdropped upon, at the least.<sup>18</sup>

How gauche, we might think, that a novelist would so publically offer a way to read their work. This is not what we were taught, in literature seminars, about the behaviour of novelists, that they would tell us about the ‘planned’ effects of their writing. Morrison is, in one sense, doing nothing more than other writers do – sketching the conditions under which the writing took place and which shaped the book’s scope. And not just that, but also that the reader might actually gain a fuller and better insight into the novel by being aware of this context. But in another sense, Morrison goes one step further and connects the dot that the critic would usually connect: yes, she says – the novel’s themes bear a relation to the political circumstances under which it was written. What’s more, we should note the distinction that Morrison draws between the act of publication and the act of writing: publication involved exposure, writing involved disclosure. In doing so, she draws attention to the difference in experience between putting undisclosed knowledge into writing *as a writer*, and putting a piece of writing into print *as an author*.

We can see a similar demystification when Morrison speaks of the role of the ‘spaces’ that structure her 1977 work *Song of Solomon* and for which she gives some glosses:

‘These spaces, which I am filling in, and can fill in because they were planned, can conceivably be filled in with other significances. That is planned as well. The point is that into these spaces should fall the ruminations of the reader and his or her invented or recollected or misunderstood knowingness.’<sup>19</sup>

Providing a type of authorial explanation about a diegetic feature – the gaps in the narrative that hand interpretive responsibility to the reader – Morrison tells us that the ambiguity of the text is by design, that the contingent knowledge and ‘rumination’ of the reader (which might be invented, recollected or *misunderstood*) is not only expected but invited. She offers a reading (‘the agent’s flight [...] should not be understood as a simple, desperate act, the end of a fruitless life, a life without gesture, without examination, but as obedience to a deeper contract with his people’<sup>20</sup>) but leaves the door open for other interpretations, too. The fact of Morrison’s interpretive sensibility is incontrovertible, but the rhetoric of open-ended interpretive possibility of Morrison’s

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<sup>18</sup> Morrison, ‘Unspeakable’, pp. 147–8.

<sup>19</sup> Morrison, ‘Unspeakable’, p. 157.

<sup>20</sup> Morrison, ‘Unspeakable’, p. 156.

writing also remains circumscribed by the editorial sensibility of a novelist who knows what they are doing.

But even this knowing has, on occasion, been attributed (and with it, responsibility relinquished) to the mediation of spiritual forces. In the Tanner Lecture, Morrison speaks of how writers ‘sometimes know when the work works, when *nommo* has been effectively summoned, by reading and listening to those who have entered the text.’<sup>21</sup> *Nommo*, which Morrison defines via Janheinz Jahn as ‘the life force, which produces all life [...], in the shape of the *word*’ keys Morrison here back into a mode of authorship which is founded on a principle of interactivity not just with her imagined readers but the effective channelling of her characters too.<sup>22</sup> *Nommo*, then, is artifice or second naiveté in an African tradition. In this, the communicative act of fictionality becomes a mode of summoning, but the ‘those’ who have been read and listened to by Morrison are not mere handy rhetorical spirits but the spirits of characters whose history is real, and whose history Morrison is responding to in fiction. John McClure, whose work we will explore more fully at a later point, locates a Morrisonian enchantment (gleaned from Morrison in interview) which emerges from the language that Morrison grew up surrounded by. This language is described as ‘a kind of cosmology that was perceptive as well as enchanting’ about which Morrison remembers that ‘there was this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there [...]. They had visitations and did not find that fact shocking and they had some intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable.’<sup>23</sup> Without these people, Morrison says that she would have been left ‘dependent on so-called scientific data to explain hopelessly unscientific things.’<sup>24</sup> In addition to divining the veracity of representation in her work through *nommo*, then, what we might think of as Morrison’s literary epistemology is to some degree rooted in an enlightenment-eschewing reckoning with the world.

A final example: in a *Paris Review* interview five years after the Tanner Lecture, Morrison describes the ritual of writing by way of anecdote. She recalls speaking to a

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<sup>21</sup> Morrison, ‘Unspeakable’, p. 162.

<sup>22</sup> Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: The New African Culture* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 124, cited in Morrison, ‘Unspeakable’, p. 162.

<sup>23</sup> Christina Davis, ‘Interview with Toni Morrison’, in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah (New York: Amistad Press, 1993), pp. 413–20 (pp. 414–15), cited in John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2008), p. 104.

<sup>24</sup> Davis, p. 415, cited in McClure, p. 104.

writer who would always ensure to touch a certain corner of their keyboard before beginning to write, and realising that she had her own version of this behaviour:

I, at first, thought I didn't have a ritual, but then I remembered that I always get up and make a cup of coffee while it is still dark—it must be dark—and then I drink the coffee and watch the light come. [...] I realized that for me this ritual comprises my preparation to enter a space that I can only call nonsecular . . . Writers all devise ways to approach that place where they expect to make the contact, where they become the conduit, or where they engage in this mysterious process. For me, light is the signal in the transition. It's not being *in* the light, it's being there *before it arrives*. It enables me, in some sense.<sup>25</sup>

This comment on the nonsecular experience of writing rehearses the by-now familiar ideology of the solitary writer. It would be too easy to label this spirituality and be done with it; what this configuration of the 'mysterious process' of writing demonstrates is the ongoing tension between mystification and demystification, of uncertainty and knowingness in Morrison's work and characterisations of that work. If writing can eventually yield a sense of ownership, of having created a narrative structure that you expect might yield a particular type of response, then this is nevertheless an ownership that emanates from an experience of being 'the conduit' rather than the all-knowing creator.

Is this a paradoxical loyalty to mystery; is it strange that a novelist who has offered an admission of the existence of the constructed and contingent nature of her own authorial 'meaning' and intention has also expressed a belief in the ritual nature of writing in a way that diminishes authorial responsibility? An earlier question lingers throughout all of this, too: what does it mean that we look so squarely to the author to understand the work? My claim, of course, has been that such a public declaration of 'How You Might Read Me' is not demystifying in any straightforward sense. We can consider Morrison's exposure of her intentions, and their recalibration by a nonsecular belief in the spirit of writing from a number of perspectives. We can understand this as one point on a spectrum of rhetorical strategy in which all authors engage to some degree ('writers all devise ways to approach that place...'). We might also consider Morrison's move to interpret her own novels in front of an audience in its contemporary context of high theory in the academy. In a time after Barthes's death of the author, and in front of an academic audience, could Morrison's reading of her work be construed a radical re-suturing of author and text, or as a radical disavowal of the

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<sup>25</sup> Morrison, 'The Art of Fiction', paragraph 4.



author's significance in interpretations of the text? But we can also understand the particular forbear of authorship-as-mediumship in the African American literary tradition. This manoeuvre – a visibility of both disavowal and of authority – presents us with a paradox of how framing oneself as a reader affects readability.

Citation to an author's extra-fictional or extra-textual words is, of course, common practice in literary interpretation. Perhaps this claim, then, that novels sometimes provoke us to consider the act of reading – shouldn't be overstated. Indeed, this is the basic principle of interactivity that Iser theorised as the fundamental aesthetic experience. Reading is an experience of self-apprehension which he casts as an unfolding process of seeing oneself in the act of a discovery that 'restructures' knowledge, and contends that the experience of reading is therefore, at its core, characterised by 'dynamic *interaction* between text and reader.'<sup>26</sup> It is not only, then, fiction with reflexive or metafictional tendencies that instigates this self-apprehension, for Iser it is a fact of aesthetic experience itself. Writing in the late 1970s, Iser remarks that 'there are many current theories which give the impression that texts automatically imprint themselves on the reader's mind of their own accord' and corrects this sense of passivity and willingness to submit with his provisional thesis that '[r]eading is not a direct "internalization", because it is not a one-way process'.<sup>27</sup> Rather, there is a correlation between what you put in and get out. The means by which Iser maps the dynamic of reading are, by now, common parlance in literary theory and theories of interpretation, but it is important to note how, in the case of Morrison and the writers under study in this thesis, the dynamic is not only between text and reader but a text which is inflected with an imagined author (for the reader) and with an imagined reader (for the author); the interactivity of reading is more diverse than Iser anticipated. Indeed, while he posits the experience of reading as self-apprehension, Iser does not account for the experience of self-apprehension in the case of critics who are reading with a specific attention to their own response. What's more, that Morrison is framed as a writer whose narrative structure has didactic and educational effects, suggests that this enchantment is inflected by the presence of the author which prefigures a disposition toward the consideration of active reading. As Iser contended in the 70s, however, the dynamic of reading is *always* active, and so the framing of Morrison as a writer who evokes active reading seems redundant or tautological and suggests that something further about the relationship between author, text and reader requires articulation in

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<sup>26</sup> Iser, p. 107.

<sup>27</sup> Iser, p. 107.

the case of Morrison. To borrow Emre's earlier phrasing, Morrison does 'triple and quadruple duty' as a reader.

These activities of the author are what Genette named the 'paratexts' of literature, the materials and communicative acts which 'enable a text to become a book'.<sup>28</sup> But as Sarah Brouillette has since argued, the career of the author is itself a paratext, and this paratext often figures in the world of the fiction. Whereas the Coetzeean author-characters that we read in chapter two are prominent examples of a reflexive criticism of authorship and the novel by Coetzee, Morrison's novels, as we have discussed, do not engage in critique in this way. Rather, what is significant about Morrison's various paratexts (the interviews and critical writing) is that they have been so rehearsed in criticism that this scholarly tract has become a new paratext.

Indeed, as the recent history of reading delineated by this thesis has demonstrated, however, we relate to literary texts in a number of different ways now. Although Iser represents one means of considering 'activity' and 'participation' in reading, we cannot necessarily read Morrison's fiction according to a principle of reading that was forged between the late 1980 and early 1990s. In place of the idea that novels convene 'response-ability', then, and in order to hold fast to the forms of enchantment that underpin the novel's conception and reception, we need instead to understand the enchanting effects of intimacy in the wider context of the literary marketplace and cultural economy that has made the voice of an author particularly accessible. Dawson's contention is worth recalling and expanding on here. When Dawson discusses the return of omniscience, he argues that the performance of extra-literary duties by writers (their giving talks and interviews, teaching) has conferred a tone of the public intellectual onto the narrators of contemporary literary fiction more generally.<sup>29</sup> Dawson contends that the 'contemporary omniscient narrator can best be described as a form of public intellectual: a thinker and writer who is able to speak to a general audience on a range of public issues from a base of specific disciplinary expertise'.<sup>30</sup> The contemporary omniscient narrator is a form of public intellectual, an authority that readers receive as one mode of instructive fiction among a plethora of

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<sup>28</sup> Genette, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> This differs from recent work by Odile Heynders, who has examined public intellectuals' use of literary strategies and devices Odile Heynders, *Writers as Public Intellectuals: Literature, Celebrity, Democracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and from Said's assertion that 'the intellectual's provisional home' is in 'resistant, intransigent art'. Edward Said, 'The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals', in *The Public Intellectual*, ed. by Helen Small (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 19–39 (p. 39).

<sup>30</sup> Paul Dawson, 'The Return of Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction', *Narrative*, 17 (2009), 143–61 (p. 150).

authoritative fictions across contemporary media. In the case of Morrison who is frequently called upon as a public intellectual, Dawson's argument reaches a logical circularity. But in the case of Morrison's narrators, who possess an inevitable authority yet, from that position of authority, ask for the reader to take on responsibility, the return of omniscience is not so much the return of authority but the use of uncertainty.

It may indeed be that citation to authors is common practice, but the words and beliefs of an author are not always so easily accessed (as our reading of Coetzee was testament to), and they are not always invoked so frequently yet uncritically as they are in the case of Morrison.<sup>31</sup> Morrison is not frequently discussed as a reader but invoked as a reader who offers an interpretive key to her own fictions, even if that ends up as an unimaginative critical narrative of "Morrison says that we are to engage in her work". Of this phenomenon, the critical recourse to Morrison, C. Namwali Serpell has argued that interpreters of Morrison's fiction reach all too quickly for the words of Morrison, readily available as they are. Morrison, she explains, has given 'enough explanatory interviews to fill two volumes, both extensively cited despite the humble, homey "conversations" intimated by their titles'.<sup>32</sup> In addition to the books of interviews, Serpell emphasises the 'dominance of authorial persona' that exists around Morrison, and her accessible presence on the public stage (that she has, for example, made an appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show – 'humble, homey').<sup>33</sup> In her discussion of *Beloved*, Serpell surveys the landscape of Morrison criticism and deduces that it is most particularly those critics who look to comment on the configurations of uncertainty and uninterpretability in her work who fail to produce independent readings (she places Phelan and J. Hillis Miller in this pool). Noting that Morrison's interpretations 'often befuddle rather than clarify' the meaning of her work, Serpell finds this befuddlement amplified specifically in the work of critics who interpret what they deem to be the inscrutable and impenetrable facets of her work:

critics dutifully repeat rather than parse or trace Morrison's claims about the effects of the radical uncertainty in her work, taking recourse to her extratextual words to inscribe her often terrifyingly dark texts into a positive political project. As if muffled by their adherence to a principle of the "unspeakable," critics often quote her exactly, ventriloquizing Morrison on Morrison.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> What's more, it is certainly the case that novels do not always provoke a Morrisonian level of reflexivity among its readers and critics.

<sup>32</sup> C. Namwali Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (London: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> Serpell, p. 119.

<sup>34</sup> Serpell, p. 119.

This is a paradoxical adherence: the text does not synthesise, so Morrison is called upon to speak instead. Serpell thus notes a reflexive tendency whereby critics halt in front of certain hermeneutic clichés, suggesting that ‘to read *Beloved* is to read reading; to read *Beloved* is to read the impossibility of ethics’: ‘We are’, says Serpell, ‘so often blinded by the fact of multiplicity in novels that we have not often moved beyond what it represents – conflict, comprehensiveness, negative capability – to consider what it affords as an experience.’<sup>35</sup>

Serpell’s theory of adjacent reading, the theory she develops in specific response to the problem of critics reading reading in Morrison (or reading Morrison instead of reading *Beloved*), proposes that we read the alternating first- and third- person narrative as simultaneously joined and detached from one another and Serpell seeks to do away with Morrison’s words altogether. Serpell’s contention is that, in place of the ventriloquizing and the subsequent stalling of interpretation, we consider ‘the ethics of the reading experience.’<sup>36</sup> A mode of reading that diverges by acknowledging the unfolding and repeating temporality of reading a novel, Serpell explains that ‘[t]he palimpsest layering of adjacency as a process over time allows us to perceive distinctive viewpoints and their projected relations, even as the text maintains a cumulative circumspection.’<sup>37</sup> Adjacency, then, is about how Morrison creates a positional relationship between the reader and text that encourages the reader to see each new iteration of an image, a word, a meaning as a mutable instantiation, rather than trying to recapitulate it within the terms of the previous encounter with that image, word, meaning. In this sense, adjacency is a response to the conundrum or antinomy that fictionality names disbelief or double consciousness. The process of reading multiple viewpoints and encountering double meaning, Serpell says, ‘leads neither to utter incoherence nor to total aporia in the reader’ but ‘affords an attunement to the exact quality of things – discreteness – that also keeps those things in reserve – discretion.’<sup>38</sup>

But what Serpell otherwise brings to our attention – although she does not frame it as such – is the entanglement of author, writer, narrator and reader in the mind of Morrison’s real life reader. There is a question of ‘who speaks?’ when we are engaged in an effort to interpret Morrison’s fictions, and an attendant question of how critics – by countering dark fictional subjects with Morrison’s ‘positive political project’ – have

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<sup>35</sup> Serpell, p. 131.

<sup>36</sup> Serpell, p. 121.

<sup>37</sup> Serpell, p. 152.

<sup>38</sup> Serpell, p. 142.

prioritised the authority and authenticity of some of these voices over others. If this arises from a desire for clarity amidst an experience of befuddlement, then we might conclude that this critical method is a demystifying one (looking to uncover meaning by exposing the intentions of the work that the author has made available) in the face of a mystifying literary style (the experience of reading a type of narrative that feels hermeneutically ‘comprehensive’, to borrow Serpell’s word). That this reach for Morrison’s extra-literary authority betrays a certain belief in the aura of writerly authority, and also ‘befuddles rather than clarifies’, then, signals the ventriloquism of Morrison as a site of enchantment. This paradox becomes further vexed when we note, as Ann duCille did in a recent special issue of *Novel*, that despite being the most-read female author in US college campuses, there has been one essay on Morrison’s work published in the journal’s half a century of publishing.<sup>39</sup> As duCille puts it in her title: where is Morrison? How can an author be everywhere and nowhere?

Morrison has been, to recall Serpell’s earlier phrasing, presented as accessible through collections of interviews that are ‘intimated by their title’ to be ‘humble, homey “conversations”’. And yet, that this accessibility is counterbalanced by the critical tendency to reach for these interviews and formulate defined modes of reading in response to her fictions attests to the perception of difficulty (of uninterpretability and even ungraspability) of the implications of Morrison’s work.

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, David James sets out to read a discourse of modernist influence in *Jazz*, *Paradise*, and *Love*, but his reading evolves overwhelmingly more so out of citation to Morrison in interview and in speeches than it does to close readings of her fictional work. He sets out to read the ‘risks [Morrison] undertakes at the level of style’ with a stated awareness that attending to ‘her continued lionisation as a figurehead for the contemporary literary scene’ can lead to ‘analytical inexactness’ yet seems precisely to fall into that inexactness because of a *lack* of distinction between Morrison in her ‘figurehead’ positions and Morrison in her fictions.<sup>40</sup>

Taking a cue from the interpretive sensibility of L’s narration, James has read *Love* as a fictional expression that enhances Morrison’s (extra-fictionally corroborated) adoption of what he calls the ‘virtue of thrift’.<sup>41</sup> Discerning a prosaic sparsity in

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<sup>39</sup> Ann duCille, ‘Of Race, Gender, and the Novel; Or, Where in the World Is Toni Morrison?’, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 50 (2017), 375–87 (pp. 385–86). DuCille notes, more broadly, that the black women’s novel has seldom been addressed in the journal other than in book reviews.

<sup>40</sup> James, pp. 164–5.

<sup>41</sup> James, p. 167.

Morrison's novels, James connects this thrift to the politics of Morrison's form and the aforementioned evocation of 'participatory reading'. The particular *challenge or resistance* (James's words) that 'we experience in reading Morrison's prose is the way it asks us to participate in what it does, before we start interpreting what it says.'<sup>42</sup> One of these engagements is with a passage from L's opening narration in which she ruminates over the misinterpretation of her quietness compared with an overly talkative younger generation: 'Nowadays silence is looked on as odd and most of my race has forgotten the beauty of meaning much by saying little. Now tongues work all by themselves with no help from the mind.'(L, 3) It is through this sentiment, in encountering a narrator who brings a question of interpretation to the fore and who suggests that one can mean much by saying little, that James both finds an expression of style and an incitement to 'participate in what it does, before we start interpreting what it says'.

James's main rationale for applying the principle of participatory reading is founded through citation to an extra-fictional Morrison, and particularly in the citation of statements about reading: namely, Morrison's explanation that her desire to 'bring the reader in as co-author or a complicitous person really stems from [her] desire to be engaged as a reader myself.'<sup>43</sup> In the fiction, James explains, this engagement is 'two-tiered' – not only does the fiction '*work upon us*' but it 'makes us aware [...] that it is doing so'.<sup>44</sup> A thesis that seeks to articulate the experience of intimacy that Morrison's narrators often cultivate or demand, James articulates the elusive, ambiguous and obfuscating traits of Morrison's fictions and narrators. Crucially it is, for James, the process of reading which 'enacts the solution' of the text's resistances and challenges.<sup>45</sup> But this is Morrison's insight, not James's.

Thus asserting a parallel between the experience of reading Morrison (specifically the idea that to read Morrison is to read reading) and Morrison's creative intentions, James partakes in the critical habit that Serpell identifies: he prioritises the readerly experience of reading Morrison that is marked by its awareness of Morrison as authorial figure as the point of entry for his interpretation. This is, in part, because James is interested in Morrison's conception of her aesthetic project and its inheritance from literary modernism's fixation on the problem of perspective, and also because it enables him to argue that readerly participation is a recuperation of intimacy after 'the

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<sup>42</sup> James, p. 181.

<sup>43</sup> Toni Morrison, interview in *Toni Morrison: Conversations*, ed. by Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), p. 46, cited in James, *Futures*, p. 174.

<sup>44</sup> James, p. 171.

<sup>45</sup> James, p. 185.

legacy of postmodernism's era of artistic self-involution'.<sup>46</sup> James's idea is about a return of intimacy via Morrison which follows in a similar suit to Dawson's diagnosis of the return of omniscience. But as a treatment of reading that seeks to account for the interaction that the *reader* has with the *gaps* and *silences* by way of Morrison's sparing prose style, James is (as Serpell anticipates) rhetorically blinded by his interest in reading. Indeed, he does not frame it in this way, but James's is an argument about how critical interpretations respond to the valences of interpretation within fictions themselves. What's more, we can see his argument as a substantiation of this thesis's ongoing claim that contemporary fiction ruminates over the history of the novel form as a history of the anticipation of interpretation (or being read) through a prioritisation of mystery and narrative mechanisms that trade on the genre's history of enchanted intimacy.

This critical dissonance (James's and others) also arises from what Pfaller has theorised as the DIY artwork or 'do-it-all' artworks, these are 'artworks that already contain their own viewing and reception'.<sup>47</sup> Pfaller – maintaining our focus on illusions and enchantments – argues that DIY artworks change the relationship between audience and artwork (or in our case, reader, novel and novelist), supplanting interactivity with interpassivity because the act of viewing (the passive act) has been displaced from the viewer to the artwork. When artworks do this, it 'absolves viewers of any necessary activity whatsoever, and also of their passivity. They can now be even more passive than passive'.<sup>48</sup> Through this delegated and displaced consumption, a problem emerges: like the academic who photocopies numerous pages that they are unlikely to ever get around to reading but who displace the act of reading to the scanner instead, interpassivity 'satisfies mainly the impulse of not reading' and 'is thereby the creation of a compromise between cultural interests and latent cultural aversion'.<sup>49</sup> Instead, then, of Morrison's critics as *engaged* readers (participatory reading, call and response, active reading), the critical reader of Morrison might have become more-passive-than-passive readers who are not really reading at all but repeating, displacing the work of reading back to Morrison. The combined effect of being asked to participate, seeing characters interpret, and reading the novelist's suggestion of how you might interpret, is that a number of critics have not really considered what it means to participate in a fiction.

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<sup>46</sup> James, p. 187.

<sup>47</sup> Pfaller, p. 17.

<sup>48</sup> Pfaller, p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> Pfaller, p. 27. Pfaller might want to speak for himself on this issue.

### Critical demeanors, critical novels

It has been only mildly inferred so far that Morrison's readability, her ventriloquization, stems from the particular crossroad of authenticity and authority that is brought to bear on black women's writing. This was highlighted in Serpell's account of how Morrison has been branded as 'homey' and produced a sense of her accessibility. In addition to considering Morrison's readability from the perspective of her combination of multiple paratexts, there is also the consideration to be made about Morrison's treatment as an African American woman. Ann duCille's formative work in the mid-90s demonstrated how black women writers, in the academy and in the creative arts, were encoded as authentic rather than authoritative. Writing about a moment in the university in which black women became 'the subjected subjects of so much scholarly investigation, the peasants under the glass of intellectual inquiry in the 1990s' duCille speaks of the concomitant rise, commodification and Othering of black feminist scholarship by scholars who are not black women.<sup>50</sup> DuCille observes the operation of a 'critical demeanor' or 'critical posturing' that these scholars engage, ostensibly 'to celebrate a literature', but which in her opinion 'actually demeans it by levelling and universalizing it'.<sup>51</sup> Critics do this, she says, by positioning themselves as speculative outsiders who spin anecdotal or personal narratives in order to grant themselves access to their subject, perhaps 'supplement[ing] their critiques with exposés of their former racism (or sexism) in a kind of I-once-was-blind-but-now-I-see way': 'Such transformative moves often occur in the forewords, afterwords, rationales, even apologies white scholars affix to their would-be scholarly readings of the black Other'.<sup>52</sup> Black women's writing, then, has been particularly prone to become the subject of a reflexive critical project because of the way that critics feel that they have to situate themselves in response to a subject that they do not have first-hand experience of. In this sense, this criticism amounts to an exoticising enchantment; as Holland has put it more recently, revisiting duCille's essay, '[t]he value of black femaleness, then, is intrinsically linked to her utilitarian

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<sup>50</sup> Ann duCille, 'The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies', in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, ed. by Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen (London: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 21–56 (p. 21).

<sup>51</sup> duCille, 'Occult', p. 42.

<sup>52</sup> duCille, 'Occult', p. 38; 41.



purpose – her service to both the community and the academy. We make the experiences of other people more *real* to them.<sup>53</sup>

An example of a white critic looking to overcome this predicament is Lanser, who reads ambiguity in Morrison as an exercise in the exclusion of certain readers. In a larger critical project that attends to the means by which '[d]iscursive authority – by which I mean here the intellectual credibility, ideological validity, and aesthetic value claimed by or conferred upon a work, author, narrator, character, or textual practice – is produced interactively' and so must 'be characterized with respect to specific receiving communities', Lanser thereby draws a conclusion about who is and is not included in Morrison's "intended community".<sup>54</sup> Reading the trajectory of fictional authority that takes place from *The Bluest Eye* to *Beloved*, Lanser argues that Morrison is 'in effect making her work less bicultural, giving white readers less and less familiar material on which to ground readings that would assimilate her novels to a white tradition and "universalize" what is historically particular.'<sup>55</sup> The trajectory of Morrison's work, she says, is one that might puzzle its white readers not simply because it stages reading or examines the condition of reading as an interaction that necessitates puzzling, but because it codes an unfamiliar knowledge.

For duCille, the crux of her own critical moment is that while the Othering of black women writers adds another string to the bow of a critic whose primary field is not black women's writing, it is not enough string to be seen as a bow for a black women for whom it is a primary field. This brings duCille to the paradox of authenticity: black women writing on black women's writing leads to those same scholars being read as 'native informants' rather than 'as critics and as scholars reading and writing [their] own literature and history':

So here we have another paradox of critical demeanor: the difference between authority and authenticity. Black scholars on predominantly or overwhelmingly white campuses are rarely authorized simply as scholars. Rather, our racial difference is an authenticating stamp that, as Indira Karamcheti has argued, often casts us in the role of Caliban in the classroom and on the campus.<sup>56</sup>

A similarly coded authenticity may well mediate Morrison scholarship: her words are needed because they are authentic, because they speak authentically of a situation that

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<sup>53</sup> Holland, p. 42.

<sup>54</sup> Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> Lanser, p. 138.

<sup>56</sup> DuCille, 'Occult', p. 31; 33.

many white scholars have only secondary knowledge of. They are needed as immanent evidence (authentic) rather than referred to for epistemological kudos (authoritative), and they are invoked in an anxiety about misreading Morrison or, specifically, of misreading *race* in Morrison.

A second context for Morrison's readability (and which falls prey to the critical demeanour that duCille outlines) is the role – first *real* and then *metaphorical* – of black women's literary production as an experience of mediumship or conjuring. Indeed, the relationship between the tradition of black women's fiction writing and the novel as a vehicle of enchantment requires some consideration. In their edited collection *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (a volume to which duCille is in part responding), Marjorie Pryse (a white feminist scholar) and Hortense J. Spillers (a black feminist scholar) theorised the newly emerging canon of black women novelists and in her introduction to the collection, Pryse reads the black women writers of her critical moment as metaphorical conjure women who are trading on the tradition of orality between African American women slaves that characterised storytelling before abolition and the education of former slaves. Setting out with the proposition that '[b]lack women have long possessed "magical" powers and told their daughters stories', Pryse argues that this passed-down 'history of black women's tradition as fiction writers – as yet unwritten – contains strategies by which individual women overcame every conceivable obstacle to personal evolution and self-expression'.<sup>57</sup>

In Pryse's reckoning, 'conjuring' refers to an assumed tradition of black folk magic and spiritual mediumship, but in the case of the novel, this mediumship is symbolically tied to the development of literary expression (i.e. storytelling) as a form of magic in the black community, or what Pryse labels 'folk magic as art and fiction as a form of conjuring'.<sup>58</sup> Pryse suggests that

In the 1970s and 1980s, black women novelists have become metaphorical conjure women, "mediums" like Alice Walker who make it possible for their readers and for each other to recognize their common literary ancestors (gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers, rootworkers, and women who wrote autobiographies) and to name each other as a community of inheritors.<sup>59</sup>

One example of this inheritance is found, by Pryse, in Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* (as earlier cited by Walsh, Walker adds an authorial acknowledgement which thanks her

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<sup>57</sup> Marjorie Pryse, in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, ed. by Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Pryse and Spillers, p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> Pryse and Spillers, p. 5.

characters for coming and enabling her – their medium – to write the novel). Pryse argues that the protagonist's (Celie's) 'authority as storyteller results from no mere sleight-of-hand; Walker seems to be saying that Celie's ability to write her story is a precondition for her own ability as a novelist.'<sup>60</sup> Walker, in other words, deflects her own achievement onto a *spirit of writing* which created and vitalised her narrator; the stronger the mediumship, then, the stronger the ability of the novelist.

This ancestral sense of mediumship is to some degree necessary for thinking about the types of narrative voice that Morrison creates, but it is not a total explanation. For Pryse, it functions as a way of introducing an array of criticism that addresses an emerging field, and although the introduction begins with an example of mediumship, these literal contexts soon give way to a merely metaphorical kinship. To be sure, there has been a body of critical work that considers the spiritualist, African, and African American traditions that Morrison articulates as well as the work that relates these traditions to the recurring supernatural figures in her work.<sup>61</sup> But the expression of mediumship is worth further consideration. Indeed, the interest in mediumship for this chapter lies in how the narrative enchantment of Morrison's late novels propagate a particular relationship between reader and text that trades on the paradoxical authority of mediumship. We have encountered a number of claims to authorial mediumship (and the rationalisation of those claims by critics) so far in this thesis, namely in the secretary who configures the act of writing as a dalliance between the mind of the writer and invisible forces, and in Coetzee's discussion of the author's phantasm of the reader. Morrison's investment in the notion of writing-as-mediumship, then, articulates another mode of reflection on creative responsibility.

In his aforementioned work on American 'postsecular fiction', McClure cites Morrison's aversion to literary criticism as evidence of what he calls her secular enchantment. This aversion, which unsurprisingly necessitates recourse to Morrison-in-interview, is evidenced through an interview between Morrison and Gloria Naylor. In the interview, Naylor describes her experience of writing as one in which she is genuinely spoken to by characters. Morrison welcomes the shift in language from a metaphoric spirituality to an invested one ('I could sort of let it disguise itself as the artist's monologue with herself' but 'there's no time for that foolishness now'), and says

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<sup>60</sup> Pryse and Spillers, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> See Melanie R. Anderson, *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2013), Juda Bennett, *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), and K. Zauditu-Selsassie, *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2009).

to Naylor that she has ‘almost never found anyone whose work I respected or who took their work that seriously, who did not talk in the vocabulary that you and I are using; it’s not the vocabulary of literary criticism’.<sup>62</sup> McClure glosses this interaction in the following way:

[T]he language of literary criticism [...] is the language of power, the official language, but it does not do full justice to the world experienced by the writer, a world that can at times be better described, and thus better negotiated, through the “discredited” language of supernaturalism.<sup>63</sup>

We will come back to this distrust of literary criticism, by now a commonplace for the authors in this thesis, at the close of this chapter. But what McClure’s study of religious enchantment reminds us of is that even if, as Walsh contends, the rhetoric of authorship-as-mediumship is one point on a spectrum of how an author relates to the cognitive process of creative work (or as Pryse says, that these are metaphorical conjure women), the idea of mediumship nevertheless serves a purpose which is lost in the demystification of that process by narrative and literary theory. But that is not good enough for Morrison or Naylor; writing is an experience of mediumship which is a conviction, not an illusion upheld in spite of better knowledge. This is, in other words, a way of articulating the rhetoric of mediumship from the other side, the enchanted view of writing as a way of accounting for something that, even if you are aware of the administrative and material reality of the work, resists explanation.

Walsh’s argument, that authors identify themselves as mediums because it aids them in experiencing writing as discovery rather than repetition, speaks to Morrison’s self-identification: ‘the author’ he said, ‘is not a figure *behind* the text, but one on the same side of it as the reader. The novelist as medium is a kind of privileged first reader.’<sup>64</sup> This does in part account for Morrison’s interpretive transparency in ‘Unspeakable’ when, for example, she pointed to the gaps in knowledge of *Song of Solomon* and labelled them intentionally blank – she discovers meaning alongside her readers – but Walsh’s claims to mediumship as rhetoric are rebutted by Morrison’s conviction in her mediumship. She is not claiming her fictions as a metaphorical discovery but as an actual discovery.<sup>65</sup> What is particularly useful for our concerns about

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<sup>62</sup> Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison, ‘A Conversation’, *The Southern Review* (Summer 1985), 567–93 (pp. 585–6), cited in McClure, p. 105.

<sup>63</sup> McClure, p. 106.

<sup>64</sup> Walsh, *Idea*, p. 131.

<sup>65</sup> We see this in the foreword to *Beloved* when Morrison describes how the historical Margaret Garner (the historical figure who initially inspired Sethe of *Beloved* was ‘confining’ in her historical being, so

Morrison as a reader is that Walsh concedes, as Gjerlevsen does with markers of fictionality, that the *fiction of the fiction* is doubtless subject to ‘changing historical and cultural contexts’.<sup>66</sup> That Morrison might write in the tradition of ‘metaphorical conjure women’ is one such historical context, but this tradition is more politically complex than Pryse presented it in the mid 1980s.

Another way of saying this is that Morrison’s reputation has partaken in the tradition that During attributes to authors who act like magicians: while During says that ‘all fictions use tricks and aim at effects’, it is only some of them that use ‘the same sort of tricks and effects as secular magic’: that is, those ‘principally based on surprising techniques designed to intensify various readerly reactions.’<sup>67</sup> During’s nod to ‘readerly reactions’ is focused on his enquiry into the work of Edgar Allan Poe, who famously delineated the intentions behind his narrative technique in ‘Philosophy of Composition’. Poe states that he endeavoured to create certain effects through literary technique, and so his fictional tricks were, according to During, a type of secular magic. But Poe and Morrison’s shared exposition of technique, their shared imperative to transparency, does not mean that their tricks or the effects of their tricks, are the same or rooted in the same motive. As Holland queries it: ‘Why did Morrison’s *Beloved* seem so different from [Nathaniel] Hawthorne’s or Poe’s ghosts?’<sup>68</sup> What Holland raises, and what is implied by the critics who are more passive than active, Morrison’s reaching for ‘nommo’ in addition to artifice, is the differing writing and novel traditions into which Poe and Morrison figure.

The paradox that Serpell traced – the accessibility versus uninterpretability of Morrison – finds a corollary paradox in the transparency and mystification that Morrison’s career (and expressions of her experience as a writer) encompass. Through her amplified attention to the reader and to interpretation, Morrison’s authorship exemplifies the conflation of writers who say that they are not entirely responsible for what they write with writers who are transparent about the writing process (and thus stake it as their own process), and the effects of this cathected transparency on readers. This paradox will now be explored with attention to the emergence of an

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decided she would ‘invent [Margaret’s] thoughts’ but that it was, first of all, *Beloved* who ‘walked out of the water, climbed the rocks, and leaned against the gazebo’ as Morrison sat on her porch. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage: 2007), pp. xi-xii.

<sup>66</sup> Walsh, *Idea*, p. 132.

<sup>67</sup> During, p. 179.

<sup>68</sup> Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (London: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 1.

institutional tradition of African American writing that has informed Morrison's fictionality.

Indeed, it is worth highlighting a related context for Morrison's authorial mediumship that is significant for bringing our focus back to Morrison's investment in the novel form. Despite possessing a BA in Literature and Classics and an MA in Literature (or rather, because of the era in which she studied for those degrees) it was not until she moved to New York with Random House that she began to read and become familiar with African and African American literatures.<sup>69</sup> The time during which Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye*, her first novel, represented Morrison's first real foray into the literary traditions of black writing and its novel history, but this discovery was made by Morrison at a time when the novel was in disrepute owing to the activities of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), a movement that was vocal about its aversion to the novel because of its lack of value as a political tool. It would require a different type of project to do full justice to the interrelation of African American art history and political history – and a number of Morrison scholars have already given rich delineations of these histories – but what we can give space to here is an overview of the BAM's antagonism to the novel form.<sup>70</sup>

In his discussion of the movement, Robert E. Washington asks 'why no major novels?'<sup>71</sup> His answer, by dint of inversion, tells us about Morrison's engagement with the novel. The movement's vision for 'black American unity [...] favored literary forms that were accessible to the black American masses':

Poetry and plays, because they operated through oral expression, conduced to this mission of communicating black nationalist consciousness through black vernacular, making it appropriate for theaters, meetings halls, and even street corners where black people could collectively share literary expression as ritual experiences of identity affirmation. This remained closed to the black American tradition of religious worship. Novels, by contrast, did not; they demanded isolation and a solitary engagement of the reader with the text, experiences alien to communally oriented black ethnic culture.<sup>72</sup>

The nature of the reader-artwork relationship forged by the novel was deemed incapable of rising to the communal orientation of the culture that the BAM wanted to

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<sup>69</sup> Tessa Roynon, *The Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 108.

<sup>70</sup> For a comprehensive account of the Harlem Renaissance, Black Arts Movement, twentieth century theories of race, and their relationship to Morrison's work, see Justine Baillie, *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition: The Invention of an Aesthetic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

<sup>71</sup> Robert E. Washington, *The Ideologies of African American Literature: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Nationalist Revolt* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), p. 307.

<sup>72</sup> Washington, pp. 307–8.

both utilise and uphold. That is to say, the novel was not deemed an appropriate aesthetic form for furthering civil rights because it relied on an inefficient economy of communication: the novel required solitude ('alienation') and an experience- and duration-based engagement that could not be communicated beyond that singular engagement. It necessitated a one-on-one interactivity rather than a public interactivity.

Recent critical revisions of this era, however, have suggested that it was at precisely this time that black women writers took up the task of repoliticising the novel. Explaining this with recourse to the shared institutional footings of various women, Courtney Thorrson's delineation of this critical moment brings us back to the tandem ideas of the novel as theory and the closeness of literary and critical institutions:

Bambara, [Paule] Marshall, Naylor, [Ntozake] Shange, and Morrison are all acutely aware of their role as theorists of identity in this literary tradition. These authors study and teach African American literature at colleges and universities; Bambara, Morrison, Naylor, and Shange hold graduate degrees in English or American studies. Their political actions are rooted in literature and the academy. [...] [F]irst, these novelists are serious literary scholars and must be treated as such; second, this engagement must happen in their chosen territory of the text.<sup>73</sup>

As literary theorists, says Thorrson, these writers all turn to literature and particularly to the novel in order to articulate their theories of African American identity. What's more, these writers all turn 'away from the realism of Richard Wright and Anne Petry, engaging instead with the fantastic and conjure of Zora Neale Hurston; they seize on a tradition of formal innovation in African American narrative visible in works by Jean Toomer and Richard Bruce Nugent.'<sup>74</sup> Morrison's interest in discussing the intended effects of her novels, then, is subtended by her preference for the form of the novel because of its elision in African American art. The fact that Morrison can be both political-in-fiction and play the role of the public intellectual outside of fiction is crucial to understanding that the critically enchanted sensibility of her fiction confers an authority in the public sphere.

Where, then, does this leave us with Morrison? It charges us with the need to consider Morrison's use of the novel form for its possibility of collective experience and interaction. But more than that, it suggests that Morrison's re-investment of the maligned novel form is imbued with a literary politics that, owing to the lack of

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<sup>73</sup> Courtney Thorrson, *Women's Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Women's Novels* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2013), p. 4.

<sup>74</sup> Thorrson, p. 5.

availability of authority for black women novelists resulted in the adoption of a particular rhetoric by Morrison (and Walker, who was beginning to publish around the same time). As one of the first prominent black women novelists after the Civil Rights movement began, Morrison's authorship was from its inception compromised by the *lack* of authority that would otherwise have been afforded by critical precedent, and the subsequent discourse of authorship was thus characterised by an amplified sense of the writer-reader dynamic and the author's need to mediate or respond to that audience. We can hear echoes, then, of the sense that mediumship stands in where a sense of authority should be. For Morrison in particular, the early to middle stage of her writing was characterised by a sense of urgency around the need to bring the African American novel back into existence. Of *The Bluest Eye* she said that, once finished, she was 'almost less concerned that it should be published than that it should exist'.<sup>75</sup> And when writing *Beloved*, Morrison articulated her perception of how, '[f]or a long time, the art form that was healing for black people was music. That music is no longer exclusively ours; we don't have exclusive rights to it' and so 'another form has to take its place, and it seems to me that the novel is needed [...] now in a way that it was not needed before'.<sup>76</sup>

Dana A. Williams has gone so far as to contend that the black women's novel comprises a post-Black Arts Movement 'synthesis' between fiction and manifesto and thus '*inhabits* at the very least and *is* at best its author's manifesto. [...] Few places is this more true than in Morrison's body of literature, where her novels are fictional representations of her critical texts.'<sup>77</sup> Citing Morrison's critical work as 'manifestos' that is also enacted in the fiction, Williams thereby professes to locate Morrison's novel politics, and she similarly locates this politicisation in Morrison's work as an editor. Williams makes the case for 'two central concerns' in Morrison's time as an editor: that Morrison had aimed at 'one, returning the African American novel to a place of dominance in the literary tradition and, two, escaping the patriarchal trappings that disabled black women during the Black Arts Movement.'<sup>78</sup> Morrison's role in defining the politics of post-70 black art, to Williams's mind, cannot be overstated. The post

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<sup>75</sup> Christopher Bigsby, 'Toni Morrison', in *Writers in Conversation*, 5 vols. (Norwich: AMC, 2000), I, 249–89 (p. 251).

<sup>76</sup> Toni Morrison, 'Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation', in *Black Women Writers: Arguments and Interviews*, ed. by Mari Evans (London: Pluto Press, 1983), pp. 339–345 (p. 340), cited in Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 219.

<sup>77</sup> Dana A. Williams, 'Dancing Minds and Plays in the Dark: Intersections of Fiction and Critical Texts in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, and Toni Morrison's *Paradise*', in *New Essays on the African American Novel: From Hurston and Ellison to Morrison and Whitehead*, ed. by Loverly King and Linda F. Selzer (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 93–106.

<sup>78</sup> Williams, p. 94.



Black Arts Movement novel – which Morrison has a significant hand in bringing to publication – both ‘*births* and *is* the manifesto for black art after 1970.’<sup>79</sup>

Williams’s evidence for this manifesto-fiction is the ‘highly participatory’ relationship between reader and text that is invited by designed ambiguity and difficulty, but also what she claims as a ‘corresponding invocation of the ancestor and use of multiple perspectives to reconstruct the stability modernity disturbed; and a final impetus to move beyond binaries and categories to suggest a more humanistic approach to the (re)construction of the self.’<sup>80</sup> Again, the question bears repeating, what does it mean to participate with the novel in this way? It should be noted, too, that Williams attributes these qualities not just to Morrison’s fiction, but also to the fiction – specifically of Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones – that Morrison edited. What is clear, then, is that Morrison’s move to novel writing and novel editing marked a highly cathected period of African American literary history in the late-twentieth century and that Morrison is substantially invested in the formal properties of the novel and as a means of unsettling the properties that comprise the tradition of the novel. The discourse of fiction in Morrison’s fiction is bound up in the politics of writing the novel as a black woman through and beyond the 1960s when novels were not seen as part of a politically progressive black life (or rather, were not seen as progressing African American rights). I do not wish to make a claim about the subsequent autobiographically correlative politics of writing fiction as a black novelist in the twenty-first century, but rather to consider how this compounded reputation and legacy of Morrison within the late-twentieth century continues to be in dialogue with the readership (the list of critics at the outset of this chapter) who want to think about the implication of Morrison’s fiction *for reading* in both her early and recent work but who are also embroiled in reading Morrison through the afterlife of this vexed authority that was fixed in the late twentieth century.

This brings us to the task of reading the contours or markers of fictionality in Morrison’s novels. The novels that will be the focus of this reading of fictionality, *Love* and *A Mercy* both build an anticipation of interpretation into their diegetic and extra-diegetic discourse. (It is not my intention to suggest that Morrison’s novels do not solicit this engagement – such a claim would be erroneous.) Instead, however, of theorising the fact of this elicitation, my brief readings of these novels will consider how the interpretive sensibilities, and the positioning between author, fictional writer, and

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<sup>79</sup> Williams, p. 94.

<sup>80</sup> Williams, pp. 94–5.

reader are configured in Morrison's late work.<sup>81</sup> What kind of participation do they ask for, and is that the most compelling question that they ask?

It was stated earlier that the characteristic of Morrison's reflexivity was its intermediary sections of narrative which hail a world that is no longer steadfastly in the realm of the fiction-in-hand because of the means by which it is told. *Jazz*'s narrator speaks to us; L of *Love* is no longer living in the world that she has impacted and continues to impact on. The movement of these narratives between narrators constitutes a fictionality that trades off the specificity and veracity of its fictional world while framing the act of telling as a disclosure. But because this narration maintains a discourse of interpretation, the disclosure impacts on the knowledge of the reader than the novel's characters and forges an intimacy between text and reader. It is by positioning herself as an intuitive writer, a medium, or privileged first reader that Morrison achieves this effect of foregrounding the contingency of reading, but in *Love* and *A Mercy*, we will see that mediumship and the supernatural take on different forms in characters and narrators in the fiction. In *A Mercy*, we learn that the chapters of the novel focalised through a young girl Florens (which comprise over half of the novel's total chapters) are being written on the walls of an empty house, intended for the eyes of a man she loves but who, it is suddenly realised, cannot read. In *Love*, the plot revolves around an attempt to forge a will that is revealed (to the reader only) to have been a forgery in the first place and in which a character's illiteracy necessitates the involvement of a secretary to become an intermediary of that forgery.

Wyatt argues that there has been an alteration in the use of disclosure that is enacted between *Paradise* and *Love*. Whereas in earlier work Morrison 'draws the reader into "co-creating" the text not only through ambiguous discourse, such as the opening words of *Beloved* [...], but also by conundrums that are solved only late in the novel, or not at all', the twenty-first-century writing differs because, although still functioning as a call-and-response, the novels are 'structured by the artful use of two narrators: a character narrator and a third-person, apparently omniscient narrator' in who 'the question of reliability or unreliability shifts back and forth between them, so that the reader is (ideally) made to think and judge for herself.'<sup>82</sup> While my reading does not take up the question of reliability and unreliability or the capacious notion of what it means

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<sup>81</sup> It is worth mentioning that these novels represent the period of Morrison's work that have garnered the least critical attention and which certainly represent a moment after mainstream literary studies has mostly lost interest in what Morrison's newer work might have to offer.

<sup>82</sup> Wyatt, pp. 11–12.

for a reader to ‘judge for herself’, it builds on Wyatt’s sense that the position between narrator and reader, and acts of reading and writing, continue to represent a valuable point of enquiry in Morrison’s late fiction.

### **‘closed up and wide open’: *A Mercy*’s talking room**

It bears remarking that the 2008 novel *A Mercy* is set in a pre-independence North America (the present tense plot of which takes place in the 1690s) which is also therefore a historical moment that precedes the existence of the novel. To be sure, the fact of a novel’s being set before the eighteenth century is not remarkable in itself; rather, what makes *A Mercy* worth considering in this regard is its attention to forms of literacy and textuality among the inhabitants of its fictional world, and that this temporal setting also places it well into the colonisation of America at the beginning of the seventeenth century, but only a few decades into the establishment of the transatlantic slave trade in the mid-seventeenth century. As Moya notes, it is a world in which the slave trade is not fully established: the land of North America is still divided between colonisers, and so relations between its characters, characters of different races, social standings, and nationalities, are more labile than they are in, for example, *Beloved*. As part of her project in delineating (as cited above) ‘how contemporary reading practices are implicated in the historically-derived and institutionalized system of ideas and practices that is race,’ Moya argues that *A Mercy* is Morrison’s attempt to ‘do with race what she did with slavery in her magnum opus, *Beloved* [...], break it open to examine its origins and find what it does to those who are its victims as well as those who benefit from its operations’.<sup>83</sup> Morrison, therefore, ‘looks to a time and place before the color-coded racial schema that many U. S. Americans now perceive as “natural” had fully emerged.’<sup>84</sup> There is a mutual urgency among its characters to perform acts of interpretation as a way of understanding this newly emerging schema.

The novel centres on a number of characters whose lives converge on the farm of Anglo-Dutch coloniser Jacob Vaark. The novel is mediated and punctuated by the narration of the young slave girl Florens who is indentured to Jacob in order to pay off a debt incurred by failed tobacco crops. The sections narrated by Florens – of which there are six in total – count for all but one of the book’s sections narrated in the first-

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<sup>83</sup> Moya, p. 138.

<sup>84</sup> Moya, pp. 133-34.

person. The other is the response of Florens's mother. In a manner confluent with Morrison's earlier narrative style, *A Mercy* is multiperspectival: Florens's sections intersperse those of other characters, of which there are also six. Each focalised narration brings a different temporal location, but the recurring present-tense action of the plot follows Florens's journey to find and deliver a letter to the freeman blacksmith who, possessing a knowledge of natural remedies, might be able to save Rebekka – Jacob's wife – from the small pox virus that has swept through the farm and its surrounding area, killing Jacob and bringing Rebekka to the brink of death. The letter and the inscription on the walls are acts of writing in which literacy is urgent, and this is compounded by an additional urgent but undeliverable message: Florens's mother's desire to communicate that she offered Florens for trading in an act of love and hope for her future, not spite or ambivalence. Her mother, whose narration is the novel's final section, wishes to tell Florens that she had intuited Jacob's good faith, 'I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight'.<sup>85</sup>

*A Mercy* brings attention to the relationship of fictionality and interpretation through its depiction of a world replete with accounts of communication (hallucinations, dreams, letters, journeys) and storytelling. Florens's passage to the blacksmith is, for example, temporarily interrupted by a group of Puritans who suspect (because of her blackness) that she is a witch or supernatural creature, thereby bringing the novel's attention to interpretation into dialogue with a pre-Enlightenment superstition. Reading and interpretation take on a number of other forms throughout the narrative, including Florens's reading of 'signs' which come to demonstrate the libidinal value of reading. In the novel's first pages she espouses a modality of reading that is rooted in intuition and superstition but is also prone to error. 'Often' she tells us, there are 'too many signs': a bright omen clouds up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much, like not reading the garden snake crawling up to the door saddle to die' (M, 1– 2). Reading, here, is specifically an act of discerning the future. Returning to the farm after her journey to seek the blacksmith and following a scene in which Florens realises that her love for the blacksmith will never be requited, Florens writes that '[w]hat I read or cipher is useless now. Heads of dogs, garden snakes, all that is pointless' (M, 155).<sup>86</sup> The value of reading, then, is linked to possibility

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<sup>85</sup> Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 164. Subsequent references to M.

<sup>86</sup> Florens's love will be unrequited because she injured a young boy that was in the blacksmith's care. This attack is a jealous return of Florens's pain at having been offered by her mother, instead of her younger brother.

and to the anticipation of a desired future. This interlinking of reading and desire is alternatively expressed in Jacob's reflection on the pointlessness of learning the names of towns because 'land claims were always fluid, except for notations on bills of sale [...]. Recognizing the slope of certain hills, a copse of oak, an abandoned den, the sudden odor of pine sap – all of that was more than valuable; it was essential' (M, 11). Jacob's concerns in forging an intimate knowledge of the land revolve around the issue of ownership and in discerning the potential value of the land's resources.<sup>87</sup>

Writing is not just for Rebekka and Jacob, however. In the narrative's final section, Florens's mother (identified throughout as 'minha mãe' – Portuguese for 'my mother', thus an indication of their passage) speaks of her motivation for seeking an education for herself and Florens. Taught in secret by a Reverend in Florens's original place of ownership, the *minha mãe* had hoped if they 'could learn letters somehow someday you could make your way. [...] He believed we would love God more if we knew the letters to read by. I don't know that. What I know is there is magic in learning' (M, 161). Florens recalls this education, too. Under the threat of being caught by 'wicked Virginians and Protestants' who would punish him if they discovered his actions, the Reverend teaches them to read with 'two books and a slate':

We have sticks to draw through sand, pebbles to shape words on smooth flat rock. When the letters are memory we make whole words. I am faster than my mother and her baby boy is no good at all. Very quickly I can write from memory the Nicene Creed including all of the commas. Confession we tell not write as I am doing now. I forget almost all of it until now. I like talk. Lina talk, stone talk, even Sorrow talk. Best of all is your talk. (M, 4)

What sort of writing is being done 'now', and what has occasioned Florens's reflections on her ability to write and its difference from speech? These gestures to an ongoing, accruing document have been brought to the fore from the first moments of Florens's utterance. She asks 'can you read?' before pronouncing that '[y]ou can think what I tell you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments when a dog's profile plays in a steam of a kettle' (M, 1). That the event of reading Florens's inscription (her confession) is analogised through the sighting of a recognisable image (a dog's profile) in an inanimate, nebulous mass (the steam)

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<sup>87</sup> This correlation of reading and ownership is concatenated by the letter which enables Florens's journey to the blacksmith: Rebekka writes and seals a letter that asks its addressee (anyone who becomes an obstacle to Florens's mission) that they allow Florens 'the courtesie of safe passage and witherall she may need to complete her errand. Our life, my life, on this earthe depends on her speedy return' (M, 110). The spoken message that Florens delivers, then, is seconded by a written one.

casts Florens's narratives in a light of what we should now recognise as ambiguity and the implication of participation; it is a confession that will appear as singular to its reader and that will therefore invite a level of projection and individuated response to its 'curiosities'.

As is often the case in Morrison's work, then, *A Mercy* directs us within its opening moments to consider its means of narration – which is both the form of the novel and the fiction indicated by an intimate first person narrative – and the plot becomes inflected or even encompassed by those means. Not only is reading foregrounded in this way, but the 'you' of 'can you read?' is later revealed to be a specific reader rather than a general real world reader, and in this revelation the fiction is configured as a physical rather than verbal communication. In speaking of her 'confession', Florens is telling us something that the text seems intent to obfuscate for a first-time reader about its production, so let us acknowledge what a reader will certainly know about Florens's narrative by the end of their reading, and the detail that occasions our discussion of fictionality: Florens's sections are not merely an act of narration (in the voice of the narrator that we take for granted) but are being scratched onto the surfaces (the walls, the floor) of a room in the house that Jacob had been in the process of building at the time of his death.

Although there are hints as to the ontological status of Florens's narration ('Confession we tell not write as I am doing now'), it is only when the telling of the plot catches up to the novel's act of writing that the reader can understand the full implications of what it means for Florens to be writing. If we had (as we likely did) assumed statements like 'can you read?' as addresses to an imagined reader which is *us*, then we can now understand that they are, rather, part of a written address to the blacksmith. Similarly, if we had previously understood them as instances of a verbal or internalised speech then we now understand that they are, in fact, written. Florens's final narration, in which she reflects on her own process of writing, the rationale for it, and on the anticipation of its interpretation, brings together these questions of anticipation and the material production of writing – it is worth representing this rumination in full:

There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor. From now you will stand to hear me. The walls make trouble because lamplight is too small to see by. I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. I cannot tell it to anyone but you. I am near the door and at the closing now. What will I do with my nights when

the telling stops? Dreaming will not come again. Sudden I am remembering. You won't read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn. If so, come to this farm again, part the snakes in the gate you made, enter this big, awning house, climb the stairs and come inside this talking room in daylight. If you never read this, no one will. These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom and all across the room. Or. Or perhaps no. Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. (M, 158–9)

It is not entirely clear whether Florens's words are being inscribed exactly as she speaks them at this point in the novel; the gesture to 'these words' that 'cover the floor' intimates a possible split in the spoken-written narrative at this moment. Indeed, why would Florens need to tell the blacksmith that her words were nearing the door – is she really writing these words too? Why would the 'confession' need to comment on its own spatial organisation and development, and how would these instructions be of any use before the act of reading? Florens, then, records the self-conscious experience that occurs when an author considers the reception of their work. In this case, it is a reception that will not be fulfilled; the communication will never be received.

There is a sense that there are two scenes in this reading, of an event that is being narrated in the present tense and an external narrator's retrospectively given view on that event. Or rather, this two-ness arises in Florens's speaking to herself. This raises, again, the concept of 'double consciousness', but in this case, W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness goes further to understanding that tautology. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, written at the turn of the twentieth century, Du Bois made the case that the experience of the African American was marked by its lack of possession of a 'true self-consciousness'; the self always feels to be 'looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness'.<sup>88</sup> By immersing herself in the act of writing but also superimposing the expectation of being read onto that present tense, the character of Florens articulates the experience of the author who is split by the act of writing, but split specifically by the knowledge of wrongdoing and the reflection on guilt that necessitates confession.

But just as *Beloved* is famously framed as a story which signals its own end – 'It was not a story to pass on' – so too does Florens figure this writing as writing that will

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<sup>88</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. by Brent Hayes Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 8.

not be read.<sup>89</sup> That these words cover the walls and floor, and that earlier Florens had spoken of how sometimes when writing ‘the tip of the nail skates away and the forming of words is disorderly’ (M, 156) calls their legibility into question. The words are not only difficult to read because of their construction, but the reader’s body will need to contort and adjust in order to read the text (‘from now on you will stand to hear my words’; ‘you will have to bend down to read my telling, crawl perhaps in a few places. I apologize for the discomfort’ (M, 156)). The blacksmith cannot read, and her inscription will therefore have no reader. That the room in which Florens writes her ‘telling’ moreover, is a room in a house which has not finished being built and which looks unlikely to ever be lived in – an unrealised project – underscores the extent to which this act of writing is a readerless one.

To bring attention to the material stuff of writing and to the existence of an intended reader is, in some ways, a reflexive manoeuvre. But if an address to a general reader would implicate a metatextuality, then to resituate this as a specific ‘you’, the blacksmith, reconfigures the narrative from espousing a reflexivity that addresses the reader to espousing one that excludes and reframes the narrative as an object or document that, rhetorically speaking, puts the reader outside of it – something about its intimacy is made inaccessible or disallowed. And yet, the insistent futurity of Florens’s rumination chimes with Morrison’s extra-fictional expressions of the necessity of readerly interpretation, for example in ‘Unspeakable’ when she calls *The Bluest Eye* a novel that ‘can be seen to open with its close’ because of the ambiguity of its ending.<sup>90</sup>

Despite the conceptual implications of our exclusion from interpretation, we ought to be attuned to the language with which Florens, in writing, reflects on her own act of writing: she describes the words as ‘closed up and wide open’. We might wonder whether Florens’s description takes us back to the secret of literature that was discussed in chapter one; these words have been etched onto a surface – they are technically accessible (wide open) but are in a room of a house that lies disused (closed up), even if only for the foreseeable future. This condition of words as ‘closed up and wide open’ gestures, then, to the reader’s potential discernment of their condition of fictionality. Like the simultaneously unopen and open book that George’s mother poses herself to be, Florens’s diagnosis of her words as ‘closed up and wide open’ in the final moments of her act of inscription attests to the simultaneous possibility of two planes of reader: the diegetic reader (the blacksmith) and the novel’s reader (you and me). And this is

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<sup>89</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 323.

<sup>90</sup> Morrison, ‘Unspeakable’, p. 149.



further suggested when Florens anticipates that the words might live in one of two futures: either they ‘will talk to themselves’ or ‘perhaps no’ because they ‘need the air that is out in the world’ instead. The image of Florens’s open and closed words soon find a response from the *minha mãe*’s lament: ‘To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if the scar forms, the festering is ever below’ (M, 161). Is this tension, framed by the novel’s opening interpretive gambit (‘can you read?’), what other critics would locate as the provocation to ‘participate’? Whereas the mother’s is a lament of the inability to heal, Florens’s message is a productive paradox.

The blacksmith, an illiterate reader but Florens’s intended reader nevertheless, has significant precedent in Morrison’s work. Amy Hungerford has written about the illiterate reader specifically in relation to Morrison alongside Kermode’s ‘secret’ of literature and the hermeneutic endeavour in a way that brings the question of authorial position and fictionality to the fore. We have just considered the ‘closed up and wide open’ words as an expression of fictionality, and it is through this double-bind of reading that Hungerford argues that the diegetic relationship between illiterate characters and scripture (or the fiction’s religiosity) constitutes a type of nonreading that she names ‘supernatural reading’.<sup>91</sup> This type of reader (‘incompetent’, ‘illiterate’ or ‘blind’) is one who ‘will most surely find the latent spiritual meaning in the materiality of words’.<sup>92</sup>

Drawing on Kermode’s likening of modern fiction to scripture because of its privileging ‘a kind of deafness or blindness in the interpreter that gives access to the latent’ Hungerford links supernatural reading back to the authoritative function of literary form and, in Morrison’s novels, to ‘the latent spiritual meaning in the materiality of words’.<sup>93</sup> The Bible and scripture do not simply figure as a religious thematic in Morrison’s fiction but rather, Morrison trades on ‘the Bible’s status as a sacred book, a book that gives a culturally authoritative account of the relation between what we see before us in the world and its supernatural meanings’ in a way that enables her to forge an authority that by the very nature of its being ‘supernatural, transcendent, imbued with ultimate authority’ reimagines contemporary literature as though it were scripture.<sup>94</sup> Not reading, then, possesses a power of its own.

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<sup>91</sup> Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 96.

<sup>92</sup> Hungerford, p. 105.

<sup>93</sup> Hungerford, p. 105.

<sup>94</sup> Hungerford, p. 99; 105.

It is through this question of authority that Hungerford enacts the suturing of Morrison's readers with real-life Morrison in a way that attends to the relationship between authority and reading without an over-reliance on Morrison-reading-Morrison. Supernatural reading, she argues, both 'effaces the work of the author' but 'at the same time the resulting mystification of the author suggests an otherworldly expertise or access to the spiritual, casting Morrison as a shamanistic figure'.<sup>95</sup> Thus Morrison's effacement of her characters' readerly authority confers an authorial authority for Morrison. This claim, which then lies implicitly, is the one that I am interested in: Hungerford suggests that Morrison's use of religious discourse is enabled by her reputation as an African American writer and that this reconfiguration of reading *benefits* her reputation and real world authority; Morrison both effaces and re-instantiates her authority. In reading secrecy and mystery in the fiction, Hungerford reads Morrison back into the fiction and demonstrates that even scenes of *not* reading create a predicament for the flesh and blood reader which necessitates a re-privileging of what qualifies as 'reading'.

While there are scenes of supernatural reading throughout *A Mercy* (Florens reads the rising steam, the blacksmith intuits remedies), it is also a novel that focuses on the 'magic of learning' to read (Florens is both a reader and a supernatural reader). And moreover, the blacksmith is never faced with the act of not reading the inscribed room. But what the unread room also does, by being 'closed up and wide open' is anticipate the undelivered maternal message with which the book ends. If this is the narrative's statement of artifice, its tension between scar tissue and a story that is both self-contained and which needs to go 'out in the world', then *A Mercy* makes its reader become the intermediary who holds not only the simultaneously open and closed words in balance but also holds that image alongside its negative image in the final section, but in this case that is a fact of reading rather than the particularly pronounced claim to 'make me, remake me' that brings *Jazz* to its end. To name this participatory or active and move on would be to overlook what Moya called the novel's attention to a time before the 'color-coded racial schema' had emerged and been naturalised. Indeed, the fate of Florens's closed up and wide open words not only finds a correlative image in the mother's unread words but in the storytelling of the Native American slave Lina who becomes a mother figure to Florens. Lina tells Florens that '[w]e never shape the world. The world shapes us' (M, 69). Florens's inability to understand this reciprocity

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<sup>95</sup> Hungerford, p. 96.

toward the beginning of the novel ('You are my shaper and my world as well. It is done. No need to choose' (M, 69)), then, narrativises an early moment of the trauma of maternal separation in US history which only becomes attuned to the materiality and reciprocity of words in the act of writing.

### **'write in the spaces': intuition in *Love***

Just as we took 'the talking room' as an example of reflexive fictionality in *A Mercy*, we will take a particular instance of writing – a forgery – as a way of reading *Love*. More specifically, we move from a talking room to a haunted home and from a late seventeenth century to mid-twentieth century America. The novel centres on a small town, Silk, that lives in the memory of a now-dilapidated hotel on the water's edge. The hotel, run by the self-made Bill Cosey, had once been a hub of aspirational African American life, but the nearby development of a canning industry – and the smell it created – led to the demise and eventual closure of the hotel. One of Silk's residents remarks that the 'withdrawal of that class of tourist was hard on everyone, like a receding wave that left shells and kelp script, scattered and unreadable, behind.' (L, 39) This sense of illegibility is part of the stagnation that has overtaken the town but which has most prominently overtaken the lives of Heed and Christine, and the hostile relationship between the two on which the novel centres. Two women bound together by Cosey's death, Heed is his widow and Christine is his only grandchild. Living together in Cosey's mansion, known to them and to the narrator as One Monarch Street, they live with the belief that they were the single inheritor named on Cosey's ambiguous will, scrawled on one of the hotel's restaurant menus: he named his 'sweet Cosey child' as the person to inherit his home and the assets associated with the hotel.<sup>96</sup>

Heed plans to forge a new will using old menus left in the attic of the hotel, a will which clearly states her as the sole beneficiary.<sup>97</sup> When it comes to the forgery, the act fails and Heed has a fatal fall through the attic's floor, leading her and Christine to

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<sup>96</sup> Heed believes herself to be the sweet Cosey child because she had been considerably younger than Cosey, and Christine believes herself to be the sweet Cosey child because she had been Cosey's only grandchild. Heed and Christine are the same age, which is the novel's latent scandal and the open secret of the community: Cosey's paedophilic marrying of a prepubescent Heed. I say that the house is known as One Monarch Street to them, moreover, because the home, in a neighbour's words, 'ain't been number one for a long time now, but you can't tell them that. Can't tell them nothing. It's 1410 or 1401, probably' (L, 14). That the name they ascribe to their home is outdated, but also that the neighbour is uncertain of the correct new address, underscores the blend of stagnation and stopped time in the novel. Moreover, it foreshadows what I will argue is the novel's concern with replacement.

<sup>97</sup> There is surely a re-working of Bertha, the madwoman in the attic of *Jane Eyre*, at play here.

finally repair their relationship and admit the lasting nature of their childhood love for one another, before Heed, Christine's friend had been replaced by Heed, Cosey's wife. But this secret plot is, crucially, a double secret; just as we had to lay out the 'revelation' of *A Mercy* – its writtenness on the walls of the empty, unfinished house – so too does *Love* contain a late-stage revelation. Cosey's 'original' will was forged by L. And not only this: L reveals that she fatally poisoned Cosey and destroyed the original will that he had written while drunk, in which he left everything to his mistress. Heed, however, is incapable of carrying out her own plot both because she is virtually illiterate and because her hands have been diminished by arthritis. She therefore places an advert to find someone to carry out the forgery – the words and signature – on her behalf. Of course, the advert does not state this: when a teenage girl named Junior arrives for her interview, Heed advertises and explains the job under the pretences of secretarial duties and tells Junior that she needs an assistant for the family history-cum-memoir that she has been compiling. She has 'got all the material, but some things need checking, you know. Dates, spellings.' (L, 26)

What quickly becomes apparent is that Junior has a heightened intuition and is capable of inciting an unsettling empathetic sensibility. When she is hired by Heed, Junior becomes a mediator of the relationship between Heed and Christine and her presence inaugurates a series of unusual, even magical, events. Answering the door to Junior, Christine is suspicious of 'the heart jump that came when she looked in the girl's eyes. [...] So what was the heart skip for? Was she afraid she would blush in recognition at any moment, sharpening her voice to a razor to cut off the possibility?' (L, 23) Christine's 'recognition' is an identification that arises from her (correct) suspicion that Junior is a runaway, just as she once had been. Heed experiences a similarly unnerving response to the girl's overly familiar rapport during her interview, an experience which instigates a disclosure:

[Junior] winked, startling Heed into a momentary recall of something just out of reach, like a shell snatched away by a wave. It may have been that flick of melancholy so sharply felt that made her lean close to the girl and whisper.

"Can you keep a secret?" She held her breath.

"Like nobody you ever knew."

Heed exhaled. "Because the work is private. Nobody can know about it. Not nobody." (L, 27)

The holding of the breath, the returned analogy of the shell, the uncertainty around why Heed leans forward ('it may have been...'), and the enchanting effects of this

‘something just out of reach’ that makes Heed divulge a secret are refracted through other instances of the supernatural in the novel. When Junior sights a portrait of Cosey in the Monarch Street home, she engages in a phantasmal relationship with him; L tells us of an oceanic force called police-heads which, although begun as a rumour to scare children away from playing in the water unsupervised, becomes a seriously believed force that is charged with the death of various beach-goers. This, and Heed and Junior’s apprehension of L through their sense of smell at the end of the novel all comprise the novel’s utilisation of magical occurrences that are brought into focus by Junior and L alone, and which go seemingly unnoticed by others.<sup>98</sup>

Junior is not a desired mediator like Anya or an intuition-follower like Costello or Morrison; she is impulsive, disrespectful and destructive. But her beauty does strike a ‘gong of envy’ (L, 23) in Christine and allows her to become a projection for desires that sees her granted access to thoughts and knowledge that others do not have. Her role in the narrative, moreover, shares in that role of the unexpected guest that both Smith and Coetzee utilise, and in *Love*, it instigates a reparation that *A Mercy* searches for. Junior is an intuitionist and intermediary whose role corresponds to what Lauren Berlant has called the professional intuitionist in the contemporary American novel. Berlant argues that novels which utilise a ‘protagonist distinguished not only by their acute intuition, but also by their professionalization of intuition’ necessitate a renewed understanding of the novel as an affective document of the present.<sup>99</sup> How, Berlant asks, ‘does the aesthetic rendition of emotionally complex sensual experience articulate what is already codified as “knowledge” of a contemporary historical moment’ and ‘[h]ow is it possible for the affects to sense that people have lived a moment collectively and translocally in a way that is not just a record of ideology?’<sup>100</sup> Like the novels she discusses to illustrate the interrelation of history and literary history – Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* and William Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition* – Junior is also the intuitionist who, as well as being hired, if unconsciously, *because* of her powers of intuition, compels a narrative about the historical difficulty of love in African American communities.<sup>101</sup> In addition to reading Junior as an intuitionist, both Junior and L speak to what I earlier called the paradoxical

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<sup>98</sup> Heed notices that the smell is the same smell that L had, but only Junior knows that that smell means spiritual presence.

<sup>99</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event’, *American Literary History*, 20 (2008), 845–60 (p. 846).

<sup>100</sup> Berlant, p. 846.

<sup>101</sup> In a different version of this thesis, Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* and *The Underground Railroad* would have comprised a chapter on race, reading and handwriting. The scholarship of *The Intuitionist* protagonist Lila Mae in particular echoes throughout this thesis’s attention to questions of close reading, scholarship and mediumship.

authority of mediumship in Morrison's fiction. In Holland's reading, this is the compounded position of black female bodies: they not only 'serve as passages between humanity and nonhumanity' but also serve as 'articulation[s] of that passage'.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, they encompass the terrain 'between the ancestral and the living community'.<sup>103</sup> In the augmented intuition and otherworldliness of Junior and L in particular, but the novel generally, there is an amplification of that movement between past and present, dead and living in a manner that brings the theme and fear of personal replacement and historical erasure to the fore.

In Houston A. Baker, Jr's reading, the narration's location and continual expression of its proximity to the sea evinces a meditation on the transatlantic slave trade – of which the slave ship was 'the historic vessel for the emergence of capitalism' – and this is a metaphoricity that critics of the novel have elided in their neglect to read beyond the plot and style of the novel: 'To merely skim the surface of *Love*' he asserts, 'is to miss completely its social and historical ancestry of oceans'.<sup>104</sup> Not only does Baker, Jr draw our attention to the slave ship as the marker of capitalism's emergence but he draws *Love*'s 'shifting narrative perspectives and dizzying proliferation of details' into his specific critique of scholarship and early reviews on *Love* and the 'certain brand of modernism's amnesia' that has affected its critics.<sup>105</sup> This Morrisonian trope of multiple perspective narrative has a lot to answer for.

But there is, as Berlant suspects in her theory of intuitionists, both a localised fiction and larger historical document at work in *Love*. Christine's formative years were spent in a radical black political group, the narration reflects on the agitations of race relations throughout the 1950s and '60s, there are allegations of rape directed toward a man in that group and one character buries household objects in the paranoid belief that ensuing race riots will render the family and the town history-less. These aspects are also linked to the novel's interest in secrecy and questions of authorship and originality evinced in the forgery. L, our narrator who is concerned with enchantment both embodies secrecy (her name relates to the unspeakable word – love) and harbour's a secret – that she faked Cosey's will and intentionally wrote it in ambiguous terms. Secrets and secrecy abound in the novel, and range from the secret of L's forgery to the

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<sup>102</sup> Holland, p. 43.

<sup>103</sup> Holland, p. 43.

<sup>104</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr., 'The Point of Entanglement: Modernism, Diaspora, and Toni Morrison's *Love*', in *Contemporary African American Literature: The Living Canon*, ed. by Lovalerie King and Shirley Moody-Turner (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 17–40 (p. 20; 29).

<sup>105</sup> Baker, Jr, p. 31.

secret language that Heed and Christine created as children. But what's more, these sites of secrecy are bound up in considerations of language and textuality, and they are tied up in the mysticism of the novel that is embodied both by L's otherworldly narration and Junior's spiritual mediumship, or intuition. This, I said, brings the theme and fear of replacement to the fore. Indeed, not only is the novel's central plot based on an act of replacing (the replacement of the 'original' will with a new one and Cosey's original with L's forged 'original'), and refracted in illegible or uncertain details like the door number One that is maybe also 1410 or 1401, but this is also expressed in Christine's lament to her lawyer that Heed, by hiring Junior, signals her own replacement: 'You don't know! You don't! She is replacing me!' (L, 95). All of these pose *Love* as a record which attests to Heed and Christine's unresolved conflict being paradoxically readable in the illegibility of One Monarch Street and Silk. We will see more signs of replacement, along with Holland's contention that black female bodies traverse between the ancestral and the living specifically in the guise of mediums and intuitionists, in what follows.

L's critical or interpretive sensibility ('my humming encourages people'), while not etched on the surfaces of a room, incites a physical proximity to the world she tells of when, for example, she recalls the hotel's decline which 'started way before 1955. I foresaw it in 1942 when Mr. Cosey was making money hand over fist and the hotel was a showplace. See that window over there? It looked out on paradise, one me and May made' (L, 104). L moves, then, between sharing memories of Silk and Up Beach (the specific area of the Hotel) and functioning as a framework for our interpretation that calls attention to the effects of narrative structure and style. Indeed, as intimated in the response to James, it is not enough to take L's rumination on the influence of narrative styling as the single point of a reading of *Love*. L's elided name, the novel's title, as well as her actions convene the circumstances for Heed and Christine's hostility and, along with Junior, oversees their fleeting reconciliation. First, to confirm L's role in the ambiguity of the will that leads to the hostile co-habitation of One Monarch Street: in the novel's final section, L's disclosure of her hand in the document that Heed and Christine believe to be Cosey's will, and in Cosey's death, highlights the role of gaps and of inviting a misreading. She tells us that it is

Just as well they fought over my menu, looking in it for a sign of preference and misreading it when they did. Heed's grasp of handwriting skills was limited, but she had to wonder in 1971 if the "sweet Cosey child" her husband was willing property to in 1958 was neither her nor Christine but a baby on the way. They

never saw the real thing – witnessed by me, notarized by Buddy Silk’s wife – leaving everything to Celestial. (L, 200)

L has created an ambiguity by design, she intentionally forged a statement that could hold (at least) two readings – two projections – at once. But she suggests that it is specifically the anticipated mistake of the readers, who owing to their desire to read preference into the ambiguity, misread.

Tracing the novel’s treatment of misreading, which is also a part of the novel’s concern with replacement, brings us to the misinterpretation of ‘L’ and to a consideration of how names and literacy (or, the literality of names) have resulted in mistakes and misinterpretations. It tells us, in other words, of how gaps in sense have opened up new meanings and new readings. Throughout her narrations, L speaks of a mystery that is premised precisely on her own claims to ambiguity and the possibility of multiple readings. She tells us of how the café in Silk that she worked in had a broken sign: it *‘reads “Maceo’s Café — ria” but the diner really belonged to me. Indeed if not in deed.’* (L, 64) The ‘te’ of ‘cafeteria’ has fallen off the sign, and these missing letters result in a new name for the café. L reflects on this, and her reflection occurs alongside a memory of how the brevity of her own name had provoked speculation:

Anybody who remembers what my real name is is dead or gone and nobody inquires now. Even children, who have a world of time to waste, treat me like I’m dead and don’t ask about me anymore. Some thought it was Louise or Lucille because they used to see me take the usher’s pencil and sign my tithe envelopes with L. Others, from hearing people mention or call me, said it was El for Eleanor or Elvira. They’re all wrong. Anyway, they gave up. Like they gave up calling Maceo’s Maceo’s or supplying the missing letters. Café Ria is what it’s known as, and like a favored customer spoiled by easy transportation, I glide there still. (L, 65)

In drawing out this distinction between L and El and the final sentence’s proliferation of ls (‘glide there still’), this passage accounts for the projection that occurs in a subsequent and provoked effort to sense-making. The gap left by the missing ‘te’ eventually stops being filled in, customers ‘gave up [...] supplying the missing letters’. This is, again, part of the novel’s consideration of replacement. The engraved crockery that Christine holds fast to is another part of this concern with the effects of misinterpretation and overdetermination. Marked with ‘CC’, Christine takes them to display her initials (Christine Cosey), although there is a counter-speculation that it is just one C doubled (and therefore simply denoting Cosey). Worn from use, these letters are doubly uninterpretable, described as having gone ‘beyond ornate to illegible’ (L, 22).



Our attention is drawn, moreover, to the difference between written and spoken forms; L is neither the first letter of a common Christian name (it's not Louise or Lucille), nor the phonetic sound of its first syllable, El (it's not Eleanor or Elvira). What is suggested in L's final narration – the final section of the novel – is that L's name is Love. Telling us, in the final moments, of how she had been witness to the intense childhood love of Heed and Christine, L affirms her recognition of the love with the comment that '[i]f your name is the subject of the First Corinthians, chapter 13, it's natural to make it your business.' (L, 199) This is the chapter from Corinthians which contains the passage frequently cited at wedding services (love is patient, kind, does not envy, does not boast, and so on). But the passage that prefaces this is a rumination on the uselessness of virtue and adeptness without the presence or ownership of love, expressed in a manner that takes us back to questions of mediumship and mysticism, being an intermediary of wisdom and ignorance as Diotima articulated:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.<sup>106</sup>

As with L's disclosure of her original forgery, the interest here is not only in the symbolic or thematic inferences of this biblical citation but also of the fact that these disclosures, which both substantially reframe the narrative events (and "theatricalize" it, as Morrison tried *not* to do with *The Bluest Eye*) take place in the final moments of the text.

Carolyn Denard has read the late-stage disclosure of *Love* as part of the 'strategy' discernible 'in most of [Morrison's] novels' whereby

even as they embrace and articulate black language and black musical forms, involves acknowledging – even while breaking – a code of silence. As *meta* texts, Morrison's narratives are often framed as documents that tell a secret that the community had kept quiet. In this way, the novels themselves have been the "silence breakers" – the vehicles through which her narrators could share with her readers, go behind the veil as it were – to tell what people do not tell, to say what they have not told.<sup>107</sup>

Counterposing a black cultural history of silence and secrecy with the rendering of those themes in Morrison's work, an inference of Denard's argument is that it is through the

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<sup>106</sup> 1 Corinthians 13. 2.

<sup>107</sup> Carolyn Denard, "Some to Hold, Some to Tell": Secrets and the Trope of Silence in *Love*, in *Toni Morrison: Paradise, Love, A Mercy*, ed. by Lucille P. Fultz (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 77–91 (p. 79).

slips between narrator, author, fiction, novel, diegesis and reader that silence and secrecy are both mapped and performed. We could note Denard's language of the 'veil' and interest in Secrecy rather than the contents of the secrets (or, secrets one by one). Denard, in the case of *Love*, thus argues that it invites its readers into the realm of its narrators and the knowledge which exists there. The veil is not the secret power that presides over the text, but rather is akin to the permeability of the boundary that exists between reader and text. But L's otherworldliness and Junior's supernatural intuition, in my reading, are an intrinsic part of how this veil works in the world of the fiction itself. L is both a force of the novel's drive to repair through her role as an intermediary spirit of love, but also the force that has held the tension of Heed and Christine, by necessity, in place. To recall Thorrson, Morrison is one of a group of writers who used 'magic, conjure, and the extrareal' to root their politics in literature; these 'documents' are framed or revealed through supernatural means.

As a 'professional intuitionist', Junior's entrance into *Love* articulates the disparate traumas and conflicts of One Monarch Street and when it comes to the act of forgery, the boundary that Junior traverses becomes particularly thinned and pronounced.<sup>108</sup> In this final example, L's name is keyed into further contention. Searching through boxes in the attic of the hotel, sound and letters but also the senses become confused:

While they search, Junior smells baking bread, something with cinnamon. "You smell something?" she asks.  
 Heed sniffs. "Smells like L," she says.  
 "Hell can't smell that good," answers Junior.  
 Heed lets it go.  
 "There! Look!" Junior points. "It's behind you. Up there."  
 Heed turns to look. osniR. "That don't say Rinso."  
 "It's upside down." Junior laughs.  
 Heed is embarrassed. "Must be losing my sight". (L, 175)

Our attention is drawn here, as readers of the written word, to Junior's mishearing before this misinterpretation is immediately mirrored in Heed's misreading of lettering that does exist in front of these characters. These misinterpretations can be explained through two different means. The first is to do with a community knowledge: Junior is not from the area and has not paid attention to Heed's stories about the hotel and Silk's history and so does not recognise L's name. In fact, Junior relies on her intuition here,

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<sup>108</sup> The act of forgery fails – Junior brings a pen that would not have been existed before Cosey's death, and Christine interrupts the scene of dictation.

but can only deduce – while deriding Heed’s choice of wording for the forgery – that the smell is not Cosey: ‘Is he listening? Is he laughing? Is he here? She can’t tell. The cinnamon bread is not him.’ (L, 176) The second is to do with literacy and reading: Heed cannot read well enough to recognise that the letters of the (branded, and so presumably visually recognisable) box that she looks at are merely upside down.

But what also figures in this scene in the physical proximity between the phantasmic narrator and the characters in the attic; as Cosey’s presence slips out of grasp for Junior, L’s takes over. At the moment of the forgery, the moment at which Junior fulfils her secretarial duty (albeit badly), the space between L’s narration and narrative events close. Junior, at this moment, is under instruction from Heed to ‘write in the spaces of the menu’ (L, 175) while Heed ‘closes her eyes and dictates’ (L, 176). Of course, this is where the writing *has* to go, but it also speaks to Junior’s role in traversing that space, between Silk’s unreadable and poorly archived past and its present. The scene in the attic is not just a scene of forgery and the attempt to influence legal circumstance but also gathers these women and mediators together for an unwitting channelling of its proximal spirits for the purpose of filling in the gaps left ambiguous by documents and relationships.

### **Morrison’s literary re-enchantment**

In attending to a number of critics who take ‘reading’ as a focus in Morrison, this chapter has articulated how critics’ lack of distinction between reading Morrison’s fiction and their use of Morrison as a reader often leads directly to readings which centre their responses on an abstracted notion of participatory reading, or which reads Morrison according to Morrison. There is, to reiterate, no inherent problem with citation, but citation to Morrison has become bound in a nexus of authentication at worst and interpassivity at best. In wagering Pfaller as an interlocutor, critical reading has been shown as an exercise, instead, in not reading. Moreover, approaches that take the novel and fiction in uncritical tandem beget readings which have reacted to, but not theorised, the effects of a novelist whose reputation hinges on her multi-faceted career as a reader. In my own readings of Morrison’s fictions, I have stuck close to theorists, namely Holland, Hungerford, Moya, Serpell and Thorrson, whose readings of Morrison’s fiction make links between the fiction and the author that resist ventriloquizing and read the fiction as part of broader investigations of literary and

public authorship. *A Mercy* and *Love* both continue to deal in appeals to the reader to participate, but reading these novels with an attention to the acts of reading and writing that displace as well as guide our own, has found that the role of intuition in *Love* and malleable and unread messages in *A Mercy* offer additionally valuable means of considering reading in Morrison. These readings have, by necessity, remained more speculative than in Smith or Coetzee because they are offered as exemplifications, rather than definitive readings, of how Morrison's reflexive and often illusion-wielding narrators can be read beyond citation and ventriloquization.

My intention has also been to show that Morrison's use of the novel is informed by a faith that the novel's ability to express and solicit enchantment makes it a valuable form of communication after the imputation of individualism by the BAM. Both the experience of the nonsecular in writing fiction, and the propensity of the novel to be remade by its reader have been repeated sentiments in Morrison's interviews, alongside a conviction that the novel does something that literary criticism cannot. I want to conclude, then, by way of addressing what has been an undercurrent in the three chapters of this thesis – an attention to the mechanisms of fiction that invites interpretation and yet is suspicious of scholarly interpretation. What does the idea of fiction enable for Morrison (as well as for Coetzee and Smith) that speaking as a critic does not?

In her interview with Naylor, Morrison made a clear distinction between the enchanted language that she and Gloria Naylor used, of speaking to their characters and feeling themselves chosen, and the disenchanted language of literary criticism. Morrison charges literary studies, or scholars who interpret literature, with using a vocabulary that does not accede to the nonsecular experience of writing. There has been an ongoing attention to the notion of a 'good practice' of literary criticism in this thesis, and chapter one precisely accounted for those modes of reading that not only permit but seek to express enchantment. But despite the crossover of institutions in which academic readers and fiction writers operate, the pull of fictional enchantment reigns supreme for Morrison, as well as Coetzee and Smith. Indeed, 'Critical Enchantments' has examined the work of three novelists who all had the training to become literary scholars (and who came up in the academy at a time when the option to 'become' a literary scholar was not a goal that presented seemingly insurmountable challenges), but who chose to

put their foot forward as authors instead.<sup>109</sup> But not only that, all three have then opted to caricature literary critics from the side-lines in various ways. They have all expressed, however satirically or offhandishly, a type of disdain for literary interpretation as a discipline and as a reading sensibility, and that disdain has been rooted in a sense of the teleological orientation or predictability of critics: whereas the fictions anticipate the unexpected changes wrought by reading, critics already know what point and intervention they are going to make.<sup>110</sup>

Smith's comes in a moment in *Artful* in which the bereaved protagonist remembers 'what you used to say when you'd make me to come with you to those boring conferences was, Ten points to the first person who hears someone say the words Walter Benjamin' (A, 41). Coetzee's take, which we noted in chapter two, was his suspicion that literary criticism involved a goal had 'been set' for him 'not only by the whole philosophical tradition into which [he is] implicitly inserting [himself], but also by the rather tight discourse of criticism itself.'<sup>111</sup> Morrison distrusts criticism on the suspicion that it cannot open itself to her conviction that she is spoken to in the act of writing ('I could sort of let it disguise itself as the artist's monologue with herself' but 'there's no time for that foolishness now'). Literary critics, like Walsh, turn this back into a metaphor or rhetorical position. Morrison also expresses a critical sensibility that, even when writing a book of literary criticism, caveats that she comes to the task of interpretation without 'the tools of a literary critic' (PD, 3) and instead with the tools of a writer.

Scholars and writers of literature, two schools who occupy increasingly close quarters, seem to operate with caricatures of one another. If the claim of fictionality reiterated throughout this thesis is to be believed, that the novel engages strategies to demonstrate its separation from other fictional and factual discourses, then this aversion to literary criticism might be part of these authors' emphasis that, in spite of being close to the university, they do things that critics cannot do – namely, create artificial but

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<sup>109</sup> Coetzee completed a PhD at the University of Austin, Texas; Smith nearly completed a PhD at Cambridge (her reading of joy in modernist poetry required revisions that she never completed); Morrison holds an MA as well as several honorary doctorates.

<sup>110</sup> This is not, of course, a reading that I share. Sedgwick's reparative, Ricoeur's postcritical and Bewes's reading with the grain all show how the act of criticism can retain its relationship to surprises and to the unforeseen. Indeed, what was an implicit rather than explicit point of enquiry for this thesis was the relationship between enchantment and how unexpected disclosures or events in the novel create effects that range from defamiliarisation to re-immersion, but a future extension of this thesis would examine the nature of this relationship, between enchantment and surprise in the false-futurity of the novel, more closely.

<sup>111</sup> Coetzee, *Doubling*, p. 246.

plausible, closed up but wide open, characters and worlds that can feel like a type of magic or that arise out of a magical experience. In other words these authors, who are all a specific type of literary fiction writer, trade in fictionality because of its established but changeable capacity for enchantment. For Morrison, the possibility of depicting more fully the work of traversal done by black women, to use Holland's term again, has proven part of that appeal.

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## Conclusion

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This thesis has sought to construct an understanding of the valences of enchantment that structure the contemporary novel and our interpretive engagement with fiction. From the ritual and superstition that inheres in the experience of writing fiction, to characters' enchanted experiences when reading books, contemplating words or looking at paintings, to critics who consciously or unconsciously detail their own enchantments, the work of Coetzee, Morrison and Smith has in each case enacted a different dialogue with the notion of enchantment as a state of knowing disbelief. But what they share is their provocation to readers to consider the workings of the fiction and the way that it has been put together. We started, in the introduction, with the suggestion of enchantment as a state that is enhanced by the availability of better knowledge. Through an attention to theories and fictions of enchantment that posit enchantment as a critical state, I have shown how enchantment takes on an additional critical aspect in theories of fictionality rather than posing them as metafiction or postmodern novels. The enchantment of the contemporary novel is one in which we can maintain an awareness of the novel as an authored construct, but in addition to confirming what we already know about novelists – that they are never writing *only* as novelists<sup>1</sup> – a reading of enchantment through an attention to markers of fictionality has found just how implicated the author is in the writing and reading of the novel. Enchantment might well apply as a descriptor of magical worlds in fiction, but in the context of the writers of literary fiction who inhabit this thesis it more forcefully describes the relationship between an author and their work – the interaction that enables the construction of another world and its voices – and between a reader and meaning, their discernment of the artifice of the object that they read.

If we think that these eighteenth-century markers of fictionality no longer have significant bearing in the contemporary market, then the case of Elena Ferrante should be enough, finally, to dispel that misgiving.

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<sup>1</sup> Novelists who write popular literary fiction are bound to write other forms of fiction and nonfiction for the purposes of edited collections (Morrison has published two new collections – *The Origins of Others* and *The Source of Self-Regard* – since I started writing this thesis), excerpts of novels or stories that will later be published as books (as in Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*), or newspaper articles that function in part as advertising (the case of Smith's *Guardian* piece on seeing del Cossa's fresco, published just one month after *How to be both* was announced on the Booker longlist for 2014, serves as an example of this pre-meditated disclosure).

## Citing, exposing, doxing

Summer 2015 saw the peak in an obsession with Ferrante's Neapolitan novels (a series of four novels translated into English between 2012 and 2015). Everybody was reading them, describing how engrossed they were in the lives of protagonists Lenù and Lila; Ferrante's writing was compelling, they could not put the books down. Ferrante, an Italian writer, represented something of a contemporary wonder: she (if the gender of the pseudonym was to be believed) had remained anonymous, nobody knew the true identity of Elena Ferrante. But in October 2016 that changed: the investigative journalist Claudio Gatti doxed Ferrante and published his findings about her true identity in a scattering of international publications including the *New York Review of Books*. Gatti, defending himself in an interview with Pete Vernon, responded to charges of misogyny and of having invaded the rights of the author to privacy. Why go after her, asked Vernon, when 'she's not a mafia boss or politician, but just a writer of fiction?':

CG: But she's a major public figure. Do you know who the Italian minister of the economy is?

PV: No.

CG: Do you know who the CEO of the Italian oil company is?

PV: No.

CG: But you do know who Elena Ferrante is. What I'm saying is, the biggest mystery about Italy from outside Italy is, "Who is Elena Ferrante?" It is a major issue, not that I made it such. When readers buy books by the millions, they have a legitimate desire to know more about who wrote the book. [...]

On November 1st, you are going to have an entire book about her life. She writes about being the daughter of a seamstress from Naples, about having three sisters. Nothing of that is true. So my feeling is they violated the privacy, because you cannot have your cake and eat it too. You are fueling the frenzy, the curiosity about her personal life, by the pieces of information that you are giving, and then you complain when somebody finds the real information. Explain to me how that works?<sup>2</sup>

In this scandal we are transported back to the world of Defoe who claims that *Robinson Crusoe* is a true story, but also of Randi and Geller: Ferrante is doxed, and the doxer justifies his actions by saying that she was packaging an invention as a truth, Ferrante was going to

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<sup>2</sup> Pete Vernon, 'Q&A: The Journalist Who Outed Bestselling Author Elena Ferrante', *Columbia Journalism Review*, 3 October 2016 <[https://www.cjr.org/q\\_and\\_a/elena\\_ferrante\\_claudio\\_gatti\\_identity.php](https://www.cjr.org/q_and_a/elena_ferrante_claudio_gatti_identity.php)> [accessed 19 July 2018], paragraphs 11-16.



profit from the knowing sales of lies as truth. Ferrante's dishonesty about the precise fictional status of her then upcoming work *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey*, combined with her popularity, profits, and the 'legitimate desire' of her readership, strip away the conditions in which the wish to remain anonymous can be respected (although how could Gatti have known, before the act of unmasking, that Ferrante was fabricating this autobiography? This was a high stakes throw of the dice). Would Gatti have set out on his task had it not been for the awe that Ferrante had inspired? Of course, Gatti's interview is a defence: there was a backlash of outrage toward Gatti and the publications that ran the story from the literary world and beyond. Many readers would doubtless have been content to be left in the dark as to the true identity of Ferrante and would continue to engage with Ferrante's work whether or not we doubted the veracity of her identity. But from the perspective of Gatti, and the people he claims to deserve the knowledge of Ferrante's identity, Ferrante's exclusion of her reader from the "trick" was too much; to return to the language of Mrs Rock in *How to be both*, Gatti felt that mystery had to be turned into Mystery again – we had to find out. The non-disclosure of fiction is a powerful tool in a time where governments and big business increasingly brand themselves on the presumed inherent good of transparency.<sup>3</sup> Fiction became a contentious subject in which the presence of increasing celebrity and large sums of money meant that it was not possible to entertain Coetzee's sense that autobiography might, once the author has begun to impart pieces of themselves into the worlds that they write, a type of fiction too.

There are a number of contemporary examples that could be drawn on here to push this point of the economic significance of fictionality further. For example, the case of the white American man Michael Derrick Hudson who attempted to publish disguised as his invented Chinese poet character named Yi-Fen Chou. It turned out that Ferrante's 'real' persona was not so far removed from the person she had been construing<sup>4</sup>, but I draw on this example here because it brings us back to a shared principle of the fictions in this thesis: their anonymity, disclosures and tricks all take place within the fiction, they do not infer an ultimate, hidden, secret.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Clare Birchall has written about the political paradox of opacity and transparency in many places, but perhaps most discretely in 'Transparency, Interrupted: Secrets of the Left', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28 (2011), 60-84. Future work on enchantment in the contemporary novel would turn its attention more squarely to the politics of disclosure.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps we should wonder what the response would have been if she had been, in the words of a friend, a bloke from Yorkshire named Dave.

<sup>5</sup> There are resonances between these fictions and the genres of memoir, autobiography and 'personal essay' that are seeing increasing attention (through writers like Karl Ove Knausgård, Maggie Nelson, although Coetzee's *Scenes from Provincial Life* tug at this boundary) but the focus from the novelists in this thesis is consistently trained on fiction in the tradition of the novel; their authorial involvement remains in the tradition of a portrait of the artist.

Indeed, a different version of this thesis, ‘Authorial Enchantments’, has lingered under this one, but in opting for ‘Critical Enchantments’, a focus has been maintained on the dynamic of mystery, the illusions and puzzles that have been utilised as a means of creating and examining enchantment in the novel. As Paige’s epigraph asserted, re-enchantments are the means by which we reconceive of fiction and the aesthetic, and in the hands of Coetzee, Morrison and Smith, enchantments have reasserted that testing readerly disbelief can also enhance it. Ricoeur’s sense that we are moved to interpret when we apprehend double meaning has echoed beyond the fresco-style narratives of Smith; each fiction specifically utilises double meaning, and in doing so casts the work in the light of an anticipation of interpretation. In the image of simultaneously ‘open and unopen’ books, being an intermediary of ‘somewhere and nowhere’, and unreadable words that are ‘closed up and wide open’, enchantment has frequently been premised on the ability of the novel to hold oppositions and conflicting feelings. The stereotyped image of enchantment has been an unbroken immersion and fixation on a masterfully constructed illusion (an illusion maintained by a skilled enchanter). These novels, in their use of anagrams, secretaries who say they can’t write, narrators who tell you that you will read incorrectly or not at all, demonstrate how enchantment – as a marker of the investment of belief – in the contemporary moment can be forged even when, and especially when, illusions are broken.

Gallagher’s articulation of the affective force of characters was updated in Smith’s use of conundrums, mysteries and puzzles which emphasised the artifice of characters and the story world. Smith takes Gallagher’s basic pronouncement on the ‘unreal knowability and apparent depth’ of characters and, in *There but for the* and *How to be both*, replaces it with an amplified accessibility that is put into tension with the amplified small-m mysteries of these narratives; we, like George and Brooke, will not find out what will happen if George meets Lisa, or why Miles locked himself in the room. Smith tells us, along with Sedgwick’s paranoid reading, that when disclosure has lost its force, we need to change our relationship to disclosure, but this does not mean ridding our stories of disclosure altogether. Smith’s open and closed narratives are a re-examination of the forms and value of disclosure and non-disclosure in fiction and they locate ‘magic’ possibility in the tension between them.

The inability of J. M. Coetzee’s fictions to get lost in the pleasure of possibility as Smith’s writing does suggested an experience of enchantment that is precisely amplified, as theorised by Mannoni and Pfaller, by the distrust of the enchantment of others. But our investigation centred on Coetzee’s dialogue with theories and fictions that find an enchantment in the cleaves between this world and the world of fiction. Through his

adherence to poetic faith, the disbelief of eighteenth-century and other loaded moments of fictionality, and in Diotima's correct belief, the ambiguities of belief are what apprehend him from breaking from fiction and speaking, transparently, as John Coetzee. In Coetzee's fictions, the experience of writing what you hear, or writing as a process of copying, has become a pronounced site of critical enchantment: in the act of responding to fictions, or returning to familiar characters, the writer finds that they become an intermediary, a secretary, who experiences the unoriginality and removed insight of copying; influence is immersive but engaged. But his work also demonstrates a strong case for applying the lens of fictionality as a way of reading, rather than genuflecting in front of, an author who uses his non-novel fictions and traditionally extra-fictional discourses (that is, his other performances as an author) to continue examining fiction and to project ambiguity into his plausibility.

Toni Morrison, an author whose work people profess to be enchanted by, has exemplified the effects of a narrator who invites your interpretation and a novelist who seconds that invitation. But Morrison presents us with the possibility that her 'reading' is not the reading enacted by literary critics or even the general implied reader but the reading of a writer. Her work as an editor, teacher and critic corroborates recent work in sociologies of literature that argue there is no distilled or straightforward 'author', but rather an author who functions as a reader and authority in multiple senses. Reading Morrison criticism on the other hand has highlighted the importance of attending to critics' citation to, and use of, of the author and the author's words. Reflexive narratives, I argued via Pfaller and Serpell, have created more-passive-than-passive readers, and this becomes doubly so when black women novelists face what duCille called the 'authenticating stamp'. Reading Morrison from the perspective of fictionality not only found the reflexive image of a fictional world that is both accessible and inaccessible, and found the limitations of Walsh's rhetorical narrative theory to deal with convictions rather than metaphors of mediumship, but highlighted the importance of attending to and explicitly framing one's critical response in relation to the author's critical sensibility. Reading "reading" in *Love* without recourse to Morrison began to demonstrate the force of the intuitive thinker in her late work.

Reading enchantment in the novel has shown that the central question of fictionality in the novel – the means of marking fiction as fiction, the way that authors position themselves in relation to the novel, the way that disbelief is solicited – continues to pose important questions about how readers invest in fiction and how they square their knowledge of its material production with the experience of reading an immersive world.

Reading through the rise of fictionality in particular has foregrounded that, just as Gallagher argues that early novels emphasised not their realism but their fictionality, these novels emphasise their fictionality too. This does not only (or even predominantly) take place in authorial prefaces but also in the world of the fiction and in the consonance of ideas, interpretive or affective sensibilities, and characters between novels and shorter fictions, interviews and critical work. It might be that, in a time where readers have often heard the author reading their work and has seen them in the flesh, these novels, by emphasising their artifice, redouble our efforts to disbelieve because we are, in a sense, in on the trick of the story.

Indeed, while the artifice of fiction has often pulled us from contemplating puzzles and mysteries to parsing aesthetic and hermeneutic theory, there has been a tension between cheap artifice and ‘serious’ aesthetic reflection on the status of the literary text. That tension of cheapness leads us to an additional reflection about the novel: the novels that have been under discussion here, *There but for the*, *How to be both*, *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man*, *Diary of a Bad Year*, *Love* and *A Mercy*, can be purchased for 1p on Amazon UK (with a £2.80 delivery charge). There is something about the form of the novel, and contemporary literary fiction in particular, wherein value depreciates quickly (even if, as the case of Ferrante shows, the cheapness belongs to the text rather than the author’s bank balance). This brings us back to the issue of the genre and identity that these authors share: they are all authors who work with presses that can afford large print runs, so much so that the physical books end up valueless. When Elizabeth Costello bemoans that stories like Paul’s, (falling in love with his married nurse) are two a penny, she is onto something. Paul’s fallibility, the liard coin ‘worth very little’ in Goliard’s name, and L’s feeling that she is irrelevant all allude to the repercussions of artifice in the novel: plots become cheap, copies or reiterations of stories we have heard before or disclose themselves as mere fabrications. It has been the task of these novelists to negotiate that threat of cheapness through appeals to the continuing value of fiction’s capacity to enchant.

It may be, as per the suggestion of the critics discussed in chapter one, that theorising our aesthetic attachments represents the next agenda of literary studies. But what this thesis has demonstrated is the depth of critical thought enacted in the contemporary novel itself on the subject of immersion and attachment; if we are to act on the critical imperative to analyse our own enchantments we must work from a perspective that gives full articulation to that depth and which is attentive to the authorial narrative that subtends it.

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