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Postmodern Feeling: Affective Frame-Breaking in the Metafictional Novel

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Abstract

Since Fredric Jameson's claim that postmodernism is characterised by a 'waning of affect', critical approaches to literary postmodernism have allowed for little consideration of embodied experience. By placing contemporary affect theorists, such as Sara Ahmed and Sianne Ngai, in dialogue with canonical readings of postmodernism, such as Linda Hutcheon's and Patricia Waugh's, this thesis not only challenges the claim that postmodernism is neither affective nor affecting, but proposes a new model for postmodern critique. This thesis aims to establish such a model by employing Waugh's vocabulary of 'framing' and 'frame-breaking' in order to illuminate how metafictional forms map structures of feeling in early postmodernist fiction.

Each chapter of this project provides a close reading of the works of seminal postmodernists William Gaddis, William H. Gass, and Thomas Pynchon, identifying the primary metaphors each writer employs in order to generate the impression of textual self-consciousness. These chapters emphasise how the self-referential qualities so often associated with the metaphors and structures of literary postmodernism impact upon readerly self-consciousness. This project contends that the self-referentiality associated with metafiction does not inhibit affective response, but re-orientates reader-character identification, introducing an unprecedented affective range into the relationship between reader and text.

This research is timely because it seeks to reclaim postmodernism's origins, and might, therefore, reroute our critical understanding of the elusive period of 'post-postmodernism'. This thesis not only proves that the structures of metafiction and the affective dimensions of reader-response illuminate textual self-reflexivity, but self-consciously demonstrate how feeling can be elicited and appropriated for political purposes through the narratives that are used to evoke them. It therefore seeks to establish a continuity that both connects postmodernism to its literary antecedents and foregrounds the concerns of our own political moment.

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree. However, the thesis incorporates to the extent indicated below, material already submitted as part of required coursework for the degree of MA Contemporary Writing, which was awarded by the University of East Anglia.

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Introduction

In 1967, in what was considered to be the manifesto of postmodernism, John Barth declared that literature was exhausted.¹ Although a controversial (and oft-misinterpreted) statement at the time, Barth's observations set the parameters for a theoretical breeding ground of aesthetic and ideological approaches to this debate. In the decades that followed its publication, so many of literary theory's most influential names lent their voices to this conversation that we might now argue that the question of 'what is postmodernism?' has, too, been exhausted. Rarely agreeing upon a coherent, unified identity for postmodernism, philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Fredric Jameson, along with more literary-specific theorists such as Brian McHale, Ihab Hassan, Terry Eagleton, Patricia Waugh, and Linda Hutcheon, have notably established their own readings of the identity of postmodernism. While this lack of coherence has endured, literary criticism in recent years has largely been content to relegate postmodernism to the exhaustion heap. Instead of labouring the question 'what is postmodernism?', literary criticism has now turned to the question of 'what follows postmodernism?', out of which theories of post-postmodernism, hypermodernity, and metamodernism have begun to emerge. The critical danger is this: if we are not yet agreed upon what post-postmodernism is moving on from, how can we hope to agree upon what post-postmodernism is doing?

While points of contention remain (is postmodernism a continuation of modernism or a break from it?; is postmodernism characterised by formal restriction or liberation?; is postmodernism's 'gameplay' ultimately a trivial or a serious endeavour?; in what ways does postmodernism attempt to engage the politics of the era out of which it emerged?), Patricia

¹ John Barth, *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: The Putnam Publishing Group, 1984).

Waugh writes that ‘a common element in the bewilderingly diverse range of theoretical Postmodernisms is a recognition and account of the way in which the “grand narratives” of Western history have broken down.’² Postmodernism has historically been read as an aesthetic and ideological attempt to undermine Enlightenment principles of essential truth and objective knowledge in a manner that abandons its reader to existential uncertainty. With the exception of a handful of critics – including Waugh and Hutcheon – postmodernism has been met with a general mood of frustration on account of the structural and narratological tools it uses to achieve this effect, such as the self-dismantling and self-referential qualities of postmodern prose.

Among those at the forefront of this argument is Fredric Jameson. In his seminal essay, ‘Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’ (1984), Jameson famously describes ‘the waning of affect’ in postmodern culture.³ This phrase has subsequently become one of the most oft-cited in reference to postmodernism, and one that is frequently used in an effort to justify the sterility of postmodern culture’s self-referential status. Jameson later contextualises this suspicion when he writes that ‘[p]ostmodernism, [or] postmodern consciousness, may [...] amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility’ (p.ix). For Jameson, then, there exists a correlation – if not a causation – between postmodernism’s compulsion to self-theorise and postmodern culture’s limited affective range. These characteristics allow Jameson to conclude that ‘[p]ostmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process’ (p.x). This observation not only came to define Jameson’s understanding of the identity of postmodernism, but other critics’, such as Terry Eagleton; a school of critics thus emerged to collectively disparage the movement on account of what they considered its affiliation with the principles of late capitalism.

² Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1993), p.5.

³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p.10.

Jameson traces the emergence of postmodernism to ‘the hypothesis of some radical break or coupure, generally traced back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s’, a period of cultural upheaval in North America which saw a greater emphasis placed on the power of commodification, advertising, and individualism (p.1). This cultural shift is represented, for Jameson, in postmodernism’s ‘offensive features—from obscurity and sexually explicit material to psychological squalor and overt expressions of social and political defiance’ (p.4). Jameson remarks that in this cultural climate, these ‘offensive features’ are no longer perceived as offensive; they are ‘not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become institutionalized and are at one with the official or public culture of Western society’ (p. 4). For Jameson, therefore, it is ironic that postmodernists’ efforts to achieve a psychologically, socially, and politically subversive aesthetic in fact play directly into the systems of power supporting the ideology of late capitalism. What were once deemed countercultural expressions are becoming increasingly absorbed by the dominant powers in the latter half of the twentieth century, and many critics, including Jameson and Eagleton, have since taken the position that the languages of postmodernism and capitalism are, eventually, indistinguishable from one another: neither exhibit any depth.

The subsequent ‘waning of affect’ observed by Jameson might then be on account of ‘the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense’ (p.9). This flatness, Jameson observes, engenders a new kind of relationship between the viewer or subject, and the cultural artefact or object, one characterised by distance, detachment, and disembodiment. ‘[C]oncepts such as anxiety and alienation [...] are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern’, Jameson writes, citing examples such as Andy Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*, which, he remarks, ‘evidently no longer speaks to us with any of the immediacy of Van Gogh’s footgear; [...] it does not really speak to us at all’ (p.14; p.8). Jameson argues that this style of art no longer ‘organizes even a minimal place for the viewer’ (p.8). It is this that determines Jameson’s emphasis on a *waning*, as opposed to an *absence* of affect; since the postmodern cultural product reorients and, thus, destabilises its subject, reader, or viewer, it would be wrong, therefore, to say that ‘cultural products of the

postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings [...] are now free-floating and impersonal' (pp.15-6).

Jameson's understanding of postmodernism's identity tells us – the subject, the reader, the viewer – as much about ourselves in relationship to postmodernism's cultural products, as it tells us about the conditions and characteristics of the cultural products themselves:

The end of the bourgeois ego, or monad, no doubt brings with it the end of the psychopathologies of that ego—what I have been calling the waning of affect. But it means the end of much more—the end, for example, of style [...]. As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling (p.15).

This, and subsequent critical approaches to literary postmodernism, have allowed for little consideration of *embodied* experiences of late capitalism. Jameson's 'waning of affect' focalises the decentering of the subject, while also indicating that this 'liberation' from 'feeling' occurs because there is 'no longer a self present to do the feeling'. But do the decentering of the subject and the erasure of the subject altogether necessarily represent the same condition? Instead, we might consider how the decentering of the subject instead represents a reorientation of subject in relation to object, a process which does not preclude or liberate one from anxiety, but profoundly emphasises it by foregrounding the subject's orientational self-consciousness. If the postmodern novel does not 'decenter' and erase the reader altogether, but instead aims to 'decenter' and foreground the reader's self-conscious role as a participant in this cultural transaction, what characteristics of the postmodern product condition this effect?

This project aims to challenge Jameson's claim that postmodernism exhibits a 'waning of affect' by proposing a fresh interpretation of the postmodern cultural artefact, placing contemporary affect theorists, such as Sara Ahmed, Sianne Ngai, and Elaine Scarry, in dialogue with canonical readings of postmodernism, such as Linda Hutcheon's and Patricia Waugh's, in order to reinvigorate and re-route what has arguably become a stale area of academic study. Through close readings of novels and stories by William Gaddis, William H. Gass, and Thomas

Pynchon, this study seeks not only to produce an interpretation of postmodernism that emphasises its affective potential, but to propose an entirely new model for postmodern critique. Through Waugh's vocabulary of 'framing' and 'framing-breaking', my analyses of some of postmodernism's most notable literary products – *The Recognitions* (1955), *The Tunnel* (1995), *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), etc. – illuminate how metafictional forms map structures of feeling in early postmodernist fiction.

Before outlining how American postmodern novelists of the mid- to late-twentieth century achieve this effect, this introduction briefly sketches Patricia Waugh's and Linda Hutcheon's interpretations of metafiction, presenting them alongside more recent analyses of the figurative and material function of the 'frame' in relationship both to its contents and to the affective responses it might condition or generate. Waugh's elucidation of metafictional structures is particularly central to this study; her work provides an important counterpoint to Jameson's reading of postmodernism, since it emphasises how postmodernism's self-referential and self-dismantling qualities not only create the impression of textual self-consciousness, but indicate how these structures directly impact upon readerly self-consciousness. Waugh's own framework for postmodernism suggests ways in which the employment of narratological devices that convey metafiction's self-reflexivity in turn introduce an unprecedented affective range into the relationship between reader and text. Reconfiguring our understanding of the postmodern novel in this way not only re-establishes the reader as a thinking, feeling subject, but foregrounds the reorientation and destabilisation of reader-character identification in order to reveal an oft-overlooked political dimension of this style of writing: how can 'feeling' be elicited and appropriated for political purposes by the narratives that are used to evoke them?

What is Metafiction?

Waugh's most comprehensive examination of 'framing' and 'frame-breaking' can be found in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (1984), in which she describes metafiction, a form of literary postmodernism, as 'a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to

pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.’⁴ Instead of proposing the erasure of the subject altogether, Waugh’s interpretation of metafiction invokes the idea of the individual as ‘occupy[ing] “roles” rather than “selves”’, which indicates how ‘the study of characters in novels may provide a useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels’ (p.3). So, too, might ‘literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language)’ become ‘a useful model for learning about the construction of “reality” itself’, since all experience is narratologically mediated by language (p.3). While it represents a model that effectively reflects both on fiction and reality, the self-conscious novel continually frustrates the reader’s ability to become fully immersed in the fictional world it contains by alerting attention to itself as a conscious construction. For this reason, however, metafiction provides a useful framework through which we might focalise postmodernism’s aesthetics, thereby redressing a critical imbalance which tends to favour a consideration of postmodernism’s ideologies. In *Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism* (1992), Waugh notes that ‘although [postmodernism’s] models are aesthetic, its theorists rarely discuss actual works of *art*.’⁵

While Jameson’s model for postmodernism indicates that the self-consciousness of the cultural product imposes such distance between itself and the viewer that it ‘no longer speaks to us’ at all, Waugh argues that this very self-theorising quality – the sustained opposition between ‘the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion’ – might instead generate a new kind of reading experience.⁶ Waugh explains how readers might initially be resistant to this reorientation, since we tend to ‘look to fiction [...] to locate us within everyday as well as within philosophical paradigms, to explain the historical world as well as offer some formal comfort and certainty’ (p.16). Such formal comfort and certainty depend upon the reader either being able to secure him/herself within ‘the construction of a fictional illusion’ by suspending disbelief and investing in the reality of the fictional world,

⁴ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1984), p.2.

⁵ Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism*, p.7.

⁶ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p.6.

or being able to secure him/herself outside of it, a condition which seems to preclude affective investment since it requires that the reader maintain a conscious awareness of that ‘illusion’.

Metafiction, as Waugh indicates, frustrates both of these possibilities; it does not entirely ‘ignore or abandon’ the conventions of realism, nor does it ‘abandon “the real world” for the narcissistic pleasures of the imagination’, but repeatedly, and often unexpectedly, oscillates between ‘realistic conventions’ – which ‘supply the “control” [...], the norm or background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves’ – and the text’s own ‘self-reflection’ – through which the suspension of disbelief might be disrupted (p. 18). The resulting sense of paranoia or suspicion that the reader might then develop toward the metafictional novel is, for Waugh, the effect of a ‘recognition’ that the ‘nineteenth century realist view of the world may no longer be viable’ (p.9). Just as Barth’s literature of ‘exhaustion’ was often misinterpreted as a declaration of the death of formal innovation and fictional productivity, one might assume that when a conventional way of writing loses its currency, writing altogether reaches a point of stasis. Instead, Waugh argues that these conditions allow for a new creative impulse, that the ‘paranoia that permeates the metafictional writing of the sixties and seventies [...] slowly [gave] way to celebration, to the discovery of new forms’ (p.9).

Waugh is not alone in this view of metafiction; Linda Hutcheon laments that ‘many reviews of new metafiction, especially in the early 1970s, were negative’, perhaps, she suggests, because postmodernism challenges the idea that reading is ‘the pleasant, controlled, harmonious experience that the Classical and Romantic traditions both suggest. It can be disrupting, challenging, not to say threatening.’⁷ Like Waugh, Hutcheon rejects the argument that ‘in metafiction the life-art connection has been either severed completely or resolutely denied’ (p. 3). Hutcheon suggests that metafiction’s self-consciousness reorients ‘this “vital” link’, reforging it ‘on a new level—on that of the imaginative process (of storytelling), instead of on that of the product (the story told)’ (p.3). For Hutcheon, crucially, ‘it is the new role of the reader that is the vehicle of this change’, a suggestion that places the reader’s experience at the

⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), p.2; p.151.

heart of the aesthetic and ideological shifts taking place, and which also resists Jameson's notion that postmodernism shuts down any sort of dialogue between subject and cultural product (p.3). The oscillation between fictional illusion and self-reflection not only accounts for the agency of the reader in the reading process, but the reader's affective experience:

On the one hand, [the reader] is forced to acknowledge the artifice, the "art," of what he is reading; on the other, explicit demands are made upon him, as a co-creator, for intellectual and affective responses comparable in scope and intensity to those of his life experience. In fact, these responses are shown to be *part* of his life experience (p.5).

For both Waugh and Hutcheon, the reader is co-opted as a creative instrument so that the text might not only influence the reader, but the reader might also influence the text. The reconfiguration of the link between reader and text, between life and art, is most notably examined by Patricia Waugh through the structural metaphor of 'framing' and 'frame-breaking'.

Waugh famously expounds this idea as follows:

Modernism and post-modernism begin with the view that both the historical world and works of art are organized and perceived through [...] structures or "frames". [...] Contemporary metafiction, in particular, foregrounds "framing" as a problem [...]. The first problem it poses, of course, is: what is a "frame"? What is the "frame" that separates reality from "fiction"? Is it more than the front and back covers of a book, the rising and lowering of a curtain, the title and "The End"? [...] The alternation of frame and frame-break (or the construction of an illusion through the imperceptibility of the frame and the shattering of illusion through the constant exposure of the frame) provides the essential deconstructive method of metafiction.⁸

This represents a challenge to Jameson's assertion that the postmodern cultural product maintains the constant exposure of its own frame, by indicating that metafiction functions by alternating between states of suspended disbelief and the shattering of that illusion. To avoid the risk of simply pitting the word of one critic against the word of another, it is worth noting that Waugh's own exposition of metafiction resonates with that of William H. Gass – novelist, short story writer, literary theorist, and professor of philosophy – who established himself as a leading voice in the arena of American literary scholarship in 1970, when he first coined the term.

⁸ Waugh, *Metafiction*, pp.28-31.

Gass anticipates the features of fiction that dictate this shift from modernism to postmodernism in readerly and writerly practice in 'Philosophy and the Form of Fiction' where he adopts the term 'metafiction' in relationship to literary theory for the first time:

There are metatheorems in mathematics and logic, ethics has its linguistic oversoul, everywhere lingos to converse about lingos are being contrived, and the case is no different in the novel. I don't mean those drearily predictable pieces about writers who are writing about what they are writing, but those [...] in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed. Indeed, many of the so-called antinovels are really metafiction.⁹

Waugh's understanding of 'frame-break' behaves as a metaphor for what Gass, fourteen years earlier, identifies as 'lingos to converse about lingos': both are devices through which the 'frame' (the novel form) is repeatedly exposed and, as a result of which, the artifice of fiction is emphasised. Both, too, are equally indicative of metafiction's self-consciousness, suggesting that our formal and linguistic expectations of the novel allow the writer to manipulate his reader between the states of being absorbed within the picture and being forced to step back and acknowledge its aesthetic value from a distance. This indicates that Waugh's interpretation of metafiction is much more closely aligned with the original aims and intentions of some of the writers who later became most heavily associated with the movement.

Often disparaged for its triviality (Ihab Hassan, for example, remarks upon postmodernism's reputation for 'sterile, campy, kitschy, jokey dead-end games, media stunts, and parodic conceits'), metafiction – in the eyes of Gass and Waugh – instead illustrates how this formal play provides an important function when it translates from the world of the fictional work to the world outside of it.¹⁰ Waugh argues that not only is *all* literary fiction 'a form of play [...] but that play is an important and necessary aspect of human society.'¹¹ Furthermore, Waugh identifies that 'play', in the context of metafictional form, is rarely associated with

⁹ William H. Gass, *The William H. Gass Reader* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018), p. 655.

¹⁰ Ihab Hassan, 'Globalism and its Discontents: Notes of a wandering Scholar', *Profession* (1999), 59-67 (p.60).

¹¹ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p.34.

completely free or immersive engagement, but that does not make the engagement it demands any less active or creative. The reason, she suggests, is that metafictional texts ‘often take as a theme the frustration caused by attempting to relate their linguistic condition to the world outside’ (pp.53-4). Frustration plays an important role in the relationship between framing and feeling – an aspect of postmodern critique which is not often attended to – since the formal conditions that produce this feeling are inherent to metafictional structure:

[T]he reader may be *temporarily* dislocated when point of view, for example, is shifted, but is allowed to reorient him or herself to the new perspective [...]. Metafiction sets mutually contradictory “worlds” against each other. Authors enter texts and characters appear to step into the “real” world of their authors (p.101).

The frustration engendered by metafiction’s perspectival dislocation is conditioned by self-consciousness, both on the part of the text-object and on the part of the reader-subject. Waugh remarks that postmodern novelists ‘explicitly create “anxious objects”, works of art which have a suspicion they may be piles of rubbish’ (p.144). Something Jameson’s appraisal of postmodernism fails to take into account is the affective properties of the cultural products themselves. As Waugh rightly identifies, metafictional structure allows for the impression of textual self-consciousness; characters are no longer comfortably lifelike only within the context of the inanimate frame which contains them: when the frame becomes visible, becomes a part of the organic structure of the textual object itself, its characters threaten to break free from the frame, and the novel absorbs not only its contents into its formal structure (and vice versa), but threatens to absorb the ‘real’ world of its author and reader, too.

This thesis sets out to challenge Jameson’s argument that postmodernism exhibits a ‘waning of affect’ by attending closely to the relationship between framing and feeling in the metafictional novel. By maintaining Waugh’s and Hutcheon’s notions that metafiction’s self-reflexivity encourages its reader-subject to enter into a dialogue of co-creation with the text-object, I would argue that an hitherto unforeseen social dimension is introduced into the reading and interpreting of the postmodern novel. The self-referentiality associated with metafiction does not, therefore, inhibit affective response in the manner described by Jameson, but instead reorients reader-character identification, introducing an unprecedented affective range into the

relationship between reader and text, a spectrum which accounts for paranoia, disgust, melancholia, vertigo, and dysphoria. While subsequent chapters of this study will address the usefulness of setting works by affect theorists such as Sianne Ngai and Sara Ahmed alongside the aforementioned accounts of metafiction, I will here signpost some important observations about the relationship between framing and feeling by Elaine Scarry and Judith Butler in order to establish a firm critical grounding to support the close reading that follows.

The Relationship Between Framing and Feeling

[T]here is no one 'Postmodernism', but it could be argued that Postmodernism is a 'structure of feeling' [...].¹²

Before establishing this critical cross-section and attending to contemporary affect theory in relationship to the aesthetics of postmodernism, we ought to attend to the term 'affect' itself. Commonly attributed to Silvan Tomkins, 'affect' is often used in conjunction with affect theory to refer to nine primary conditions that constitute 'innate, biological' responses. For Tomkins, these nine categories represent specific states with corresponding biological and behavioural characteristics. Unlike 'feelings' or 'emotions', 'affects' are states uncorrupted by the influence of cognition, memory, or conscious awareness. 'Affect', therefore, is primarily a biological response originating in the body, while 'feeling' denotes conscious awareness of any given affect, and 'emotion' refers to the cognitive processing of a feeling in the context of individual memory or association.¹³ While maintaining the general premise of this distinction, I intend to use the term 'affect' more loosely in this project. While Tomkins argues that feeling and emotion are cognitive outgrowths of affect, in many cases, when I use the term 'affect' here, I am as often considering the way that the body in turn registers a feeling or emotion. Vertigo, for example, is often experienced as an inherently ungovernable, physical sensation which can

¹² Patricia Waugh, 'Introduction', *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Patricia Waugh (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 1-10 (p.3).

¹³ 'Nine affects, present at birth, combine with life experience to form emotion and personality', *The Tomkins Institute* (n.d.) <<http://www.tomkins.org/what-tomkins-said/introduction/nine-affects-present-at-birth-combine-to-form-emotion-mood-and-personality/>> [accessed 28 July 2022].

develop out of the cognitive processing of the self in relation to space or depth. Paranoia, too, might predominantly be thought of as an emotion, since its experience usually relies upon the cognition of a present event in the context of the memory of past events; however, when that emotion becomes so invasive that it registers as distress or anguish in the body, it begins to take on an affective dimension. While Tomkins' categories have provided a useful foundation for this study, it does not restrict its usage of the term to his definition. 'Affect' is used here to refer to the affective outgrowth of an emotion or the emotional outgrowth of an affect as often as it is used to refer to the original affective states themselves.

Mark Currie refers indirectly to what we might consider the link between 'framing' and 'feeling' when he writes that 'there is a vertiginous illogicality about "self-consciousness"'.¹⁴ One of the 'definitive' characteristics of metafiction, self-consciousness is described by Currie in terms that thinkers such as Tomkins might categorise as cognitive as opposed to affective. And yet, for Currie, some *thing* or some *being* (in this case, the text itself), while cognitively processing its own consciousness, will necessarily also either encounter or engender vertigo; in its attempt to organise and frame a primarily cognitive experience, that experience necessarily becomes affective, transforming the process of logically thinking into a process of illogically feeling. Indeed, this sentiment is anticipated by Robert Scholes, who, in 1970, wrote that 'the attempts of experimental fictions of the 1960s to "climb beyond Beckett and Borges"' can be 'best thought of as moments of critical vertigo in which the relations between real life and representation are no longer clear, either within or beyond the fiction.'¹⁵ If the vertiginous experience of the text's own self-consciousness is one that, as Scholes indicates, translates to the reader, then the shared states of feeling that unite writer, writing, and reading not only appear to be conditioned by metafiction's problematisation of the 'relations between real life and representation', but also impact directly upon them.

¹⁴ Mark Currie, 'Introduction', *Metafiction*, ed. Mark Currie (London: Longman, 1995), 1-18 (p.1).

¹⁵ Robert Scholes, 'Metafiction', *Metafiction*, 21-38 (p.21).

While she does not explicitly recruit the term, Elaine Scarry describes our experience of beauty in both cognitive and affective terms in her study *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999):

What is the felt experience of cognition at the moment one stands in the presence of a beautiful boy or flower or bird? It seems to incite, even to require, the act of replication. Wittgenstein says that when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it.¹⁶

What is so notable about this experience – one to which Tomkins might assign the categories of Interest-Excitement, Enjoyment-Joy, or Surprise-Startle – is that Scarry identifies how it compels us to trace or recreate the conditions of its existence. Scarry argues that '[b]eauty brings copies of itself into being'; however startling it may be to think of the beauty of the world contained within classical texts as 'a replication', 'the word recalls the fact that something, or someone, gave rise to [such] creation and remains silently present in the newborn object' (p.3; pp.9-10). While the traditionally beautiful object or work of art might in some way work to preserve the illusion of framelessness in order to establish its sense of oneness with the 'real' world around us, metafiction gives centre stage to that 'something' or 'someone' who has created it, shattering the illusion and reminding us that it is something artificially 'other' than the world we occupy.

Scarry reminds us of the important social and political dimensions of the relationship between any subject and object when such a relationship involves the unilateral act of 'looking' which, in the context of the novel, we might also extend to reading. Scarry remarks that 'contemporary accounts of "staring" or "gazing" place exclusive emphasis on the risks suffered by the person being looked at', which, for our purposes, is represented by the vulnerability of the text-object; however, Scarry notes, 'the vulnerability of the perceiver seems equal to, or greater than, the vulnerability of the person being perceived' (pp.72-3). Metafiction, apart from highlighting the role of the object's creator, might also be thought of as highlighting the vulnerability of the perceiver, or, for our purposes, the reader-subject. The demonstrative self-consciousness of the metafictional novel heightens the reader's own self-conscious participation

¹⁶ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.3.

in the co-creation of the text's meaning. To return to Hutcheon, the challenge that metafiction poses to the Classical and Romantic traditions of reading threatens the status of the reader-subject, highlighting his/her vulnerability.

Like the novel form, Scarry describes beauty as a 'contract between the beautiful being (a person or thing) and the perceiver', one which has a forceful impact upon the stability and vulnerability of the perceiver (p.90):

At the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering. Beauty, according to [Simone] Weil, requires us "to give up our imaginary position as the center... A transformation then takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions [...]" (p.111).

If beauty can be thought to have this effect, so too can the exposure of fictional framework; where the sustained illusion of the invisible frame allows the reader to comfortably experience the three dimensionality of the fictional world, the exposure of that frame forces the reader to reconcile him/herself as an extramural addendum to it. The reader can no longer occupy the central position, inserting him/herself at will in place of the novel's protagonist when reader-character identification encourages him/her to do so. This 'transformation' appears to relegate the reader from active participant in the fictional action to voyeur, a figure who, from the outside, is only able to observe the action without participating in it. In fact, this transformation represents the opposite; instead of passively engaging with the preordained conditions of a fictional world, the reader can now co-create that world from a marginal vantage point.

Scarry identifies how Iris Murdoch describes the revelation of this marginal vantage point as 'unselfing'; primarily unsettling and destabilising, it involves the recognition that 'one has ceased to be the hero or heroine in one's own story and has become what in a folktale is called the "lateral figure" or "donor figure."' (p.113). This transformation balances the scales; it makes the reader at once less central and more active, allowing for a much richer affective potential to be gleaned from the textual interaction, however much it may not feel 'as though one's participation in a state of overall equality has been brought about, but as though one has just suffered a demolition' (p.113).

If exposing the fictional framework of a text might not only reposition the reader in relationship to the text-object, but threaten what the reader perceives as his/her own demolition, then this ‘decentering’ – to return to Jameson’s term – can hardly be thought of as a condition which precludes feeling. Furthermore, if this is how Scarry suggests we orient ourselves in relation to beauty, then how do we orient ourselves in relation to the ugly, the fearful, or the shameful? Without referring explicitly to metafiction *or* postmodernism, Judith Butler nevertheless effectively explores the relationship between framing and feeling in the context of violence in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009). She asks ‘[h]ow do we understand the frame as itself part of the materiality of war and the efficacy of its violence?’¹⁷ For Butler, the frame is as important as, if not more important than, the world contained within it; its materiality serves as a constant reminder of the ways that framing might directly affect the tangible impact of its content on the world outside of it:

The frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality. [...] Although framing cannot always contain what it seeks to make visible or readable, it remains structured by the aim of instrumentalizing certain versions of reality. This means that the frame is always throwing something away, always keeping something out, always de-realizing and de-legitimizing alternative versions of reality, discarded narratives of the official version (p.11).

If a frame is capable of ‘selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality’ then it is, as Butler argues, doing far more than simply *exhibiting* ‘reality’; it both creates a reality and seeks to make that reality somehow more believable than our own. This demonstrates how the act of framing or frame-breaking might become directly or indirectly political; the success of such a political agenda depends upon the frame performing at once as an agent of ‘containment’ as well as an invisible operative, actively controlling as well as subtly preserving the illusion that its own contents might be both realistic and objective.

The control that a frame might exercise over its observer also depends in part upon the contents of the frame, or what Butler, in this context, terms the ‘target’:

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016), p.11.

[F]ocusing on the target produces a position for the soldier, the reporter, and the public audience, structuring the visual field [...]. The frame not only orchestrates such positions, but also delimits the visual field itself. In the context of war photography, the image may reflect or document a war; at times it may rally emotional responses either in support of the war effort or in resistance to it (p.10).

If the frame can be thought of as a vehicle for war propaganda, one which produces a specific 'structure' that holds the visual field as well as each individual component's position within it, then what happens both to that 'positioning' and to the 'emotional responses' the content of the frame might rally when the frame itself is destabilised or revealed? When the frame is revealed, as it is in the metafictional novel, it engenders a dramatic restructuring of the typical organisation of a reader's relationship to a text. This reorientation of reader to text also conditions a variability in emotional response; rather than an authoritative account designed to provoke a specific reaction on the part of the reader/viewer, the self-conscious frame allows its own contents to elicit different emotional responses according to which details absorb the reader/viewer within it, and which details impose distance. As I shall demonstrate in subsequent chapters, the imposition of distance does not always incur an objectivity that represents the antithesis of the absorptive power of propaganda; in some cases, distance conditions affective responses such as disgust where absorption might otherwise invite identification.

Butler actively shares Scarry's interest in the role of the observer or perceiver in this investigation of the relationship between a frame and its contents. Like Scarry, Butler questions how an observer's typically passive role might be co-opted in order to perform an active role in the interpretation of the events as they have been presented, and whether, in this context, the vulnerability of the observer is in any way a fundamental characteristic that might be used or abused for political purposes:

[T]here is a question of the epistemological position to which we are recruited when we watch or listen to war reports. Further, a certain reality is being built through our very act of passive reception, since what we are being recruited into is a certain framing of reality, both its constriction and its interpretation (pp.10-11).

If 'a certain framing of reality' conditions a specifically 'passive reception' on account of its 'constriction' of events, then that 'frame' must, by necessity, be inconspicuous. The metafictional novel, on the other hand, invites awareness of extra-textual forces operating on, parallel to, and against the 'constriction' and 'interpretation' of events presented within the frame, by attributing to it self-consciousness; this self-consciousness not only allows the reader to be alerted to the very limitations of the framework acting upon its contents, but makes the reader a more active participant in the action of its contents, since it allows us to discern more accurately how our cognitive faculties and general reasoning are being influenced.

Butler ultimately asks what exactly is 'formed and framed' when we examine the 'circulation of the visual and discursive dimensions of war' more closely, and how this might impact upon the activity of the observer (p.9). Butler argues that 'if we are to oppose war', we have to know 'the conditions under which war is waged' (p.9). In order to truly know not just war, but how war is formed and framed by the tools we use to control and contain it, we must consider how its framework impacts upon the sense experience of those on whom the image is designed to exercise an effect. Essentially, these same considerations may be extended to the postmodern novel's engagement with the violence of the capitalist agenda. We might argue that certain writers of this period engage with the 'conditions' of capitalism in order that their reader might recognise them and oppose them. And yet, to understand how capitalism truly works, we must consider 'how it works on the field of the senses', which is where the relationship between perception, cognitive feeling, and affect plays such a central role in the function of metafictional framing, drawing the experience of the reader into the foreground (p.9). We might ask, too, what is 'framed' by the postmodern novel, and how does it not only reveal to us the function of textual self-reflexivity on an aesthetic level, but the political dimensions of these narratives as social critiques.

If the act of 'framing' both the human and the non-human form makes the camera an instrument of war, then, by the same logic, we might just as easily accuse the novel as an instrument of war, or at the very least propaganda, on account of its ability to control the contents of its narrative framework and disseminate them in a manner designed to elicit a

particular response from any given reader. The postmodern novel is often similarly accused of colluding with the capitalist regime; Tony Hilfer writes that ‘Stephen Connor among others has shown [...] that postmodernism goes with rather than counter to the energies of late capitalism’ since it functions as ‘a helpful ideology for a consumer society captive to the fleeting sensations offered by the postmodern media of television and advertising.’¹⁸ We might, however, use Waugh’s vocabulary of framing and frame-breaking to assert a counter-position to this claim: while novels typically focus on ‘framing’ in a manner akin to the technology of the camera, the postmodern novel is as often invested in ‘frame-breaking’, a mechanism by which the narrative framework of the novel is revealed and the authority of the control and constraint it exercises over the text is thereby undermined. Through this technique, I would propose that early contributors to this style of writing, such as William Gaddis, William H. Gass, and Thomas Pynchon, in fact use self-conscious framing mechanisms in order to gesture to what lies outside of the frame, an act which becomes directly subversive by aiming to challenge the authority or account implied within the contents of that frame.

Metafiction’s Pioneers: William Gaddis, William H. Gass, and Thomas Pynchon

This project seeks to produce a close reading of the key metafictional novels and stories of these three writers, identifying the primary metaphors each writer employs in order to generate the impression of textual self-consciousness. It represents not only a departure from Jameson’s, Eagleton’s, and Connor’s interpretations of postmodernism, but an extension of the work of theorists such as Waugh and Hutcheon, by proposing to reclaim the origins of postmodernism and reorient our understanding of literature’s subsequent trajectory. By placing Waugh’s and Hutcheon’s vocabularies of metafiction in dialogue with more recent affect theorists, I seek to reappraise the works of Gaddis, Gass, and Pynchon and to disentangle the intended function of their textual structures from the tonal inflections of depthlessness and affectlessness that have come to define our retrospective understanding of literary postmodernism. Through an investigation of the affective properties of self-conscious literary structure, I set out to establish how the works of these writers initially intended to interrogate

¹⁸ Tony Hilfer, *American Fiction Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1992), p.163.

and frustrate capitalist conditions through their engagement with the social and political dimensions of affective response. These writers ask their readers not only what it means to feel these feelings, but what it means to share these feelings with others, a notion which defies the suggestion that the postmodern cultural product is aligned with the capitalist principles of individualism and exceptionalism.

This research is timely because it seeks to reclaim postmodernism's origins, and might, in turn, reroute our critical understanding of the theories of post-postmodernism, such as metamodernism, pseudo-modernism, and transpostmodernism. I seek not only to challenge Jameson's assertion that postmodernism is characterised by a 'waning of affect', therefore, but to ask how these writers employ and experiment with metaphor and literary structure to alert their reader to the self-reflexivity of the texts in question. How do the metaphors they use reveal the ways in which metafiction seeks to reorient the reader in relationship to the text? How does this introduce a new affective range into the relationship between reader and text? And how do these texts explore the political and social properties of the affects they engender? Answers to these questions, as subsequent chapters will illustrate, indicate that a self-referential text is not necessarily an apolitical or an asocial text as once previously thought. This thesis proves, therefore, that the structures of metafiction and the affective dimensions of reader-response not only illuminate textual self-reflexivity, but self-consciously demonstrate how feeling can be elicited and appropriated for political purposes through the narratives that are used to evoke them. It seeks to establish a continuity that both connects postmodernism to its literary antecedents and brings its concerns into the foreground of our own political moment.

The broader structure of this thesis takes each of its three writers in turn: William Gaddis, William H. Gass, and Thomas Pynchon. In order to produce a comprehensive close reading of the works of these writers, each corresponding chapter follows a tripartite structure which focalises the key images and structural devices that might indicate the affective dimensions of literary self-consciousness.

The first chapter considers the works of William Gaddis, whose first novel, *The Recognitions* (1955), is often thought to represent one of the earliest examples of postmodern American literature. Although his apparent lack of productivity is marked by the publication of only five novels in the course of his lifetime, the length and scope of works such as *The Recognitions*, *J R* (1975), and *A Frolic of His Own* (1994) were extraordinarily impactful in the context of the American literary canon, with two of the three awarded the U.S. National Book Award for Fiction and *The Recognitions* named by TIME Magazine as one of the 100 best novels from 1923-2005. The works of Gaddis might at once be described as an extension of high modernism and an early foray into postmodernism, as tragically solemn and wittily satirical, as dramatisations of the realist tradition and as examples of prosaic experimentalism. This chapter seeks to reconcile some of these apparently contradictory qualities of Gaddis's writing. Its tripartite structure divides the concerns of his collected novels into an investigation into the self-reflexivity of the metaphors of masks and mirrors, and how the structures of disguise and reflection are often used in his works to alert the reader to the dangers of the suspension of disbelief; into the relationship between visual art and formal embodiment which Gaddis uses to illuminate mankind's impulse to re/create, and to demonstrate how representation might not only alter the picture of reality it seeks to convey, but the observer's affective response to it; and into the politically didactic power of his novels by considering the relationship between humour and its affective properties.

The second chapter considers the works of William H. Gass by focalising a selection of his novels and short stories in the context of his philosophical and critical output. A longstanding professor of philosophy, Gass's nonfiction writing was considered as important as his fiction in the course of his own lifetime, and provides a useful insight into his own philosophy of the relationship between literary form and content. The tripartite structure of this chapter allows for a consideration of Gass's engagement of images and structures of embodiment, excavation, and exhibition, which, I argue, he recruits in order to illustrate how the reader might not only increasingly come to view the text as an autonomous, organic entity, but might be alerted to his/her own participation in, or co-creation of, the text via his/her affective interaction with it. I argue that the metaphors of embodiment, excavation, and exhibition in turn

self-consciously invoke the feeling body in relationship to its cognitive and intellectual faculties, and the physical spaces and geographical orientations in which it operates, in order to establish the relational and social dimensions of affect, as well as specific affects attendant to the experience of self-consciousness itself. I trace, through Gass's collected works, allusions to the relationship between the private and the public, the domestic and the political, and the personal and the professional, in order to establish exactly how the self-consciousness of his texts seeks to reorient their readers; in doing so, I demonstrate that these apparent dichotomies are not so clearly cut, since where familiarity might often engender reader-character identification, distance does not always engender objectivity, and instead leaves room for emergent affects such as disgust, dysphoria, and vertigo.

The third chapter narrows the scope of Thomas Pynchon's works to his first five published novels and *Slow Learner* (1984). Although notoriously elusive, critical interest in Pynchon has been and remains far greater than that of either Gaddis or Gass. In this chapter I take an oft-examined aspect of Pynchon's fiction – paranoia – and reformulate it in the context of affective experience; the broader argument of this chapter maintains that paranoia operates in Pynchon's novels and stories via the strict establishment of intra- and extra-textual realms which are determined by the self-consciousness of the fictional framework. The chapter's tripartite structure allows for a close consideration of three central characteristics of Pynchon's fiction which contribute to this effect: metaphors of visual and textual self-referentiality; science and technology; and images of the mechanical and the prosthetic, which are often filtered through the lens of fetish theory. An analysis of these three clusters of self-reflexive metaphor will pose a challenge to the notion that Pynchon is little more than 'an exemplar of a solipsistic and privatist tendency which, however unintentionally, reinforces existent American power relations'.¹⁹ Instead, this chapter seeks to establish how paranoia is not only a creative force, but a social force which operates as effectively on Pynchon's characters as it does on Pynchon's reader. While the forces of power and authority may not be successfully revealed in Pynchon's works, the effect of this paranoia is such that it collectivises his readers; through the destabilisation and heightened self-consciousness of the reader, Pynchon demonstrates how

¹⁹ Ibid., p.153.

collective and creative experiences of paranoia might actually encourage the individual to *resist* the ‘solipsistic’ and ‘privatist’ tendencies for which he has been criticised.

In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013), Timothy Morton remarks on the ‘globalizing sureness with which “there is no metalanguage” and “everything is a metaphor” are spoken in postmodernism’; for this reason, among others, Morton warns that postmodernism constitutes ‘just another version of the (white, Western, male) historical project.’²⁰ Indeed, the force with which this project attends to the power of metaphor in the collected works of three white, Western, male writers indicates that it might represent little more than a contribution to the very same restrictive and proscriptive project. I would argue, however, that by retroactively examining the narrative structures and perspectives of these fictions through the lens of a predominantly female canon of philosophers of the postmodern and affect theorists, we might not only reclaim these writers’ works as ‘affective’ but reassess the contingency of postmodernism’s apparent claims that ‘there is no metalanguage’ and ‘everything is a metaphor’. What if metaphor *is* the language through which the text-object mediates itself, but that what it reveals is that objective reality can only ever be partial?

This claim alone might not appear to be breaking new boundaries in thinking around postmodernism, but it lends itself directly to one of Morton’s key claims about the nature of hyperobjects, namely that ‘OOO [object-oriented ontology] radically displaces the human by insisting that my being is not everything it’s cracked up to be—or rather that the being of a paper cup is as profound as mine’ (p.17). Indeed, this is precisely the effect that metafiction achieves. While it appears to be propped up by the power structures of a white patriarchal literary canon, metafiction in fact challenges us to unmask, unsettle, and unseat the authorities that govern these processes. Instead of creating text-objects that support the dominant relations of power, these writers have created – to return to Waugh’s phrase – ‘anxious’ objects, that not only question who holds that power, but how that power functions. Instead of engendering stasis, solipsism, and impotence, the metafictional novel challenges us to act on it in a way that might

²⁰ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p.4.

unmask, unsettle, and unseat the authority of the text's author, and, in doing so, reflect how dominant powers might be challenged at large. As Scarry writes, the 'making of an artifact is a social act, for the object (whether an art work or instead an object of everyday use) is intended as something that will both enter into and itself elicit human responsiveness.'²¹ Thought of in this way, the metafictional novel represents a particularly effective example of how a work of art, when given the gift of self-consciousness, might far more actively contribute to the democracy of reading and interpreting.

In order to establish how metafiction has influenced the trajectory of self-conscious art both in contemporary literature, visual art, and popular culture – and to partly redress the gender imbalance of this project – the conclusion of this study aims to trace how different genres have adopted the 'frame-break' as a means of reorienting the spectator in relationship to the spectacle. Morton identifies Hitchcock as an early example of a visual or cinematic artist to employ a frame-breaking technique: 'the pull focus'. He writes that '[b]y simultaneously zooming and pulling away, we appear to be in the same place, yet the place seems to distort beyond our control.'²² Interestingly, for Morton, the 'two contradictory motions don't cancel one another out. Rather, they reestablish the way we experience "here." [...] [I]t drastically modifies [human experience] in a dizzying manner' (p.19). While this effectively identifies how modes of framing, reframing, and frame-breaking might engender affective responses (the 'dizzying' effect described here is resonant with what I suggest is the vertiginous experience of reading Gass's and Pynchon's novels, for example), the methods by which the spectator has been destabilised and reoriented have become more subtle over time. Glances to the imagined spectator in female-led British comedies such as *Fleabag* and *Miranda*, as well as recent period adaptations such as Netflix's *Persuasion*, invite an unprecedented sense of collusion between audience and protagonist. Modern science fiction shows, such as *Westworld*, both foreground the role of participants as narrative co-creators and self-consciously question their predilections for certain themes, arcs, and genres. Even reality television shows, whose 'fly-on-the-wall'

²¹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.175.

²² Morton, p.19.

perspective depends upon their audiences' investment in the reality of the storylines they convey, are beginning to draw attention to the apparent lack of objectivity allowed by this framework. Everywhere in visual culture, the fourth wall is beginning to be broken in new and unexpected ways, each of which challenges and restructures the role of the viewer.

The final chapter of this project by no means intends to exhaust the full range of examples of frame-break that have been explored and employed since the works of William Gaddis, William H. Gass, and Thomas Pynchon, but aims to indicate a certain continuity between postmodernism and 'what came after' (whatever that is, or was) that has rarely been accounted for in the manifestoes for metamodernism, transpostmodernism, hypermodernity etc. It may offer grounds for a fresh appraisal of the influence of this postmodern technique on contemporary culture not afforded by existing models of the contemporary, but that will remain a research area for a subsequent study.

Chapter One

A ‘felt vacancy’: The Affect of Framing Absence in the Works of William Gaddis

In his seminal essay ‘Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’, Fredric Jameson famously describes ‘the waning of affect’ in postmodern culture.¹ Although arguably one of the most oft-cited denouncements of the period’s literature, Jameson is by no means the only critic to decry the aesthetic and ideological direction of post-war American fiction in these, or similar, terms. The novel of the American mid-twentieth century has also, in recent decades, been associated with what David Foster Wallace describes as the ‘Great Male Narcissists’.² Writers such as John Updike, Philip Roth, and Norman Mailer are held to account by Wallace for their ego-centric prose and narrative sexual violence; indeed, it is often on account of these novelists that the period’s fiction is now remembered predominantly for such features as its ‘eroticization of language’.³ For Jameson, and many subsequent literary critics, postmodernism did not castigate the capitalist values of the age, but, in fact, contributed to them. In *American Fiction Since 1940* (1992), Tony Hilfer identifies mid-century literature’s ‘attack on traditional spiritual and family values’ as a threat to ‘the few surviving sources of resistance to the complete dominance of media and market’ (p.163). Although Updike, Roth, and Mailer are as often associated with other sub-genres of mid-century fiction – such as the modern realist novel and the American Jewish novel – it is possible that their investigation of what Ihab Hassan

¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p.10.

² David Foster Wallace, ‘John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One; Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?’, *The Observer* (1997) <<https://observer.com/1997/10/john-updike-champion-literary-phallocrat-drops-one-is-this-finally-the-end-for-magnificent-narcissists/>> [accessed 19 August 2022].

³ Tony Hilfer, *American Fiction Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1992), p.160.

describes as ‘the retrenchment of the individual, the drama of good and evil [in] which the hero and villain once objectified in society becomes blurred’ has sown the seed of our critical interpretation of the contemporaneous postmodern movement.⁴

Updike, Roth, and Mailer, alongside those writers often more explicitly associated with literary postmodernism, such as William Gaddis, William H. Gass, and Thomas Pynchon, emerge from the same set of cultural, social, and political conditions in the United States. Hassan identifies the mood of the mid-century as ‘one of cataclysm or else of transience’ (p.13). In the post-war climate of the United States, a time when social progress was measured by the varied outcomes of a series of violent upheavals, it is perhaps unsurprising that mid-century fiction is now remembered less for its concern with collective advancement and more so for its inquiry into ‘the existential self’ (p.20). Concerning the works of Norman Mailer, for example, Hassan argues that Mailer’s protagonist ‘begins with vast ambitions of knowledge, goodness, or love; like Faust, he takes his chance with life. [...] But the process of his encounter with experience serves to chastise him’ (p.151). This is immediately indicative of a post-war disposition, in the spirit of which moral fortitude has been surrendered in favour of power or personal achievement. In keeping with the capitalist, consumer-driven climate of the time, the 1950s could in many ways be seen as the decade that industrially re-animated the American Dream, valuing personal and financial progression over and above ethic-driven communal awareness.

The ethical and artistic implications of consumer society preoccupy the novels of William Gaddis, in whose works an obvious Faustian parallel can also be found. In his first published novel, *The Recognitions* (1955), his protagonist, aspiring artist Wyatt Gwyon, sells his soul to the devil (an art dealer, aptly named Recktall Brown), by agreeing to produce counterfeit artworks in exchange for a cut of the profits and, more importantly, for the recognition he receives (albeit anonymously) for having been able to hoodwink the best critics on the globe.

⁴ Ihab Hassan, *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p.22.

The Faustian anti-hero may be a pervasive feature of American post-war fiction generally, indicating the common contextual ground on which the contemporary canon is founded, but literary criticism has since agreed upon a set of stylistic parameters which separates the postmodern novel from its peers. Hilfer identifies both the blessings and the curses of literary postmodernism's distinctive flavour here:

There can be no doubt that postmodernism expanded the possibilities of literary play, rediscovered some lovely literary conventions, undermined some dangerous cultural mythology and increased the energy level of American fiction. But there is also a certain depreciation of the complexities of sexual and family relationship, an overeasy cynicism, a failure of appreciation of the obduracy as well as the possibilities of what we usually suppose real.⁵

While it is possible to identify some of these arguably unsavoury features of postmodernism in Gaddis's fiction, we cannot straightforwardly identify the tone of his novels as one of 'overeasy cynicism'. While from one angle it seems apt to describe Gaddis's work as postmodernist, from another it appears as though his work poses a direct challenge to literary postmodernism's principles. Although Steven Moore, renowned Gaddis critic, cautions us that '[i]t's hard to say whether William Gaddis would have approved of this book' because '[p]ublically, he insisted that only a writer's published work matters', his collected letters reveal a great deal about his creative process.⁶ In a letter to Charles Socarides in 1948, he addresses the early formation of ideas for a novel with the planned title *Ducdame*, later to become *The Recognitions*:

[T]his growing fiction fits so insanely well with facts of life that sometimes I can not stand it, must burst (as I am doing here). And *then* I ruin it by *bad writing*. Like trying to be clever—this perhaps because I am afraid to be sincere? (p.89).

By the time he had come to complete his novel, he seemed to have overcome this hurdle. Where we find cynicism in his novels, we also find sincerity, and it is the narrative wrestling match between cynicism and sincerity that allows for a much greater affective range in Gaddis's fiction than Jameson allows for in the broader context of postmodernism.

⁵ Hilfer, p.163.

⁶ ed. Steven Moore, *The Letters of William Gaddis* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), p.7.

Where other novelists of the period dedicated themselves to ‘literary play’, and the rediscovery of – and subsequent challenge to – ‘literary convention’, Gaddis’s main concern appears to have been much more thematically than stylistically motivated. In an interview with Tom LeClair, Gaddis describes that ‘[the] central theme in *The Recognitions* is the absence of love, the withholding of love, the withdrawal of love.’⁷ For all its rich intertextuality, poetic patterning, and textual oscillation between energy and malaise, *feeling* lies at the heart of Gaddis’s works. While one might argue that ‘the absence of love’ instead indicates an *absence* of feeling in his novels, I will suggest in this chapter that what Gaddis explores is a broad range of secondary affects that surface out of ‘absence’: sorrow, disorientation, exhaustion, dysphoria, pity. Although, accordingly, his works share certain contextual conditions and stylistic tropes with the likes of America’s ‘Great Male Narcissists’, it is necessary to distinguish him from them; in doing so, I propose to illustrate how Gaddis’s works play an important role in the refutation of Jameson’s suggestion that the period is characterised by a ‘waning of affect’.

Gaddis’ works illustrate how extra-textual affect can be generated through the relationship between his textual themes and the postmodern structural innovations that support them. Hilfer identifies that it wasn’t until the 1970s that ‘the critical construction of postmodernism’ began to shift ‘from black humour to fabulation and metafiction’.⁸ Gaddis, however, can be seen to explore the power and possibilities of metafictional writing long before both the first coinage of the term by William H. Gass in 1970 and more widespread experimentation with the form which dominated the latter half of the twentieth century. In more recent years, metafiction’s apologists have been few and far between; Hilfer warns that ‘[i]n its jettisoning of representational realism as well as modernist metaphysical pathos, postmodernism risks being merely shallow, merely illustrative of that unbearable lightness of being so acutely

⁷ Tom LeClair, ‘An Interview with William Gaddis, circa 1980’, *Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System*, eds. Joseph Tabbi and Rone Shavers (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 17-27 (p.19).

⁸ Hilfer, p.127.

delineated by Milan Kundera.⁹ The descriptor ‘shallow’ explicitly recalls the terms of Jameson’s notable critique of the postmodern period as a culture of ‘flatness or depthlessness’.¹⁰ As I will go on to illustrate, however, the terms by which metafiction is perhaps best remembered today do not so easily characterise Gaddis’s first novel, *The Recognitions*, or, indeed, his subsequent works. Published in 1955, his debut 956-page novel can in no uncertain terms be described as either ‘light’ or ‘shallow’.

Although the concept of the metafictional novel long predates the publication of *The Recognitions*, it is reasonable to position Gaddis at the forefront of structural experimentation in literature of the American mid-century. Resistant to the idea that his writing might be ‘experimental’, Gaddis, on the few occasions he has given interviews or public speeches over the course of his career, has nevertheless repeatedly emphasised how the pioneering structural characteristics of his novels reflect their textual themes. In the aforementioned interview with LeClair, he specifically addresses the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ that texts require of their readers, which he explores characterologically in his first two novels:

In both books [*The Recognitions* and *J R*] there is the old idea of the artist as a confidence man: both artist and con man ask for a willing suspension of disbelief. But the artists in my books also con themselves. [...] The suggestion that I write about business destroying the innocent artist is a simplistic one.¹¹

The idea that ‘business’ might destroy ‘the innocent artist’ has, nonetheless, been a popular line of critical enquiry among Gaddis scholars. His statement strengthens the case for a reading of his work which moves beyond such a ‘simplistic’ assessment of the role of the artist in the age of capitalism and technological reproduction. For Gaddis, this concern extends beyond the social and cultural contexts of the characters in his fiction, to the narratological conditions of the relationship established between writer, text, and reader, when the process of interpretation takes place. In a classically metafictional turn, Gaddis goes on to illustrate the parallel

⁹ Hilfer, p.129.

¹⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.9.

¹¹ LeClair, p.20.

relationships between a writer and his fiction, and a character and his mythology, demonstrating how his characters can be found to fail in ways that a writer cannot afford to:

[One] danger for the writer is to believe his own myth created by talk; that myth is just not there when one sits down to write. J.R. slips into the myth he has created and it takes over him at the end of the novel when he reads a press release describing him as a shrewd executive. The writer should avoid the possibility of being taken over by his own fiction (p.21).

While taking a commandingly didactic approach to an artist's relationship to his art in interviews, his thematic representation of these artistic concerns within his fiction often manifests as anxious incoherence on the part of his characters. In *Agapē Agape*, a shorter novella published posthumously in 2002, Gaddis's anonymous narrator muses

read Huizinga on Plato and music and the artist as dangerous and art as dangerous and music in this mode and that mode, [...] the Lydian and the Ionian where the art the, the artist having trouble breathing here I, coming out of the anaesthesia down in the recovery room tried to raise my leg and it suddenly jumped up by itself like a, like the pain avoiding pain that's what this is all about isn't it?¹²

The hesitation 'the art the, the artist', as well as the narrator's acknowledgement of both 'the artist as dangerous and art as dangerous', suggest at least a confusion between and at most a conflation of 'art' and 'artist'. The image of the body emerging from anaesthesia becomes suggestive of the relationship of an artist to his art as that of the human body to a restless limb, fighting for its own autonomy. While Gaddis is clear about his belief that a writer must distinguish himself from the fiction he creates, his works notably demonstrate an anxiety about the question of where the artist ends and his art begins.

This passage also indicates that the implications of the distance between a writer and his fiction extend to the subsequent affective relationship that grows and develops between that fiction and its reader. If 'what this is all about' is 'pain avoiding pain', and, as mentioned previously, 'the absence of love' – the negation of physical and emotional feeling – then what affective responses *does* Gaddis's fiction condition in his reader? Does the relationship between

¹² William Gaddis, *Agapē Agape* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004), p.4.

reader and text in any way differ if we see that fiction as an extension of its creator or, otherwise, as detached from its creator?

Gaddis's novels both illustrate a gradual progression towards the removal of the author from the text and employ what Patricia Waugh identifies as a structural 'frame-break' to consistently remind his reader that what s/he is reading is a piece of carefully constructed fiction by an extra-textual agent.¹³ In his fiction, we can find an entirely new experience of reading, one which challenges the way that we feel about a work of fiction once we recognise it as such, and 'the willing suspension of disbelief' is no longer required in order for us to participate in it. As the text develops an increasingly autonomous role, separate from that of its creator, the reader is at once alerted to its artificiality and implicated directly as an interpreter of its action. Gaddis addresses this notion in a later essay when he remarks 'I want to be known by the finished product'; 'a fiction writer, I think, is to me very much between the reader and the page, not between the reader and the writer.'¹⁴

If, as Gaddis suggests, the purpose of a work of fiction is to establish a firm relationship between the reader and the page, then his first novel, *The Recognitions*, succeeds as an example of this. Close friend and fellow novelist, William H. Gass, writes in his introduction to the novel that

a cult did form, a cult in the best old sense, for it was made of readers whose consciousness had been altered by their encounter with this book; who had experienced more than its obvious artistic excellence, and responded to its neglect not merely with the resigned outrage customarily felt by those who read well and widely and wish that justice be accorded good books; it was composed of those who had felt to the centers of themselves how much this novel was indeed a recognition and could produce that famous shock: how it revealed the inner workings of the social world as though that world were a nickel watch; how it combined the pessimisms of its perceptions with the affirmations of the art it, at the same time, altered and advanced [...].¹⁵

¹³ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen & Co., 1984), p.31.

¹⁴ Gaddis, *Agape*, pp.228-9.

¹⁵ William H. Gass, 'Introduction' in William Gaddis, *The Recognitions* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012), v-xv (pp.vi-vii).

Gass's description is loaded with the language of affect: the novel is able to induce 'outrage', 'shock', 'pessimism', artistic 'affirmation', the sort of altered consciousness that 'recognition' can alone produce. Gass's suggestion that this novel is capable of revealing 'the inner workings of the social world' indicates how this particular novel is not merely self-referential, engendering, in turn, self-reflection on the part of its reader, but must be materially acknowledged as a part of the nexus of the world that s/he occupies. While recent years have borne witness to the dismissal of the postmodern novel on the grounds of the disjunctive, self-contained worlds it propagates, Gaddis suggests a different direction for literary postmodernism in *The Recognitions*: a form of fiction that is aware of its fictionality while remaining a reference point for social and political reality. Both of these qualities, crucially, depend upon the self-awareness of the reader.

Readers and literary critics of the period, however, were repelled by this novel. Gass describes how critics declared the novel 'unreadable and wandering and tiresome and confused'; the biggest irony of the critics' ultimate dismissal of the novel was that 'they [had] participated in the very chicaneries the text documented and dramatized. It was too much to expect: that they should read and understand and praise a fiction they were fictions in' (p.vii). Indeed, Gaddis not only succeeds in crafting fiction from what's real, but he provokes reality into acting out his fiction. It is, therefore, not a typically 'self-referential' postmodern novel, reflecting only on itself or on the instability of the idea of objective reality. It is not, as Mark Currie describes, 'a decadent response to [the novel's] exhausted possibilities'.¹⁶ Instead, Gaddis's novel is an early example of metafiction as understood by theorists such as Waugh and Linda Hutcheon; it is concerned with the relationship between reality and appearance, which exhibits 'an unlimited vitality: what was once thought introspective and self-referential is in fact outward-looking' (p. 2). It is not only a fiction influenced by the world around it, but a fiction that influences that world.

¹⁶ Mark Currie, 'Introduction', *Metafiction*, ed. Mark Currie (London: Longman, 1995), 1-18 (p.2).

In this chapter, I'll address the novelty of Gaddis's structural experimentation and his rejection of conventional realist narrative frameworks through a consideration of metaphors such as masks and mirrors which illustrate how framing and frame-breaking function in his novels. I will also suggest Gaddis's approach to the novel as an embodied form, rejecting the notion that an 'absence' of certain types of feeling precludes feeling altogether by examining the development of his treatment of the imagery of embodiment and disembodiment from *The Recognitions* to *J R* and his later novels. In the final portion of this chapter, I focus on the increasingly didactic aspects of Gaddis's writing, focalising the relationship between humour and social responsibility in his works in order to evidence its political import. I suggest that the role of humour in these novels is to uncover, distort, and exaggerate truths in a manner akin to satire, suggesting that, at their core, the novels' comic qualities are designed to illustrate a more sombre political and social reality. Ultimately, this chapter aims to suggest that these self-reflexive narrative properties do not force the text to collapse in on itself, but encourage distance, allowing the reader to acknowledge the text as an independent body, one which provokes unexpected affective responses in the reader on account of having made that reader, in turn, more self-aware about the role s/he plays in the co-creation of the fiction. Rather than creating the effect of 'depthlessness', Gaddis's novels fully recruit spatiality – reflection, presence, absence, distance, closeness – in order to gesture both to an extraordinary affective depth that lingers just beneath the texts' otherwise more characteristically postmodern surface and to the distance imposed between the self-conscious text-object and the self-conscious reader-subject.. This, I argue, is the quality that best identifies Gaddis as a master of the metafictional narrative.

The Recognitions and the Rejection of Realism: The Frame-Breaking Mechanism of Masks and Mirrors

One of metafiction's most significant characteristics is its rejection of the narratological frameworks commonly used to support the nineteenth century realist novel. In his introduction

to *The Recognitions*, Gass addresses the legacy of realism from which this work so notably departs:

Of course; the traditional realist's well-scrubbed world where motives are known and actions are unambiguous, where you can believe what you are told and where the paths of good and evil are as clearly marked as highways, that world is as contrived as a can opener; for all their frequent brilliance, and all the fondness we have for these artificial figures, their clever conversations and fancy parties, the plots they circle in like carousel'd horses, to call them and the world they decorate "real" is to embrace a beloved illusion.¹⁷

Fredric Jameson echoes this suggestion in *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013) when he writes that '[r]ealism [...] is a hybrid concept, in which an epistemological claim (for knowledge or truth) masquerades as an aesthetic ideal, with fatal consequences for both of these incommensurable dimensions.'¹⁸ This presumes a distinction between the social, political, or cultural 'knowledge or truth' the work purports to investigate and the aesthetic framework ('idealistic' or otherwise) through which that knowledge or truth is conveyed. Jameson goes on to suggest that '[w]hat we call realism will thus come into being in the symbiosis of this pure form of storytelling with impulses of scenic elaboration, description and above all affective investment' (p.11). Beyond simply aspiring to reflect a true mimetic representation of an objectively and unambiguously 'well-scrubbed world', the framework of literary realism as a *vehicle* for the communication of 'knowledge or truth' depends upon its ability to harness an affective response from its reader.

Indeed, Jameson's choice description of literary realism as a 'masquerade' is a metaphor which lies at the heart of *The Recognitions*, one which Gaddis introduces in the first sentence of the novel: 'Even Camilla had enjoyed masquerades, of the safe sort where the mask may be dropped at that critical moment it presumes itself as reality.'¹⁹ This passage, which presumes a distinction between appearance and reality, encourages us at the outset of the novel to consider the implications of a novel whose literary framework depends not upon the act of sporting such

¹⁷ Gass, 'Intro' in *Recognitions*, p.xi.

¹⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2015), pp.5-6.

¹⁹ William Gaddis, *The Recognitions* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012), p.3.

a mask, but upon the act of dropping it. Through this image, Gaddis suggests that safety is represented by a sustained awareness of the masquerade as a performance of reality, and that danger is represented by the belief that the mask as a mimetic representation of reality endures beyond its performance. The metaphor of dropping the mask enacts what Waugh describes as a narratological ‘frame-break’; for Waugh, the frame-break constitutes a structural device allowing the postmodern writer to temporarily reveal the fictional framework of the text in a manner which might allow him/her to address the reader directly, reminding all who encounter the narrative masquerade that it *is* a performance, an artificial construction, that the surface it exhibits implies a ‘reality’ that lies beneath – not on – its surface.²⁰ This metaphor thus supports the idea that the traditional realist novel poses a certain threat or danger, one which both Jameson and Gass identify in their own critiques: a text which wears its mask so skilfully and so unfalteringly, refusing to ‘be dropped at that critical moment it presumes itself as reality’, encourages its reader to forget that it is wearing a mask at all, inviting us to partake in its own established reality, to occupy that reality as though we are feeling *through* it, rather than *about* it, so that there is no need to distinguish between the reality proposed by the text and the reality of the world occupied by its reader.

Matthew Wilkens considers how Gaddis’s fiction (and that of his contemporaries) marks an important moment in American literary history, one during which the novelist was beginning to recognise how, to some degree, *all* literature wrestles with the problem of literary representation:

[W]hile any shift in paradigm entails a fundamental uncertainty concerning the objects in its field, changes in literary paradigm have as their object the problem of representation itself (since the establishment and continuation of a more or less stable mode of representation is the function of a literary paradigm) [...].²¹

Where Wilkens focuses primarily on the impact of the writer on his own fiction, Klaus Benesch considers the impact of these differing modes of representation on the reader, who arguably

²⁰ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p.31.

²¹ Matthew Wilkens, ‘Nothing as He Thought It Would Be: William Gaddis and American Postwar Fiction’, *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Fall 2010), 596-628 (p.600).

constitutes one of the ‘objects’ whose certainty is challenged by such ‘shifts’ in the paradigm of literary representation:

[A]ny literary text, regardless of cautionary stylistic devices such as irony or self-referentiality, is likely to be taken by readers as more authentic than the reality it reflects upon [...] [e]ven if the frame of reference, as in Postmodern writing, is the flimsy status of authenticity itself [...].²²

What both of these critics illustrate are the same concerns for postmodern writing that afflicted the literary realism described by Jameson and Gass. Where writers are concerned with their ‘mode of representation’, whether realistic or self-referential, there necessarily entails the danger of the reader presuming the fictional narrative to be ‘more authentic than the reality it reflects upon’. Gaddis’s ironically self-referential masquerade metaphor cautions his reader from the outset, revealing the contrivance of his narrative’s own framework before the threat of any immersive mode of representation has been established.

In the subsequent pages of the opening chapter, we are much more suspicious of the fiction’s ‘authenticity’ and, thus, alert to the influence of Gaddis himself, authorially presiding over the text. Indeed, when Gwyon can be seen to attempt to convince indigenous populations to ‘accept’ the Christian narrative as their new reality, he enacts the role of a writer conveying his own narrative, the authenticity of which is ultimately determined less by the author than by his reader:

He did no better convincing them that a man had died on a tree to save them all: an act which one old Indian, if Gwyon had translated correctly, regarded as “rank presumption”. He recorded few conversions, and those were usually among women, the feeble, and heathen sick and in transit between this world and another, who accepted the Paradise he offered like children enlisted on an outing to an unfamiliar amusement park.²³

²² Klaus Benesch, ‘Fake Supreme William Gaddis and the Art of Recognition’, *Faking, Forging, Counterfeiting: Discredited Practices at the Margins of Mimesis*, eds. Daniel Becker, Annalisa Fischer, Yola Schmitz (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018), 127-138 (p. 129).

²³ Gaddis, *Recognitions*, p.8.

The inclination to invest in or dismiss a narrative is determined exclusively by neither the narrative nor its narrator, but by its reader's determination to commit to what Jameson terms the 'affective investment' that the narrative requires of him/her. This is evidenced here, where the older, more hardened members of the community adopt a cynical attitude towards the Christian narrative proposed by Gwyon, while the members of the community vulnerable to their own sense of mortality or emotionality demonstrate a more naive sensibility; they are 'like children', unprepared to accept the dark and unforgiving nature of reality, and embrace, instead, the novelty of Paradise. This incident enacts both 'affective investment' in the 'contrived worlds' of literary realism (as described by Gass and Jameson), as well as the masquerade described in the novel's opening sentence. By employing one of the most divisive narratives of all time (the story of Christ), Gaddis dramatises the metaphor by demonstrating the wide array of interpretations and responses to a single narrative, examining, in turn, the differences between those who are prepared to accept the narrative at surface-level and those who are more inclined to probe its depth of suggestion.

If the mask already feels like a somewhat stale self-reflexive metaphor, it is not perhaps as ubiquitous as the metaphor of the mirror in the broader canon of Western literature, and in the postmodern novel in particular. Hilfer, writing on the works of John Barth (a contemporary of Gaddis), notes that '[t]he use of mirrors to image self-consciousness is, of course, heavy-footed symbolism.'²⁴ Like his treatment of masks, however, Gaddis's utilisation of the mirror is not as straightforward as the long tradition of its 'heavy-footed symbolism' suggests. Tony Tanner, for example, describes how a particular apprehension of self-consciousness was developing in the American mid-century:

[M]any recent American writers [1950-1970] are unusually aware of this quite fundamental and inescapable paradox: that to exist, a book, a vision, a system, like a person, has to have an outline—there can be no identity without contour.²⁵

²⁴ Hilfer, p.130.

²⁵ Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p.17.

The mirror is not only a symbol through which Gaddis is able to cast aspersions about the self-identification of his characters, but one through which he is able to reflect on the changing 'outline' of post-war fiction. The mid-century's elevated awareness of the relationship between 'identity' and 'contour' anticipates what was to develop into the narrative frame-break; this idea is enacted by the function of the mirror not only as metaphor, but as structural device in *The Recognitions*.

The mirror, as a vehicle through which awareness of this 'paradox' can be realised, recalls Plato's theory of the simulacrum. Nathan Widder effectively summarises Deleuze's interpretation of Plato's theory:

On the one hand, simulacra are treated merely as copies of copies; in the example given in *Republic*, Book X, there is the Idea of the couch, a physical couch manufactured by a craftsman, and a painting of a couch, each with a different degree of reality and truth (Plato 1961: *Republic*, 596b–9). In this respect, simulacra are merely weak imitations inhabiting the lowest portions of Plato's divided line. On the other hand, Plato worries that simulacra have a deceptiveness that allows them to masquerade as representations of truth. [...] Plato therefore splits the material world in two, holding copies to have an internal resemblance to their Ideas, while the deceptive simulacrum simply 'produces an effect of resemblance' (Deleuze 1990: 258).²⁶

Widder suggests that Plato distinguishes between the 'copy' and the 'simulacrum' by way of the simulacrum's ability to deceive. Gaddis's employment of the mask metaphor to caution his readers about the dangers of the suspension of disbelief reflects Widder's argument that Plato's concern about simulacra is their ability to 'masquerade as representations of truth'. The implications of this distinction give rise to an important question about how we might interpret the mirror's function here, one which extends beyond its function as a vehicle through which a character might self-reflect: does the 'copy' image produced by the mirror hold 'an internal resemblance' to its idea, or does it produce only 'an effect of resemblance'? If mirror images were designed to prompt self-reflection on the part of the subject, one would assume that the image held some 'internal resemblance' to the subject mirrored; the unsettling suggestion, therefore, that a mirror's reflection simply produces the 'effect of resemblance' would be to

²⁶ Nathan Widder, 'Matter as Simulacrum; Thought as Phantasm; Body as Event', *Deleuze and the Body*, eds. Laura Guillaume and Joe Hughes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 96-114 (p.99).

imply that the image is nothing more than a visual copy or interpretation of an increasingly abstract subject, thus destabilising the existential status of the subject reflected.

The mirror image and visual art are thereby paralleled in Gaddis's work as somehow faulty representations that threaten or challenge the original subjects or ideas they reflect; this is established early in the novel when we are introduced to Gwyon's son, Wyatt. Christopher J. Knight suggests that 'Wyatt's own discomfort with the artist's role, particularly with imitation, stems in large part from his having been raised in a tradition wherein the image is thought almost sacrilegious.'²⁷ Indeed, Aunt May repeatedly denounces Wyatt's proclivity for invention, whether it be the unique way he communicates his experience of the world around him or the creative impulse he demonstrates as a child, producing original drawings and paintings. May not only takes issue with Wyatt's art, discouraging him from drawing by suggesting that 'Our Lord is the only true creator, and only sinful people try to emulate Him', she also complains that 'he invents things and pretends they are *so*', when Wyatt describes the corporeal experience of feeling trapped in his own reflection: 'he could not move, as though mirrors in the arms of the cross on the wall had gripped him from behind'.²⁸ From this moment, Wyatt becomes increasingly resistant to his own reflection, disturbed by the idea that his self-image can only ever be a representation of his true form; he can, therefore, only know himself as a reproduction of his true self.

Wyatt, in his insistent avoidance of mirrors throughout the novel, begins to appear to lose all sense of himself to the power of his reflection. This is increasingly conveyed through a distinct lack of textual detail regarding his physicality; the reader is only ever given to understand Wyatt as a fragmented form, with intermittent attention afforded to the minute details of his 'fingertips', for example (p.89). The only details attended to by the text are often those that emphasise Wyatt as an object of fragmentation or mutilation, such as when Wyatt injures himself shaving and his wife Esther 'almost screamed, seeing him standing in the door

²⁷ Christopher J. Knight, *Hints & Guesses: William Gaddis's Fiction of Longing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p.43.

²⁸ Gaddis, *Recognitions*, p.34; p.28.

of the studio with blood all over one side of his face and neck' (p.90). The face and neck themselves remain notably featureless and the reader thus remains unable to comprehend Wyatt's physical form independently of the growing evidence of its wear and tear. The mirror, therefore, begins to behave less like a vehicle for self-discovery in the novel, and more like a metaphor for self-eradication.

On the basis of this apparently nihilistic preoccupation, one might suggest that *The Recognitions* is laying the groundwork for a model of postmodernism that recalls the terms of Jameson's critique: the reason that postmodernism illustrates a 'waning of affect' is, for Jameson, because there is 'no longer a self present to do the feeling'.²⁹ But the notion of perceived self-eradication has important affective consequences in this novel, allowing it to be interpreted, instead, as what I will term self-subjectification. When Basil Valentine, the art critic, asks 'it's your habit to cover up mirrors? as they do in a house where someone's died?', Wyatt responds 'don't you get tired of the image you dodge in mirrors?'³⁰ Valentine's suggestion that the covered mirrors indicate the 'mourning' of a household implies the loss or lack of a person or subject. However, that the mirror's reflection produces only the 'effect of resemblance' implies not the loss or lack of the subject, but the effort to resist the substitution of subject for object. Knight explores this idea in his study of Gaddis's works through the critical framework of Derrida's *The Gift of Death*:

[T]he "individual" can be understood in at least two opposing forms: first, as the resident of a democratic and materially advanced society who values autonomy and spatial privacy, and feels no obligation toward any truth larger than self-interest; and second, as one who, intuiting an absence, makes a concerted effort to return to the primacy of felt being, to that rare moment wherein being true to the Other is, paradoxically, synonymous with being true to oneself. Or as Derrida [...] puts it [...] "[t]he individualism of technological civilization relies precisely on a misunderstanding of the unique self. It is an individualism relating to a *role* and not a *person*. [...] For it is thus that the soul separates itself in recalling itself to itself, and so it becomes individualized, interiorized, becomes its very invisibility" (*Gift of Death*, 15).³¹

²⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.15.

³⁰ Gaddis, *Recognitions*, p.333.

³¹ Knight, p.17.

Wyatt is representative of the second form of the 'individual'; by 'intuiting an absence', he demonstrates an effort to 'return to the primacy of felt being'. In covering the mirrors and eradicating his reflection, Wyatt is not eradicating himself; he is resisting modern civilization's 'misunderstanding of the unique self' by establishing distance between his 'true' self as subject and his reflection as object, affirming, in turn, his existential status. Just as Gaddis later addresses the notion of an artist's work as a restless limb fighting for its own autonomy, Wyatt attempts to release himself from his representation. While all that's left of Wyatt is a fragmented, mutilated form, the fact that he still bleeds, moves, and ages, is evidence that he has been able to retain some sort of embodiment independent of his reflection, indicating his capacity to return to 'the primacy of felt being'.

Gaddis resists the notion of the mirror as a vehicle for self-discovery *or* self-eradication; instead, the mirror image poses the same danger for Gaddis as the mask. Identification with the reflection it contains enacts the dangers of the 'willing suspension of disbelief' that might otherwise allow for the conflation of original and representation, while its avoidance indicates the severance of the bond between subject and object. To identify with the mirror image is to self-objectify; to reject the mirror image is to self-subjectify. The function of the mirror, therefore, is to enact the structural framework of the text; *The Recognitions* drops the mask of the realist novel's convincingly mimetic framework in order to reveal itself as a representation, as an object. In establishing distance between the reader as subject and the text as object, we are continually reminded, in reading this novel, that we occupy a world only similar – and not identical – to the world contained within the text. The novel has only the 'effect of resemblance', and confesses such; the narrative does not invite us to suspend disbelief and figuratively step into the fictional world reflected in it. Jameson suggests that realist fiction relies upon 'affective investment', as though to say that without the suspension of disbelief that allows us to occupy a novel's fictional landscape, we, as readers, might feel nothing at all. If this novel uses its motifs of masks and mirrors to establish itself as an object separate from its reader, is it, therefore, possible to experience an affective response to it?

Knight's reading of Derrida illuminates not only the relationship between Wyatt and his reflection, but the relationship between reader and text, allowing for an interpretation of the reader as the second form of 'the individual' described and the text as the 'Other'. In this case, the willing suspension of disbelief is not the only means by which we might experience an affective response to a text, even a text as self-conscious as *The Recognitions*. 'Being true' to both oneself and the text, here, involves acknowledging the text as 'the Other', as being separate from the self. This suggests that we cannot be true to ourselves when we read realist fiction, as it involves a conflation of 'the individual' and 'the Other', a temporary suspension of the paradigms that allow these two notions to exist as separate entities. We are, thus, 'the resident of [our own] democratic and materially advanced society', until our encounter with realist fiction requires us to become a resident of the text; we can never simultaneously be both. Self-conscious fiction, on the other hand, asserts itself as 'the Other', allowing the reader to simultaneously be both true 'to the Other' and 'to oneself': we are allowed 'to return to the primacy of felt being'. We do not need to occupy that world in order to feel through it, but in returning our own 'self' to 'the primacy of felt being', we are able to feel *about* it.

Knight emphasises the 'mood' or affective capacity of Gaddis's prose as 'one of mourning, reflective of the sense that an unnameable something has vacated the stage of our existence':

Gaddis's fiction itself can largely be said to constitute a meditation on, or a response to, this felt vacancy – to the sense that twentieth-century material culture provides all the means necessary for survival except the reason why we should seek it.³²

The suggestion that we are able to feel *about* the novel, rather than *through* the novel, however, suggests a greater affective range than moods of negation – of loss, of sorrow, of mourning – immediately indicate. As mentioned previously in this chapter, Gaddis's exploration of the absence of love does not leave the novel affectively 'vacant', but invites a plurality of secondary affective responses to this absence. What Knight *does* suggest, however, is that this vacancy is 'felt'.

³² Ibid., p.3.

Saul Bellow, a contemporary and correspondent of Gaddis's, explores this idea in his novel *Herzog* (1964), in which the notion of vacancy or absence is connected with the re-animation of feeling. Towards the end of the novel, Asphalter describes the deep numbness of depression that overcame him following the death of his monkey, Rocco. In an effort to re-animate himself, to increase his affective range, he describes how he attended a 'headshrinker' who taught him to 'pretend [he had] already died':

[Y]ou have to feel and not feel, be and not be. You're present and absent both. [...] Now there's nothing to say but what you really thought. And you don't say it to them because you're dead, but only to yourself. Reality, not illusions. Truth, not lies.³³

This is demonstrative of re-subjectification and suggests an inherent parallel with the process of returning to 'the primacy of felt being' by intuiting absence or 'Otherness'. It rewards Asphalter with agency, allowing him to become capable, once again, of feeling actively, rather than being made to feel passively, or, worse still, to feel nothing at all. While the covered mirrors in Wyatt's apartment might be misinterpreted as either a cause or symptom of self-eradication, Asphalter, in *Herzog*, illuminates the true role of imagining the object self as dead: its ability to re-animate the subject self, affirming the status of the subject self as an occupant of the material world.

Asphalter says '[a]s I gaze up from my coffin, at first I can keep my attention on my death, and on my relations with the living, and then other things come in'. Herzog asks, 'You begin to get tired?' and Asphalter replies, 'No, no' (p.283). In *The Recognitions*, Gaddis suggests that imagining the soul as an object or a representation is what is 'tiring', as is reflected when Wyatt asks Valentine 'don't you get tired of the image you dodge in mirrors?' Instead, it is imagining the subject self as part of an affective network, the self in relation to others who belong to the world of the 'living', that enlivens affective response through memory, experience, and communication.

Esme, who is cast in the role of muse to numerous characters, but most notably to Wyatt and Otto, serves as the orator of this investigation in the novel. Indeed, Esme is one of the only

³³ Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (London: Penguin Classics, 2019), pp.282-3.

characters of the novel able to apprehend Wyatt's reasons for striving to separate himself from his reflection. She quickly becomes hysterical when describing how the mirror 'dominates' Wyatt:

Mirrors dominate the people. They tell your face how to grow. [...] There are evil mirrors where he works, and they work with him, because they are mirrors with terrible memories, and they know, they *know*, and they tell him these terrible things and then they trap him.³⁴

Although Wyatt's efforts to keep the mirrors covered demonstrate his desire to orient himself in the material world, to disconnect from his reflection, Esme articulates how the hypothetical fictive realm of representation poses an eternal threat, not just to Wyatt, but to 'people' in general. Much like the masquerade Gaddis alludes to in the novel's opening sentence, 'mirrors' become 'evil' when the worlds they reflect offer the subject self a greater sense of agency than the material world s/he occupies; Wyatt does not work with the mirrors, but 'they work with him', 'they trap him'. Wyatt's agency is threatened when he acknowledges the realm of representation, and this is reflected in the passive syntax Esme employs to characterise Wyatt's domination. Where imagining himself as dead helps Asphalter to reconnect to the feelings and memories he associates with his experience of the material world, Wyatt's own feelings and memories are challenged by the 'terrible memories' of the mirrors and the 'terrible things' they tell him. Perhaps even more disturbingly, Esme's suggestion that mirrors 'tell your face how to grow' implies both that the world of representation is fighting for its own autonomy, and that its role is not only to reflect, but to influence the state of affairs in the material world. She later elaborates on this idea in the letter she leaves for Wyatt: 'It does not seem unreasonable that we invent colors, lines, shapes, capable of being, representative of existence, therefore it is not unreasonable that they, in turn, later, invent us, our ideas, directions, motivations' (p.473).

This is a key distinction to make in our appraisal of Gaddis's structural and thematic handling of 'representation' in the text, marking a departure from accusations of 'overeasy cynicism' regarding postmodern fiction's approach to the delineation between the real and the

³⁴ Gaddis, *Recognitions*, p.221.

artificial.³⁵ If traditional realist fiction figuratively holds up a mirror in order to prompt social reflection in the material world, and if postmodern fiction figuratively holds up a mirror in order to incite the revelation that the material world is just as artificial and contrived as its representation, then Gaddis finds a different use for it. Instead of laying the material and the fictive side-by-side, Gaddis employs frame-breaking to problematise the parallelism of these worlds. Waugh describes how ‘the alternation of frame and frame-break (or the construction of an illusion through the imperceptibility of the frame and the shattering of illusion through the constant exposure of the frame) provides the essential deconstructive method of metafiction.’³⁶

In her consideration, Waugh accounts for the ‘frame’ as the imperceptible structure that allows a fictive construction to masquerade as an illusion of material reality, and the ‘frame-break’ as the ‘shattering of illusion’ that allows for this framework to be exposed. Waugh thus equates the breaking of the frame with the exposure of the frame. I would argue, however, that Gaddis’s employment of the metaphors of masks and mirrors extends beyond this; his use of frame-break represents not simply the exposure of the frame, or the shattering of the illusion, but the shattering of the frame itself. Once this frame has been shattered, it is no longer productive nor even possible to delineate between the real and the artificial. Only shortly after her conversation with Otto, for instance, Esme describes a dream she has in which Wyatt is being trapped by the mirror, as he felt he had been as a child: ‘The big mirror was almost behind you, [...] and then it caught you, you were caught in the mirror. And I could not help you out.’³⁷ Esme emphasises, as did Wyatt, that the mirror has ‘caught’ him from ‘behind’, suggesting that Wyatt can neither perceive himself in the material world nor in the world of representation, and must simultaneously inhabit both by being caught somewhere in between.

By ‘catching’ both his characters and his readers somewhere between the realms of the real and the artificial, Gaddis also affects a tone that is caught somewhere between the illusion of sincere feeling Jameson associates with nineteenth century realism and the overeasy cynicism

³⁵ Hilfer, p.163.

³⁶ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p.31.

³⁷ Gaddis, *Recognitions*, p.272.

that Hilfer associates with literary postmodernism. Indeed, he crystallises this idea most effectively in his shorter novel of 1985, *Carpenter's Gothic*:

– no, they all want to be writers. They think if something happened to them that it's interesting because it happened to them, hearing about all the money that gets made writing anything cheap, anything sentimental and vulgar whether it's a book or a song and they can't wait to sell out.
 – Oh. Do you think that? [...] because I mean I don't think so, I don't think they sell out [...], I mean these poor people writing all these bad books and these awful songs, and singing them? I think they're doing the best they can... [...] That's what makes it so sad.³⁸

The novel's elusive geologist and landlord Mr. McCandless articulates a typically cynical attitude towards artistic representation in an age of capitalism, consumerism, and technological reproduction, identifying 'sentimental' literature as both 'vulgar' and 'cheap' because it advances the individualistic claim that any one person might be more 'interesting' (and, therefore, more marketable) than another. His tenant (and sometime lover) Elizabeth Booth illustrates a different approach; Liz, in fact, reflects the fracturing of the frame in her acknowledgement that these 'bad books and awful songs' have affective consequences in the material world beyond their own self-containment. For Liz, the material world doesn't only inform the representational world; these artistic representations bleed back into reality and occasion extra-marginal repercussions. Regardless of how trivial or 'vulgar' consumer art may seem, or how consciously self-reflexive or vacant 'high' art may be in retaliation against this idea, what's 'sad', in Liz's opinion, is that everybody is 'doing the best they can'.

In an age of 'cheap' ideas and artistic reproductions, therefore, it is possible to respond both cynically and sincerely to the changing relationship between the material and the representational; we are not simply mourning the 'loss' of *true* art or the *true* artist (tenuous terms which Gaddis deliberately resists categorically defining), but lamenting a culture which has facilitated the overproduction and devaluation of artistic output. No matter how 'sentimental', 'vulgar', or 'cheap' these works might be, the fictional worlds they invoke still

³⁸ William Gaddis, *Carpenter's Gothic* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), pp.158-9.

threaten to masquerade as more ‘authentic’ than the reality they reflect upon.³⁹ The ‘absence’, therefore, of meaningful or affective art is, for Gaddis, occasion for affect itself. Wyatt’s immobilisation between the material and the representational, and in his ultimate journey from creator, to reproducer, to destroyer of art, is a transformation reflected in Liz’s ‘sad’ response to ‘these poor people’ who attempt to create, and the resultant dysphoria and exhaustion of those who realise they have failed to do so.

Art, Embodiment, and the Absence of Love in *The Recognitions* and *J R*

In Gaddis’s works, the role of the self-conscious artist is frequently focalised in order to illuminate art’s affective properties in unexpected ways. The figurative ‘exhaustion’ of the artist in relation to his/her sense of embodiment foregrounds the metafictional relationship between a text’s affective properties and its narratological structure. In the developing context of his fiction, Gaddis complicates the conflation of himself and his artist characters by regressing from his own narratives, emphasising, simultaneously, both his presence and absence as mediator of the novels’ action. By accenting, instead, the experiences of his characters, Gaddis opens a narrative channel through which he can self-consciously and affectively communicate with his reader without engaging his own voice at all. His characters’ anxieties about their own ‘bad’ art, which takes a variety of forms, become a means through which Gaddis can repeatedly alert his reader to the contrivance of the fictional form without encroaching upon the narrative himself.

In the context of postmodernism, Wyatt’s artistic role anticipates the thesis of John Barth’s ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’ (1967). In this essay, Barth clarifies that by “‘exhaustion” I don’t mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities—by no means necessarily a cause for despair’.⁴⁰ Many critics contemporary to the publication of Barth’s essay

³⁹ Benesch, ‘Fake Supreme’, p.129.

⁴⁰ John Barth, *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: The Putnam Publishing Group, 1984), p.64.

misinterpreted this statement as a declaration of the death of the novel form, and he was thus forced to clarify his statement in a further essay entitled 'The Literature of Replenishment' in 1979:

A dozen years ago I published in these pages a much-misread essay called "The Exhaustion of Literature," occasioned by [...] my concern, in that somewhat apocalyptic place and time, for the ongoing health of narrative fiction. [...] The simple burden of my essay was that the forms and modes of art live in human history and are therefore subject to used-upness [...]. But a great many people [...] mistook me to mean that literature, at least fiction, is *kaput* [...] (p.205).

In *The Recognitions*, Wyatt's degeneration from creator, to reproducer, to destroyer of art might as easily be misinterpreted as a proclamation for the death of art, but Gaddis handles his subject with much greater nuance than this progression initially suggests; instead, Wyatt's shifting role illustrates how the changing faces of both art and artist demonstrate the affective struggle of breathing new life into an otherwise exhausted form. As Barth later clarifies, his original intention was not to emphasise the notion that 'there is nothing left for contemporary writers but to parody and travesty our great predecessors', but that 'modes of art *live* in human history' [my italics]: art becomes thus transformed into organic, material, autonomous matter and is, therefore, by necessity, 'liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against [itself] to generate new and lively work' (p.205). Wyatt's relationship to his art is not demonstrative of *art's* exhaustion, but of his own, as the novel conveys his visceral experience of determining between generation and regeneration, and the implications this has for the creation of an art that assumes a new form.

The problem of artistic completion lies at the heart of the novel's consideration of art's aesthetic and ideological direction in a climate of formal 'used-upness'. Knight suggests that '[f]or Wyatt, painting entails the question of perfection. Even when perfection is not present in the canvas, which is most of the time, it makes itself known by its absence.'⁴¹ If Wyatt's resistance to self-representation illustrates an effort to establish himself in the material world, Knight finds this paralleled in his attitude toward art: it is only when perfection is *not* present

⁴¹ Knight, p.39.

that it can be *felt*, even if that feeling arises out of absence. Knight elucidates the affective implications of this in his study:

An artist grows to accept that perfection is elusive, but remains committed to the task, knowing that if the work falls short, it nevertheless allows the artist to gauge the distance between what he or she has done and what remains to be done. [...] Yet for some artists, overwhelmed by the sense of perfection, it seems almost preferable to abandon the work before its completion, for fear that the gap between the conception and the object should prove too dispiriting (p.41).

The ‘dispiriting’ gap between ‘the conception’ and ‘the object’ remains problematic for Wyatt; the completion of a work of art represents the final act of severance, allowing for the separation of the painting from the material world it inhabits. Ironically, Wyatt’s emotional investment in ‘the task’ can only be retained as long as ‘the distance between what he or she has done and what remains to be done’ endures; it is this state of suspension that prolongs the ‘fear’ of the gap between these conditions. When he is critically ill, in the novel’s opening chapter, we are informed that ‘[w]hen he could not read, he painted, with an extraordinary deftness which consumed his whole consciousness, and often left him so tense that he passed into delirium’.⁴² If art is a by-product of an artist’s consumption by ‘delirium’, then this indicates that an artist, at certain stages in his art’s development, has little, if any, control over it; his art, as a separate entity, grows out of his consciousness and, once completed, holds the power to consume it. The absence of completion in a work of art, therefore, promises the artist the possibility of retaining his or her own embodied autonomy.

Indeed, the relationship between art and suffering, between what the artist ‘has done and what remains to be done’, recalls Gaddis’s interview with Tom LeClair. In it, he states ‘[o]ne is dismayed and disturbed as one grows up by the difference between the anticipated actuality and the actuality. [...] A central theme in *The Recognitions* is the absence of love, the withholding of love, the withdrawal of love.’⁴³ If, in the context of art, perfection can *only* be felt in its absence, then an absence of love does not necessarily denote an absence of affect.

⁴² Gaddis, *Recognitions*, p.44.

⁴³ LeClair, p.19.

Where love is absent, a new canvas of affect blooms: sorrow, apathy, loneliness, self-pity.

Wyatt's art is produced from a place of absent love – the love withdrawn from his life through the death of his mother, the withholding of love from his apparently indifferent father, and the absence of love from his puritanical Aunt May – as much as it is produced from a place of creative delirium.

Gaddis uses one painting in particular, Wyatt's unfinished portrait of his mother, as a metaphor through which to investigate the function of affect in the context of a postmodern culture inherently concerned with a lack of closure:

It was done in black on a smooth gesso ground, on strong linen, a stark likeness which left its lines of completion to the eye of the beholder. It was this quality which appeared to upset Gwyon [...]. [E]ach time he returned to it, it was slightly different than he remembered, intractably thwarting the completion he had managed himself [...].⁴⁴

A work of realist fiction, as we have seen, relies on securing the reader's affective investment by creating the illusion of a completed world – a world which the reader can inhabit and experience fully with immediate effect. Its picture can be completed with minimal conscious effort on the part of the reader; the affective experience is therefore generated within the realist text, rather than in the distance between itself and its reader. Gwyon, in this passage, appears most 'upset' by the fact that the painting's completion requires his own conscious effort; not being able to appreciate its completed image prevents him from becoming absorbed in the promise of its reality, reminding him that the picture itself is an artificial representation, thus frustrating his desire to perceive, once again, his dead wife's apparently lifelike form. Gwyon's awareness of the picture as an unfinished contrivance of his wife's image, however, does not preclude affective response altogether. Instead, what might have been his joy becomes his sadness, what might have been his comfort becomes his discomfort. In its state of incompleteness, the painting emphasises the distance between 'the conception' and 'the object'; the promise of perfection that has been lost in the imposition of this distance mimics Gwyon's realisation that the love he

⁴⁴ Gaddis, *Recognitions*, p.57.

has lost only makes itself felt in its absence. Wyatt challenges his father's critique of the unfinished work:

[t]here's something about a... an unfinished piece of work, a... a thing like this where... do you see? Where perfection is still possible? Because it's there, it's there all the time, all the time you work trying to uncover it (p.57).

Crucially, this process reflects most explicitly on the agency of the reader's role as co-creator of the novel's action. If the artist leaves his work incomplete and, thus, imperfect, the work of art requires of its viewer both that s/he recognise the failure of the art to achieve a full, mimetic representation of its source object, and that s/he imaginatively complete the work of art him/herself.

The question of artistic completion also extends to Gaddis's treatment of embodied experience in the novel. If Barth views works of art and literature as *living* in a point in time, he neglects to address the effect of this on the embodied experience of the art or novel's creator. In a letter to Katherine Anne Porter in May 1948, Gaddis writes

[a]fter college I worked [as a fact-checker at *The New Yorker*] for something over a year, and when I quit it was with the sole idea of selling them something written. Starting with a tragedy of youth, an exhaustive history of the Player Piano [which would later be developed into *Agapē Agape*], which I still have and treasure as I am told mothers do their strangely-shaped children which the world derides.⁴⁵

While acknowledging the risk of defying Gaddis's wishes that his works be encountered on their own terms, his employment of the motherhood metaphor here is loaded with implication about the approach he takes to embodiment in his investigation of the relationship between art and artist. This image emphasises art and artist as separate units, while suggesting a codependent relationship between them. Susan Stanford Friedman suggests that while '[m]en as well as women have used the metaphor extensively', 'the association of the pen and paintbrush [is typically] with the phallus in metaphors of creativity'.⁴⁶ It is necessary, therefore, to

⁴⁵ ed. Moore, *Letters*, p.108.

⁴⁶ Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring 1987), 49-82 (p.49).

distinguish between metaphors of fatherhood and motherhood as they pertain to creativity, by separating production from reproduction. Friedman emphasises this in her essay by suggesting that '[c]reation is the act of the mind that brings something new into existence. *Procreation* is the act of the body that reproduces the species' (p.52). Both the intention and the effect of the motherhood metaphor is, according to Friedman, contingent upon its male or female usage. Friedman describes that T.S. Eliot, for example, of whom Gaddis was a huge admirer,

takes recourse to the metaphor to express [...] his theory of the text's autonomy: [...] he is oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief... And then he can say to the poem: 'Go away! Find a place for yourself in a book—and don't expect me to take any further interest in you.' (pp.62-3).

Eliot's employment of the metaphor is indicative of Gaddis's idealistic impression of the relationship between an artist and his work – that once a work of art has been completed it must, by necessity, speak for itself, leaving its artist to live independently of his responsibility for it. However, here, as elsewhere, Gaddis's illustration of his role as 'mother' to his 'strangely-shaped' literary 'children' suggests that while the metaphor of artistic procreation offers a separation of material bodies, there lingers an often undesirable affective relationship between them, precluding total autonomy. Unlike Eliot, Gaddis's repeated metaphors of embodiment, as illustrated through this image of motherhood, indicate that he is unable to relieve himself from the 'burden' of his art – that, as Friedman identifies, 'birth lead[s] to a lifetime of maternal nurturance' (p.62).

If it is as Friedman suggests, then Gaddis is acutely aware of the fact that the nurturance of art necessitates a depletion of the artist. As a mother's body transforms into a vessel of nourishment which is repeatedly exhausted by a growing baby's developmental requirements, Gaddis explores the artist as one whose corporeal anatomy is threatened or challenged in the act of procreation. Friedman distinguishes between 'creation' and 'procreation' in the same way as we might distinguish between 'production' and 'reproduction' in terms of both embryonic and artistic conception. Notably, Wyatt does not 'create' or 'produce' art in the gendered masculine sense to which Friedman attributes these terms; his job is to counterfeit, and, therefore, to reproduce, as it is traditionally incumbent upon a mother to procreate. A character such as Max,

when asked of his original (whether or not all suggestion might indicate ‘bad’) painting, ‘[d]id it take you long?’ replies, ‘[t]hinking it out was the main thing’, thus representing the male archetype of creation and production: once the act of conceiving and producing has been completed, there is no longer the burden of ‘a lifetime of maternal nurturance’.⁴⁷ For Wyatt, on the other hand, the act of artistic *reproduction* entails corporeal consequences that extend far beyond the simple act of ‘thinking it out’. When Recktail Brown says, ‘I can feel your bones right through your shoulder. Don’t you eat anything?’, Wyatt replies, ‘[y]our reassurance strengthens me, for I have sensed I felt them there myself. But no one has confirmed me in some time’ (p.365). Brown attributes Wyatt’s loss of flesh to the fact that he has not ‘eat[en] anything’, that in the act of nurturing his art he has neglected to nurture himself. By bringing ‘strangely-shaped’ new life into the world, the physicality of the parent body has been reduced to the essence of its skeletal foundation, occupying a separate body from the art it has produced, but prevented from becoming entirely unburdened by it.

The metaphor of the artist’s corporeal depletion by the art he has created is also amplified in the character Stanley, the Catholic composer whose attitudes and mannerisms transmute over the course of the novel until they resemble Wyatt’s. Stanley begins increasingly to mimic Wyatt’s speech patterns – ‘Listen, listen... Listen to me...’ – and to echo his sentiments regarding artistic completion: ‘it’s as though finishing it strikes it dead [...] because you can still make changes and the possibility of perfection is still there’ (p.840; p.599). Gaddis, however, introduces the prospect of Wyatt and Stanley as mirror images of one another at a much earlier stage in the narrative:

[Stanley’s] work, always unfinished, was like the commission from a prince in the Middle Ages, the prince who ordered his tomb, and then busied the artist continually with a succession of fireplaces and doorways, the litter of this life, while the tomb remained unfinished. [...] [E]very piece of created work is the tomb of its creator: thus he could not leave it finished haphazard as he saw work left on all sides of him (p.323).

The point at which the tomb is not only ‘created’, but completed, suggests the point at which the severance between art and artist takes place, as well as the point at which the work becomes

⁴⁷ Gaddis, *Recognitions*, p.189.

entirely autonomous and signals the death of its 'creator'. The novel is, significantly, bookended by Wyatt's childhood and Stanley's death, when the Church roof collapses on him as he embarks on the first complete playthrough of his composition on the organ. Stephen J. Burn argues that the collapse of the Church 'symbolizes the crushing weight of information [...] because it is caused by an increase in the number of cultural artifacts (the new composition by Stanley cannot be borne, significantly, by the architecture)'.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the collapse of the Church symbolises the crushing weight of the composition itself; the structures of the Church collapse and crush Stanley, the 'creator', when his created work takes shape. The work itself outlives Stanley, like a child who has outgrown its parent, since 'most of his work was recovered' from the site of collapse, and was 'still spoken of, when it is noted, with high regard, though seldom played.'⁴⁹ This event literally enacts the metaphor of the 'created work' as 'the tomb of its creator', revealing the novel's own fictional framework in order to explore not only how the material world informs the representational, but how the representational world impacts upon the material. The effect on the reader is such that the writer's influence over the text is felt most potently in the moments during which his absence is most keenly emphasised; only when the text begins to exhibit awareness of its own shape is the reader best reminded of the fact that the text as an autonomous, organic entity was once conceived and created by an extra-textual agent.

Wyatt and Stanley are not the only characters burdened both by the act of producing art, and their resistance toward completion. Esme, at once one of the novel's primary surrogates for the role of the reader *and* the artwork, also experiences the challenge art poses to her capacity for embodied experience; she is repeatedly forced to confront her own form in a state of incompleteness or a state of defacement in Wyatt's art. Here, Knight illuminates how Wyatt's artistic depiction of Esme affects the emotional dynamic of their relationship:

⁴⁸ Stephen J. Burn, 'The Collapse of Everything: William Gaddis and the Encyclopedic Novel', *Paper Empire*, 46-62 (p.57).

⁴⁹ Gaddis, *Recognitions*, p.956.

Esme, Wyatt's model for the Virgin, is keenly aware of how she is asked to play a counterfeit, both to be and not to be the woman in the painting [...]. A "counterfeit creature," Esme allows Wyatt "to search with clinical coldness" the "austere perfection" of her face, and yet not to discover her, searching as he does with "academic disinterest" but "not the eyes of a lover" (270).⁵⁰

When Wyatt searches Esme's face, it is an act suggestive not only of Wyatt's appreciation of Esme from an emotionally detached, scholarly perspective, but of critical approaches to the encyclopaedic novel in the mid-century tailwind of high modernism's literary legacy. In this example, therefore, Esme represents the artwork object. The 'clinical coldness' and 'academic disinterest' with which Wyatt evaluates Esme in the flesh is a projection of his attitude toward the aesthetic reproduction he has created. Gaddis thereby self-consciously alerts his reader to the dangers of surveying this novel with a comparative attitude; a clinically cold and academically disinterested interpretation of the text risks the preclusion of a genuine, affected response to its self-contained world, which is exposed in the moments its fictional framework is revealed. Through Wyatt, Gaddis cautions his reader *against* the diminishment of affective response, by reminding not only those who create art, but those who look upon it, that something more visceral can be experienced when we abandon an entirely academic focus on the 'austere perfection' contained within the frame at the expense of the materiality of its 'bones' and the suggestion of the 'shadows' it casts in the world in which it is situated. If we must view art and, thus, those ideas and lives contained within it through 'the eyes of a lover' in order to 'discover' it, then it suggests that 'clinical' analysis alone will bring us no closer to the heart of the text. In a letter to Jeanne G. Howes, a student at Case Western Reserve University, Gaddis writes 'I suppose if there has been one immense frustration with the book's often grudging acceptance it has been how few people seemed able to permit themselves, despite its so-called "erudition", to simply enjoy it.'⁵¹ Wyatt, therefore, performs the function of a distinctly narrow manner of reading, enacting the academically disinterested relationship of the critic to the text through his conflation of object and image.

⁵⁰ Knight, p.59.

⁵¹ ed. Moore, *Letters*, p.278.

While Esme may, in certain examples, represent the form and function of the artwork, Esme also performs the role of a certain type of ‘reader’ in the text. Esme becomes a vehicle through which Gaddis investigates what happens to the reader when s/he encounters him/herself in a fictional character – to simultaneously acknowledge the similarity and dissimilarity s/he is confronted with – and forced to reconcile the distance between him/herself and the character when the text so explicitly announces itself as a fictional construction. Esme thereby enacts the challenges of reader-character identification in a novel which resists the willing suspension of disbelief. In a letter she writes intended for Wyatt, Esme laments that Wyatt’s representational likeness of her threatens her own sense of proportion:

To recognize, not to *establish* but to *intervene*. A remarkable illusion?
 Painting, a sign whose reality is actually, I, never to be abandoned, a painting *is* myself, ever attentive to me, mimicking what I never changed, modified, or compromised.
 Whether I, myself, am object or image, they at once, are both, real or fancied, they are both, concrete or abstract, they are both, exactly and in proportion to this disproportionate I [...].⁵²

Repeatedly encountering her own likeness in Wyatt’s art reveals to Esme the difficulty of distinguishing between ‘object’ and ‘image’ since both are at once ‘real’ and ‘fancied’, ‘concrete’ and ‘abstract’. This situates Esme neither inside nor outside of the frame but somehow and somewhere *between* the material and the representational, the real and the fancied, the concrete and the abstract. Like Wyatt, Esme’s experience of structural suspension between these states is encountered in the body; it is only through confronting her proportional representation that she is alerted to her own disproportion. This raises the question not only of how this experience is registered affectively, but how it reflects the experience of reading a novel which refuses to present itself as an entirely ‘remarkable illusion’.

In his study of literary realism, Jameson describes how affect can be distinguished from emotion because of its resistance to linguistic definition; where we have a tradition of naming emotions, affects typically elude language. Because, according to Jameson, affect is a bodily sensation, it incurs greater difficulties for the ‘representational tasks it poses poets and novelists

⁵² Gaddis, *Recognitions*, p.472.

in the effort somehow to seize its fleeting essence and to force its recognition', a difficulty which it is comparatively easier for the painter or the composer – creators whose artworks are free from the limits of language – to overcome.⁵³ For Jameson, bodily affect is a condition of the material world rather than the representational world:

[I]f the positive characteristic of the emotion is to be named, the positive content of an affect is to activate the body. [...] At its outer limit, then, affect becomes the organ of perception of the world itself, the vehicle of my being-in-the-world [...]. (p.32; p.43).

If affect is not only bodily in nature, but, as Jameson suggests, an 'organ of perception' with the ability to animate and situate the self in the material world, then how are we materially affected by the uncanny experience of having our bodies and emotional patterns 'mimicked' by characters contained within an entirely representational fictional world? What is striking about Esme's articulation of her experience of being 'mimicked' is how it affects her sense of 'disproportion': she is at once both the same as and different from her image. Jameson suggests that affect is 'the vehicle of my being-in-the-world' and suggests, therefore, coherence between the way that we imagine ourselves in the world and the way that we physically experience ourselves in the world. To have your body proportionally represented, however, is to have your disproportions materially exposed, thus establishing how aesthetic mimicry incurs a bodily affect which not only *changes* our 'perception of the world itself', but challenges the coherence of our 'being-in-the-world'. Esme's heightened material self-consciousness is engendered by the increasing fear that she is materially insufficient. When she is left alone, free from the appropriation of aesthetic reproduction, she reverts to the apparent reliability of sensory experience in order to establish her sense of 'being-in-the-world': 'she began to talk with herself; [...] she moved with exaggeration as though she were being watched, [...] to have another consciousness present, aware of her, containing her, to assure her of her own existence'.⁵⁴ Her efforts to employ sense experience to anchor herself in the world – conditions which Jameson describes as fundamental to the experience of affect, and, thus, the orientation of the self – are futile. When she 'does not see [Wyatt] any more', when she is no longer afforded

⁵³ Jameson, *Realism*, p.31

⁵⁴ Gaddis, *Recognitions*, p.301.

containment by the artworks modelled on her likeness, she no longer exists either inside or outside of the frame; she exists *for herself* as neither object nor image, dramatically altering the ways in which she is able to experience her own body (p.483).

Esme thus comes increasingly to believe that her stomach is ‘not there’ and to refer to herself in the third person, as though she is no longer connected to the idea of herself as an active subject: ‘[s]he does not know, she must take a long walk [...], and then she must go to the doctor’ (p.483). However, if we take Knight’s suggestion in the light of Wyatt’s approach to art – that the absence of perfection makes its possibility felt, just as we have seen previously that the absence of *love* makes its possibility felt – then what Esme perceives to be the absence of her respective body parts catalyses a re-evaluation of her body as a material marker of her presence in the world. When she writes ‘[t]o recognize, not to *establish* but to *intervene*’, she foregrounds one of the most central concerns of the novel: recognition involves the sort of intervention that challenges the notion of being fully established in either a material or a representational context, a challenge that the reader thus encounters when s/he determines to discover him/herself in one, or several, of the novel’s characters. For Klaus Benesch, Gaddis’s structural and thematic marriage of repetition and recognition is suggestive of a mode of ‘knowing’ which transcends and thus reconfigures the realm of bodily experience:

Gaddis conjoins both form and content so that “repetition” can be reconceptualized as “re-cognition” (a second cognition, from *recognoscere*: to examine, investigate a lost or hidden truth) and vice versa. The structural and epistemological dynamic Gaddis sees at work between the two activities is reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s analysis of repetition as a spiritual/poetical mode of “knowing.”⁵⁵

Benesch identifies recognition as ‘a second cognition’ entailing the examination or investigation of a lost or hidden truth. This resonates with Esme’s suggestion that recognition involves a stimulus which might provoke either the recovery of a lost knowledge previously possessed, or the discovery of a knowledge hitherto hidden from view. Esme craves the security of a framework of containment, whether that be the figurative framework of Wyatt’s gaze, or the

⁵⁵ Klaus Benesch, ‘In the Diaspora of Words: Gaddis, Kierkegaard, and the Art of Recognition(s)’, *Paper Empire*, 127-138 (p.37).

physical framework of the painting within which her image, or likeness, is represented.

Containment, in this context, offers a framework through which the promise of establishing oneself *either* inside or outside of a frame is realised. The loss of such containment therefore precludes the establishment of the self as either object *or* image; her image represents, literally, a repetition of herself as object, and once the figurative framework of the fiction is not only revealed, but broken, she is suspended between the material and representational, incurring recognition of the self – a re-cognition of the self.

Wyatt's wife Esther is similarly unsettled by Wyatt's art, and provides a useful lens through which an examination of the affective relationship between reader and fiction can be investigated further. While Esme fully surrenders (at whatever cost) to the postmodern experience of acknowledging the mimicry of her object self in an image which subsequently reconfigures her material existence, Esther represents a readership which actively seeks to identify the object self with the image inside of the frame. Esther is primarily motivated by the 'affective investment' Jameson describes as a condition of traditional realist prose and thus differs from Esme: her constant investigation of others' paintings for evidence of her own likeness suggests her *desire* to be mimicked; the challenge to Esther's material existence is born of art's *refusal* to replicate her. When Esther, for example, encounters the unfinished portrait of Wyatt's mother, she reacts similarly to Gwyon, albeit for an entirely different reason:

[S]he standing beside him could see no further than the portrait, held by the likeness as happened so often but seldom so clearly, finding resemblances to herself everywhere as though she set out from the start seeking identity with misfortune, recognition in disaster.⁵⁶

Esther's 'recognition' is explored in vastly different terms to Esme's, although both recognitions are brought about by a changed experience of their own corporeality in relationship to its aesthetic reproduction. While Esme's recognition is catalysed by the appropriation of her likeness in Wyatt's paintings, Esther's recognition is catalysed by her desperation to identify with the images contained within them. While Gwyon becomes increasingly disturbed by the

⁵⁶ Gaddis, *Recognitions*, p.88.

incompletion of the portrait of Wyatt's mother for emphasising the absence of the lost love between them, Esther becomes increasingly resentful of the portrait, because, in its state of incompletion, it remains reliant upon Wyatt's nurturance. The presence of another within the frame where she had hoped to find herself proves a threat to Esther's material consequentiality: as long as Wyatt's attentions are directed towards the representation of another, her own currency as an active participant in their marriage is diminished.

When her attempt to find 'resemblances to herself everywhere' in the painting ultimately fails, Esther derides Wyatt, arguing 'I wish you would finish that thing [...] and get rid of her' (p.88). For Esther, the painting becomes increasingly synonymous with Wyatt's mother; for both Wyatt *and* Esther, completion is synonymous with destruction and, thus, death. The painting becomes a way for Wyatt to preserve the life of his mother within the frame. Knight argues that when Esther pleads with Wyatt to complete the portrait so that he might make 'room' for her, 'Wyatt responds that, unlike his mother, Esther is alive and present, the suggestion being that one of the painting's purposes is to make absent things present, or approximately so.'⁵⁷ While Wyatt indicates this possibility, one of the risks of art that Wyatt identifies is perhaps less affectively desirable: painting's ability to make private 'emotions' public. When Esther finally confesses to Otto the emotional toll Wyatt's art takes not only on her personally, but on her relationship with him, she recalls a time that he lamented how 'vulgar' representations of traditional culture trivialise the 'great emotions':

I can still hear his voice. What a vulgarizing of something as tremendous as the Passion, this is what happens to great emotions, this is the way they're rotted, by being brought to the lowest level where emotions are cheap and interchangeable. Has there ever been anything in history so exquisitely private as the Virgin mourning over Her Son? [...] Don't you know that I love him? [...] Do you think that there's anything more... exquisitely private than... that, for me?⁵⁸

This raises an important question that the novel deals with, but is less often remarked upon: how do private emotions and bodily affects change and transform when they are performed on a

⁵⁷ Knight, p.43.

⁵⁸ Gaddis, *Recognitions*, p.127.

public stage? Whether masquerades, reflections, art, or the body, Gaddis deals with themes, images, and metaphors that illustrate how the ‘private’ is made to perform, asking not only whether the risk of making emotions seem ‘cheap and interchangeable’ is worth the reward of their recognition, but asking what happens when the ‘private’ remains just so, performing absence in both the material and the representational realm? What happens when interior experience goes unvoiced?

The question of voice is one which governs Gaddis’s narratological development from *The Recognitions* to *J R* (1975). Only a handful of chapters in *The Recognitions* are dominated almost entirely by dialogue, yet it is here that Gaddis begins to depart from authorial mediation, allowing the voices and aural identities of his characters alone to facilitate frame-breaking in the text. In Gaddis’s works, there tends to be a gestural emphasis on what is unsaid, on the relationship between unarticulated emotion and the intimate experience of bodily affect, which plays out particularly subtly in passages in which what *is* said, alone, prevails. In *The Recognitions*, Gaddis’s command of authorial voice through the intrusion of omniscient asides and atemporal observations primarily allows him to alert the reader to the novel’s own artistic contrivance, but he also introduces vocal plurality to prompt further enquiry into the relationship between identity and affect.

Mark Taylor describes how Gaddis’s use of vocal plurality allows characterisation to simultaneously develop and unravel in the novel through its relationship to the metaphor of the masked persona:

As seemingly distinct personae fade into one another in a play of shifty masks, it is often difficult to be sure who is speaking; indeed, voices often seem to “come from nowhere” (652). In a rare interview given in 1986, Gaddis described all the characters as “reflecting facets of the central figure, who, for all practical purposes, disappears.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Mark C. Taylor, *Rewiring the Real: In Conversation with William Gaddis, Richard Powers, Mark Danielewski, and Don DeLillo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp.18-9.

Traditional realist literature typically demonstrates linear character development (for example, wherein a character becomes *more* as opposed to *less* three-dimensional as the reader becomes better acquainted with his/her moral, social, and cultural reality through the authorial elaboration of either oral or internal voice). Meanwhile, Gaddis proves that the unmediated garble of characters' voices can, in fact, puncture realist illusions of narrative, by undermining the notion that neither an attempt at self-definition on the one hand, nor the appropriation of existing cultural and identity constructs, can in any way reveal anything substantial about objective or affective reality. When a character deigns to vocalise an element of his or her lived experience, or to attempt to summarise his/her existence in its entirety, the unique essence and affective encounters of that character become cheapened by the nature of the language they have had to borrow in order to articulate it. It is not only the difficulty of identifying the speaker that creates the effect of 'distinct personae' fading 'into one another' in the novel, therefore, but the ways in which these characters steal the verbal constructions and cultural clichés of others.

While it would be possible to advance a variety of cases positioning different characters as the 'central figure' of *The Recognitions*, Wyatt appears to be the obvious choice, since most of the novel's characters reflect 'facets' of him. Firstly, introducing the reader to Wyatt's vocal idiosyncrasies incurs a small sequence of recognitions on the part of the reader, which occurs when we are able to identify these idiosyncrasies pervading the language of other characters. Dialogue between Esme and Otto, for example, frequently reflects that of Esther and Wyatt: Esme suggests that 'Otto has a guilty conscience'; then, when she enquires '[w]hat did you do to yourself?' Otto replies, 'I cut myself with a lousy razor blade', indicating one of the more memorable arguments between Esther and Wyatt, who cuts himself shaving when he fails to remove Esther's flannel from the bathroom mirror.⁶⁰ Indeed, Esther is quick to point out when Wyatt and Otto first become acquainted that 'there's something alike about you both' (p.136). Stanley, too, begins to adopt Wyatt's defining features, abandoning situations and conversations '[t]o... to work', a reflection of Wyatt's conditioned response to Esther's interrogations about what occupies him: 'Nothing, just... this work' (p.453; p.84).

⁶⁰ Gaddis, *Recognitions*, pp.448-9.

The function of these vocal ‘echoes’ in the novel serves to place ‘recognition’ and ‘familiarity’ in opposition to one another; indeed, very early in the novel Wyatt characterises this dichotomy by describing the experience of viewing a work of art:

When I saw it all of a sudden everything was freed into one recognition, really freed into reality that we never see, you never see it. You don’t see it in paintings because most of the time you can’t see beyond a painting. Most paintings, the instant you see them they become familiar, and then it’s too late (p.92).

The nature of the world and the things contained within it are only ‘freed into one recognition’ at the point at which they are first encountered and, thus, least familiar. As Wyatt suggests, once the recognition has taken place and the encounter is transformed into a kind of ‘seeing’ – along with the suggestion of considered or systematic analysis and appraisal – ‘it’s too late’: we can no longer ‘see’ the true nature of the reality that was, momentarily, revealed. Gaddis’s use of vocal plurality illustrates this point; in contrast with our expectations of realist prose – that our recognition of a character becomes more pronounced the *more* familiar we become with him/her – Gaddis suggests that what first appear to be unique articulations of experience are conversely capable of confusing our ability to delineate between the different identities contained within the text. Our moment of recognition, like Wyatt’s, occurs at the point at which the voice is least familiar. The better we think we get to know a character in this novel, the more the outlines of their identities begin to blur. Through its dense intertextuality, the novel enacts the notion of language as a ritualistically borrowed and recycled form. And yet, while all these examples indicate the exhaustion and ‘used-upness’ (to borrow Barth’s term) of any meaningful articulation of human experience, Gaddis is still able to suggest that language, for all its flaws, provides a necessary function for affective experience. As natural, instinctive, and inevitable as might be our recycling of the language of others, so too is our quest for unique linguistic expression. For all the echoes rebounding in the chamber of this vast novel, they are underpinned by a deeper human experience which craves affirmation simply in the act of speaking aloud. All the ambitious philosophical and polemical monologue in this novel is just as frequently undercut by moments such as Esther’s tender enquiry of Otto, ‘[b]ut [Wyatt] must say something about me?’ (p.125).

The performative qualities of monologue and dialogue and the affective transactions they instigate or complicate are developed in Gaddis's subsequent novel, *J R*. In *J R*, Gaddis – as narrative mediator of the novel's action – is almost entirely inconspicuous. If Gaddis's ambition is to completely withdraw the author from the text, and place an emphasis on intra-textual communication alone, then the indication is that this fictive world ought be *more* immersive, since there is no longer an omniscient narrator to intermittently intrude upon the text and alert the reader to its fictional contrivances. And yet, *J R* has more in common with *The Recognitions* than this single narrative departure might at first indicate: both novels are concerned with what it means to exist inside and outside of established frameworks; both novels are concerned with the formal vocalisation of experience; and both novels are concerned with the shape that affective embodiment takes when one's self-orientation is challenged or threatened.

In his interview with Tom LeClair, Gaddis expands upon his approach to this novel, for which he was awarded the National Book Award for Fiction in 1976:

With the writer Gibbs in *J R*, there's no framework whatsoever. He takes the risks, but is destroyed because he has not pursued his work to the end. He is not able to sustain his belief that what he wants to do – his book – is worth doing. Once he saw solutions, the accomplishment didn't interest him. He was just too bored. That, if you like, is tragedy. Mrs. Joubert's love for him is not quite enough to get him through, as Esme's love was not enough in *The Recognitions*.⁶¹

For all the differences in execution between the two novels, they are united in their shared thematic core: the relationship between the affect of exhaustion and the impact of the extension and subsequent withdrawal of love. Esme's love gets lost in the space between herself and Wyatt, just as Amy Joubert's is lost in the space between herself and Gibbs; when Gibbs' long-lost idealism is shattered beyond repair, the energy he had once invested in his writing proves to be nothing more than a directionless, entropic force in the real world. Indeed, Wyatt's concerns about the relationship between completion and perfection in visual art bleed into the character of Gibbs and his attitude to writing. Knight writes that 'Gaddis's own understanding [of] the world

⁶¹ LeClair, p.21.

is [also] most palpably felt in terms of its incompleteness and imperfection. Implicit here is the possibility of completion, of perfection. Order follows from the pursuit of this possibility, disorder from its rejection.⁶² In this context, Gibbs might also be understood as a metafictionally self-conscious stand-in for Gaddis himself. Like the characters of *The Recognitions*, the characters of *J R* are formally and existentially suspended in states of ‘incompletion’ and ‘imperfection’: Jack Gibbs is immobilised between intellectual ambition and existential exhaustion; Edward Bast, in pursuit of one as a means of achieving the other, becomes successful neither as businessman nor composer; and Amy Joubert remains legally bound to her Swiss husband in her quest for independence because of the complicated terms of their divorce.

Where such immobility might ordinarily occasion associations with impotence, anaesthesia, or existential stasis, states of suspension prove in *J R*, as in *The Recognitions* before it, breeding grounds for unexpectedly affective consequences. When discussing the case of her divorce and the possibility of the impending battle for custody of her son, Amy Joubert identifies this set of circumstances as ‘an emotional issue’:

- Please I, Mrs Joubert I didn’t mean to make an emotional issue of it, the...
- Well it is! It is an emotional issue it simply is! because, because there aren’t any, there aren’t any emotions it’s all just reinvested dividends and tax avoidance that’s what all of it is, avoidance the way it’s always been it always will be there’s no earthly reason it should change is there? that it ever could change?⁶³

Gaddis gestures to his own concerns about the ‘waning of affect’ in the dominant financial and legal culture of the 1970s through the voice of Amy. Rather than acknowledging the inevitability of the waning of affect as a direct consequence of capitalism, however, Gaddis suggests that doing so represents a misguided effort to resist recognition of the affects and emotions associated with the discomfort of being perennially wedged between a problem and its solution. Where critics such as Jameson indicate the contemporaneity of postmodernism and the culture of late capitalism, Amy laments that that’s ‘the way it’s always been it always will be

⁶² Knight, pp.96-7.

⁶³ William Gaddis, *J R* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), p.212.

there's no earthly reason it should change'. The timelessness and ubiquity of avoidance and emotional resistance indicated in the history of the corporate world are, therefore, qualities by no means exclusive to the culture in which this novel was conceived. For Gaddis, a characterisation of capitalism on the basis of the 'waning of affect' is to both overlook and undermine the very real lived experience of those individuals who find themselves at the mercy of the 'system'.

J R's examination of the relationship between love and representation is, at its core, affected by its examination of corporate affairs. The novel's notion of artistic creation, for example, is repeatedly marred by a question of capitalist influence: is invention an act of love or an act of indulgence? This is a question with which one of the novel's many failed artists, Edward Bast, is repeatedly confronted. Davidoff informs Bast '[I] wrote a novel once myself you know, maybe a little jealous of you boys with a knack for the arts luxury I can't afford never finished it, couldn't just sit on my butt and indulge myself like that' (p.540). If the corporate world appears to cheapen affective experience by reducing the labours of familial and romantic love to legal paperwork and financial settlement, Gaddis represents the capitalist machine as one which reduces the labours of artistic and intellectual love to nothing more than a 'luxury', both created by and designed for a social elite. By mediating certain of its concerns through the lens of the corporate world, the novel forces its reader to reflect not only on what it means to write a work of this length, but what it means to consume a work of this length in the contemporary climate. In a world of perpetual movement, informational chaos, and accelerating rates of re/production, Gaddis moulds his reader in the image of Bast, who is left wondering whether the act of reading this novel is a noble undertaking or a trivial indulgence. There is, therefore, a more self-consciously ethical dimension to the reader's identification with Bast, which extends beyond Esme's and Esther's reflections of the reading process in *The Recognitions*. Not only does this quality of the novel alert the reader to his/her own extra-textual role and the impact of individual characters on his/her self-image, but it forces the reader to interrogate how his/her own social privilege impacts upon the act of reading as a form of artistic co-creation.

In order to focalise the role of the self-conscious reader in this novel, Gaddis articulates how the removal of the authorial voice originally necessitated the creation of a reader-surrogate character in *J R*:

I wanted to remove the author, thereby having the characters bring themselves and each other to life by what they say and do. [...] I have Bast resist J R's speeches. Bast is the reader's surrogate: "I don't want to hear any more about it." And J R is this insistent little voice saying, "Just one more thing."⁶⁴

Bast – the ‘reader’s surrogate’ – allows Gaddis to lull his reader into a false sense of security; without his own authorial mediation, the presence of a central character with whom we are invited to identify appeals to the reader’s natural impulse to suspend disbelief and invest in the reality of the fiction. At the same time, the characterisation of Bast is crafted specifically to prevent the text from facilitating our full participation in it; Bast is a poor substitute for the sort of three-dimensional protagonist with which literary realism accustoms its reader, given that he is rarely afforded the opportunity to speak, to think, or to feel anything in addition to the frustration and disorientation that he experiences at the hands of the frantic, the wild, and the verbose narratives of his students, colleagues, and acquaintances. In many respects, the reader is left with the impression that Bast’s narrative has been written less by Gaddis than by the other characters who populate the novel.

The idea of a ‘reader’s surrogate’ character is carefully refined in *J R* with precisely this effect in mind, since it allows Gaddis to manipulate the narrative framework and the reader’s willing suspension of disbelief without intruding upon the narrative himself. In *The Recognitions*, the reader is tentatively invited to enter into and explore the world of the novel, the dimensionality of which jars with self-conscious interventions on the part of the authorial voice. This results in a figurative back-and-forth between total but temporary immersion *in* the text and sustained periods during which the reader is forced to recognise the contrivance of the narrative mediation. In *J R*, the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of the text are not mutually exclusive, since we are invited to insert ourselves into the fictional framework of the text, but neither on

⁶⁴ LeClair, p.24.

our own terms, as an autonomous entity, nor by way of the vehicle of a character through whom we are capable of indirectly achieving agency. The novel requires its reader to stretch Bast's skin over his/her own; Bast's ideas and experiences (both internal and external) are either drowned out or interrupted by the cacophony of other voices in the text, mediated by telephone conversations, or literally occurring off the page as the text itself only ever travels between Long Island and Manhattan. Where the character with which we are invited to identify remains an object rather than agent in the narrative of his own life, a pawn in the capitalist structures that dominate the novel's fiction, the reader often finds his/her own affective investment reduced to that of Bast's frustrations.

The disorientating noise of the novel creates an environment of disembodiment in which the reader can never securely orient him/herself, and this is a facet of the fiction that Gaddis uses metafictional devices to illuminate. Jack Gibbs, for example, repeatedly employs the metaphor of entropy to characterise the process of creation, reflecting on both his own difficulties in collecting and organising material for his book and Bast's difficulties in juggling the physical and the psychological baggage of his multiple corporate and creative projects:

Problem Bast there's too God damned much leakage around here, can't compose anything with all this energy spilling you've got entropy going everywhere. Radio leaking under there hot water pouring out so God damned much entropy going on think you can hold all these notes together know what it sounds like? Bast?⁶⁵

Gibbs identifies the difficulty of holding something 'together' in the midst of sensory overload; this not only reflects the challenges both characters face – aspiring artists attempting to hold their creative aspirations in tact, while wrestling in the grip of the frenzied demands of contemporary corporate life – but, on a metafictional level, the reader's experience of interpreting the novel's textual message. The reader is tasked with collating and attempting to organise its informational chaos – the often unidentified voices, the inevitably glitchy technological interferences, and the hollow ringing of fatuous financial and legal terminology – and is confronted with 'so God damned much entropy' that in the very act of reading this

⁶⁵ Gaddis, *J R*, p.287.

novel we begin to develop parallel anxieties about containing any ‘leakage’ from these ruptures within its narrative framework.

Although Gaddis identifies Bast as the ‘reader’s surrogate’, we might also identify many of Bast’s central facets in the novel’s other characters. In addition to the characters from *J R*, there are echoes of *The Recognitions*’ protagonist, Wyatt, in Bast. Like both Wyatt and Otto, Bast remarks ‘I think I cut myself shaving a few times shaving I haven’t had much sleep’ (p. 290). Even intra-textually, Bast begins to lose what few idiosyncratic features allow the reader to identify him at the novel’s outset, by increasingly (albeit apparently subconsciously) mimicking J R’s unrefined speech patterns: ‘Yes well you see Mister Crawley this here whole, I mean this whole thing is...’ (p.442).

The instability of Bast’s own voice represents not only the codification of the artistic experience by capitalist America, but, according to Nicholas Spencer, the indeterminacy of art. Spencer suggests that however mutable the voice of Bast may be in the text, the one tenet he vocalises consistently is his opposition to the codification of the artistic process:

Despite the failure of artists in *J R*, Bast voices opposition to the twin tendencies of postmodernity[:] the standardized meanings and norms of identity [...]. J R in particular wants to believe that artistic creation and reception can be reduced to the predetermined meanings of, for example, the “nothing music” that Bast is commissioned to write (112). [...] J R wants to know if musical composition is a matter of seeing the notes or hearing the sounds, but Bast refuses to codify the process according to J R’s paradigms. [...] By refusing to acquiesce to J R’s definitions, Bast resists the logic of postmodern identity.⁶⁶

Indeed, part of Bast’s resistance to the logic of postmodern identity lies in his rejection of the idea that artistic substance can be codified by taxonomical reasoning. What Spencer terms ‘standardized meanings and norms of identity’ are deeply ingrained in Gaddis’s representation of the spoken word in the novel. By emphasising the role of dialogue, Gaddis’s novel represents an effort to communicate a primarily aural experience through a typographic medium, one which generates a deliberately disjunctive reading experience in order to illuminate the

⁶⁶ Nicholas Spencer, ‘Critical Mimesis: *J R*’s Transition to Postmodernity’, *Paper Empire*, 137-150 (p.148).

opposition between organic artistic creation and its reduction to a cheap, predetermined 'logic'. Bast, therefore, begins to function as a vehicle for metafictional reflection in the novel, representing not only the reader, but the nature of the written word, an exploration of affective transaction that is more liable to take place in the indeterminate, interpretative space between the written word and the reader.

The discord between the inherently private characteristic of the reading experience and the inherently performative quality of the dialogic experience is enacted in the text through Bast's and Crawley's disagreement about the nature of the composition that Bast delivers in written notation. Crawley criticises Bast's expectation that written notation alone could animate itself in his imagination, that with no sound to fill the space between himself and the manuscript before him, Bast's work of art lies lifeless in his hands:

[W]hen I commissioned you to compose the music for our film here of course I meant music, and to me Mister Bast music is something I hear. [...] I understood our purpose to be to call upon its powers to help evoke the majesty of another kingdom, to summon the breath of life to these fellows [...] who can scarcely be expected to share your talents, your ability to glance at these hentracks and hear those soaring tones that evoke the vastness of the plains [...].⁶⁷

Crawley suggests that unless the artist animates the textual notation for his intended audience, unless it is literally made to perform, it cannot come to life. This allows Gaddis, without the interference of an authorial voice, to illuminate the fictional self-reflection inherent in Crawley's statement: no fiction is itself capable of animating the lives of the characters contained within it, unless the reader has the imagination and the 'ability' to create that world from the 'hentracks' on the page before him/her.

Crawley's employment of the term 'evoke' suggests the idea of recalling something to the self; indeed, recollection is something that cannot by nature *be* animated by the artist, but can only be animated by the person in whom that object arouses cognitive or affective memory. There is a subtle distinction to be drawn here between what it means to signify, and what it

⁶⁷ Gaddis, *J R*, p.447.

means to evoke, and this distinction is the key to understanding Bast's resistance to the paradigms of the corporate world. To evoke is to surrender the power of the piece to the private experience of the interpreter, to allow for the flexibility and mobility of its affect according to the inflection of each individual's personal and unique catalogue of experience. What Crawley seems to desire from this project is not evocation at all, but signification: he does not demand any participation on the part of the audience, but requires that the art announce itself in its specificity, in complete and perfect terms to any who might hear it.

Bast is thereby animated in the role of the metafictional quasi-hero. He represents both reader and writer, and his role illuminates the affective transaction that takes place between writer, text, and reader. It is, perhaps, his role as artist that makes him one of the few characters who appears to *feel* in any deep sense in the novel. For Knight, this constitutes a form of romanticism:

J R is not a novel bursting with romantics [...]. Amy and Edward are perhaps the only two. [...] [B]oth are caring, sincere, and vulnerable. [...] There are, in fact, quite a number of Gaddis characters rich "in self-awareness and moral perception," and while in the larger context of the novels they may appear a minority, we make a mistake if, propelled by our postmodern ambitions, we choose to conflate, or reduce, all of Gaddis' characters into this single posthumanist type.⁶⁸

While Bast remains one of the few feeling characters of the novel, Knight notes that there are several 'rich in self-awareness and moral perception', indicating the relationship between characterological self-consciousness and the 'caring, sincere, and vulnerable' qualities both that they share and that make them such effective vessels for affective experience in this novel.

In *J R*, Gaddis explores the relationship between self-awareness and affective response through an examination of creative exhaustion, a central theme carried forth from *The Recognitions*. Gibbs' close friend Thomas Eigen is considered in the public realm to have achieved intellectual greatness at the expense of appealing to a wider readership, and, in the private realm, to have sacrificed his creative potential for menial domestic duties. In a scene no

⁶⁸ Knight, pp.120-1.

doubt intended to intertextually evoke the critical reception to his own first novel, Gaddis details an interaction between Eigen and Mister Gall:

I think it's the most important book I, one of the most important books in American literature [...]... But you must have known when you were writing it, you must have known you were writing it for a very small audience, I...
– Small audience! his feet dropped, –do you think I would have worked on it for seven years just for, do you know what my last royalty check was Mister...⁶⁹

In an ironic twist of fate, Eigen, in his state of creative exhaustion, is able only to measure his artistic achievement in the context of capitalist currency – his ‘last royalty check’ – and the recollection of this material reality causes repeated incidents of painful self-awareness for Eigen throughout the novel.

Eigen is not the only character to contend with the concern of creative exhaustion. Gibbs’ creative exhaustion – which takes the form of his failed attempts to complete a history of the player piano, another self-referential ploy by Gaddis, having wrestled with the topic himself – is explored through the image of his impotence. In a heated discussion between Jack and Amy following an evening of failed lovemaking, the conversation oscillates inadvertently between Jack’s failure to achieve perfection or completion in the act of artistic creation and failure to achieve an erection during sexual intercourse. Amy remarks ‘[d]on’t be silly, you’d been drinking and you were tired’ in a portion of the exchange that poignantly takes place immediately after a discussion about the naive and unfulfilled creative ambitions of Gibbs’ youth (p.487). Jack self-consciously crafts the parallel between his creative and sexual failures in the ensuing conversation; when Amy brushes off his complaints about his creative abilities, he asks ‘[w]ell what about last night then!’ as though his sexual performance were determined entirely by his creative abilities (p.487).

Creative exhaustion in *J R* is pursued in similar terms to *The Recognitions*, resonating in turn with Barth’s critical corrective, ‘The Literature of Replenishment’. In this novel, Gaddis demonstrates that creative exhaustion is not a product of the negation of affect, but is at once a

⁶⁹ Gaddis, *J R*, p.417.

product of feeling and a breeding ground for feeling. When Amy asks Jack what sort of person would bother to dream up the idea of creating the first flea circus, he responds ‘— maybe just somebody afraid of failing at something worth doing...’ (p.491):

God damn it Amy doing things badly because they’re not worth doing, or trying to believe something’s worth doing long enough to get it done... [...] it’s just, sometimes it’s just too God damned long to be able to keep believing something’s real... (p.492).

Jack insists on the connection between ideological belief and material establishment. For Jack, as long as you are able to convince yourself of the personal or moral worth of an idea, it is possible to provide that idea with a material reality. For Jack and Amy’s relationship, this has disastrous consequences. When Jack continues to profess his creative impotence, Amy says ‘Jack don’t you see? [...] Jack if you keep talking that way that I’ll finally believe it...?’ (p. 492). Amy, like Bast, is one of the few romantically inclined characters of the novel. She suggests that she is quick to willingly suspend disbelief, to produce a material reality from the narratives she consumes, establishing a dichotomy with a character such as Crawley, who finds it impossible to invest belief in anything that requires his own active participation. Both characters as ‘ways of reading’, however, present similar dangers: for Crawley, a narrative only signifies that which it explicitly announces; for Amy, too, the narrative animates itself, reducing her to a passive vessel through which the reality of the narrative is realised. Crawley wants to be made to believe, while Amy believes too readily, but neither character is capable of animating a narrative for him or herself. For Amy, therefore, if not for Jack, the ‘worth’ of a narrative is its ability to animate *her*, to sustain a reader’s willing suspension of disbelief for just ‘God damned long [enough] to be able to keep believing something’s real’.

The novel’s fluctuating sensibilities regarding creative exhaustion and animation allow it to perform both its own embodiment and its own self-conscious fragmentation. The text alerts its reader to this concern, by adopting for many of its characters names which reference independent anatomical fragments, bodily excretions, or diseases and maladies, from the explicit, such as ‘Whiteback’, ‘Flesch’, ‘Skinner’, ‘Hyde’, and ‘Gall’, to the more obscure, such as ‘Joubert’, a syndrome which denotes a disorder of the brain’s development. In each case,

these names fail to invoke the complete embodiment of the characters they signify, indicating instead dismemberment, deformity, or anatomical malfunction. Knight confronts the significance of the novel's names when he describes the language used to signify their 'molestation', at once a challenge to and an affirmation of the nature of their personas:

There does not appear to be a single character whose name goes unmolested [...]. In one sense, then, names here are simply that—names, signifiers lacking any essential relation to beings, the way in which Gibbs and Eigen's Mr. Grynszpan remains an unembodied creation [...]. But in another sense [...] names can foster linkages, can be quite real. [...] A name relates to the fact of a person's existence—and by extension, worth—but it does not guarantee existence.⁷⁰

Where the names previously listed indicate only the imperfect embodiment of the characters to whom they refer, Knight's inclusion of Mr Grynszpan in this list represents an additional challenge to the relationship between embodiment and linguistic signification in the novel. In the case of Mr Grynszpan, the invention of Gibbs and Eigen, the name indicates the existence of a persona in the total absence of a physical body (perhaps a reference to Herschel Grynszpan, who assassinated the German diplomat Ernst vom Rath in 1938; he was legally declared dead in absentia in 1960 after he went missing while in captivity during the war).⁷¹

Other characters, too, have lost their material essence, their private selves at the expense of their public output. One of the characters whose name best illustrates the irreconcilability of the public and the private selves in this novel is Dan diCephalis, whose surname invokes dicephalic parapagus, a rare form of conjoinment in twins, whereby one torso carries two heads. This physical state metaphorically indicates the gulf between Dan's professional and domestic lives: he rehearses this duality in a manner which he hopes will allow him to quite literally support different faces on a single torso. His rehearsals, however, attract the attention of his unforgiving wife:

⁷⁰ Knight, pp.84-5.

⁷¹ Lorraine Boissoneault, 'How a Jewish Teenager Went From Refugee to Assassin to Puppet of Nazi Propaganda', *Smithsonian Magazine* (2019) <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-teenaged-jewish-boy-went-refugee-assassin-puppet-nazi-propaganda-180971204/>> [accessed 31 August 2022].

- You’re making faces at yourself in the glass.
- No I’m, it’s called role playing industrial consultants are beginning to...
- Well stop it.⁷²

Dan’s ‘role playing’ possesses specific metafictional significance, indicating both the capital value of self-fashioning in the context of industrial consultancy and the referential function of an authorially-fashioned character in the context of the novel’s fiction. Ironically, when Dan rehearses his public persona – an attempt to reclaim both his own capital value and personal autonomy in the wake of the emasculation he suffers at the hands of his wife – the reader is reminded of the performative, and inherently fictional, nature of *both* these personas. Dan is required to perform the art of ‘role playing’ in public life in order to come alive in the corporate world, just as he is required to perform the art of ‘role playing’ on the page in order to come alive in Gaddis’s fiction. This reduces both Dan’s private *and* public personas to nothing more than ‘roles’ serving the purpose of Gaddis’s own creation.

Dan diCephalis, perhaps more so than any other character in the novel, is undermined at almost every turn, directly by his wife and indirectly by his creator, who alerts his reader to the tragicomedy of Dan’s innately futile attempts at self-fashioning throughout the novel. When he attempts to explain the significance of role playing to his wife, Ann, he begins to stutter, indicating his waning sense of resolve, and, as the conversation degenerates, Ann begins to use the terms ‘role playing’ and ‘roll playing’ interchangeably:

- Role playing, the use of role playing in teaching de, de, the decision making...
- So you’re going to stand there all night and make faces at yourself in the mirror? she said, and dropped from sight. [...]
- [...] My God, roll play... [...] Roll play.’ (p.166)

This punning on ‘role/roll’ indicates the equation of actively adopting or performing a specific character or position with turning over, laying down, surrendering to a situation, and, thus, surrendering both agency and control. Ann’s substitution of ‘role’ for ‘roll’ suggests not the active creation of a new persona, but passive acquiescence to external influence. The apparently incongruous ideas of ‘role playing’ and ‘roll playing’ also conflate in this image to evoke the

⁷² Gaddis, *J R*, p.162.

control of a writer over his character; the character is at once required to play a 'role' within the established confines of the fiction and to 'roll' over, submit to the demands of both his creator, the writer, and his audience, the reader.

Michael Wutz notes that Gaddis insisted 'that any form of art must always, by definition, be embodied art—even if the body is failing and about to lose its capacity for making signs and leaving traces'.⁷³ Just as Ann reinforces Dan's anxieties about the relationship between his physicality and its metaphorical imprint on the corporate world, Wutz identifies Gaddis's novels as exhibiting their own anxieties about themselves as 'failing' bodies; in the act of 'rolling over', they, too, might lose their 'capacity for making signs and leaving traces' in the literate world. If this novel can be seen to perform its characters' anxieties about 'rolling over' and surrendering to the capitalist climate of its time, both its form and content allow it to behave as a kind of affective interface; the anxieties, frustrations, and fears that Gaddis channels through the pitiable performances of his characters are thus shared by the reader, whose own struggle to locate him/herself among this canvas of 'failing' characters generates its own kind of affective response, which takes place in the 'inter-text' between novel and reader. Like Dan, whose futile efforts to physically remodel himself illustrate his discomfort at being reduced to a passive vessel in the context of his marriage, the reader is forced to reflect on his/her own status as a passive vessel through which the experience of Edward Bast – the reader's surrogate – is mediated.

The impact of technology on embodiment and affective investment is one of *JR*'s most pervasive themes. While Ann condemns her husband's performative facial expressions for their lack of authenticity, she relies on technology as an opportunity to perform herself, simultaneously believing that technology can enable intimacy in her classroom, while also acknowledging that her classes' technological transmission only allows for an invisible, anonymous audience which persists beyond the lens of the camera. This artificial atmosphere of intimacy requires Ann to suspend disbelief (forcing her to imagine her audience in the place of a

⁷³ Michael Wutz, 'Writing from between the Gaps: *Agapē Agape* and Twentieth-Century Media Culture', *Paper Empire*, 185-210 (p.198).

physical one), but promises, in her opinion, a genuine and sincere relationship between teacher and student.

Marshall McLuhan was one of the first twentieth century thinkers to elucidate the role that modern technology had to play in the contemporary evolution of human relationships, communication, and affective transaction. In *The Medium is the Message* (1967), he describes the relationship between the emergence of modern technologies and the changing landscape of affective intimacy:

The medium, or process of our time—electric technology—is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. [...] Everything is changing—you, your family, your neighborhood, your education, your job, your government, your relation to “the others.” And they’re changing dramatically.⁷⁴

Despite the fact that ‘electric technology’ is causing ‘patterns of social interdependence’ to undergo a dramatic shift, McLuhan concedes that ‘[s]ocieties have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication’ (p.8). This cultural constant becomes the standard against which we can measure the way modes of communication affect how we understand ourselves in relation to others as we develop from the organic to the electrical, from analogue to digital. Ann diCephalis suggests, paradoxically, that electrical technology in the classroom enables a greater degree of intimacy because it allows her to perform as though she is addressing each child individually, rather than addressing a full classroom of otherwise blank or anonymous faces:

[A]n intimate medium, it really is, because when you look into the camera you’re looking each child right in the eye [...]. – When I’m on camera, I just keep repeating to myself I am speaking to a single child. I am speaking to a single child, over and over. That’s what makes it intimate...⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p.8.

⁷⁵ Gaddis, *J R*, p.37.

McLuhan would appear to agree with Ann diCephalis. In fact, rather than viewing technology as a means of limiting interaction between performer and audience, or between teacher and student, McLuhan suggests that *classical* legacies are those that preclude involvement, while electronic technology represents a challenge to these classical frames, actively implicating the viewer in the narrative with which they would otherwise only engage from a detached, extra-textual vantage point:

The Renaissance Legacy.

The Vanishing Point = Self-Effacement,
The Detached Observer.
No Involvement!

The viewer of the Renaissance art is systematically placed outside the frame of experience. A piazza for everything and everything in its piazza.

The instantaneous world of electric informational media involves all of us, all at once. No detachment or frame is possible.⁷⁶

Gaddis, however, does not appear to be so optimistic about electric informational media's democratic involvement of 'all of us'. Ann's conviction that she is creating an atmosphere of intimacy both in and out of the classroom through the role of technology is ironised through the suggestion that the experience of a single-sided, electronically-contrived teacher-student connection is not only artificial, but entirely disembodied. While McLuhan suggests that classical structures engender a lack of involvement by their insistence on 'the detached observer' and that the frameless, 'instantaneous world of electronic informational media', therefore, can involve 'all of us, all at once', Gaddis deliberately dwells on the implications of this 'detached observer'. While promising involvement and inclusion in and out of the classroom, Gaddis's ironic conception of this 'intimate medium' highlights the role of the 'camera'; for Ann, it is as though 'when you look into the camera you're looking each child right in the eye', and yet she's not: 'the camera' lens remains a conspicuous surface which separates one from another. McLuhan suggests that 'no detachment or frame is possible' when it comes to electronic informational media, but Gaddis's imagery continually reinforces the borders and frames that place a barrier between electronic media's informational dispatcher and

⁷⁶ McLuhan and Fiore, p.52.

the recipient for whom it is intended, barriers which only become invisible once the condition of suspended disbelief has been attained.

Gaddis's concerns about mechanisation's impact not only on art and culture but on human relationships and interactions are well-documented. Wutz writes

Gaddis was fearful of the disembodiment brought about by the increasing mechanization of art and culture and the consequent march of dis-authentication. Consider, for example, the repeated focus on hands [in *Agapē Agape*], not as an index of humanness and *self*-expression, but—what is more prominent in light of the ubiquitous severance of art from the body—as a marker of mechanization, which is to say, dehumanization.⁷⁷

Ann diCephalis believes that technology and the mechanisation of education lends a greater degree of authenticity to her practice than ever before, but her presence on television screens all over the school (and, indeed, Long Island), reduces her form to little more than a two-dimensional image. In *JR*, various technologies both literally and metaphorically figure as frame-breaking devices, emphasising the cacophony of voices that have become disconnected from the bodies they once belonged to, reinforcing not only Gaddis's anxieties about art remaining an embodied form, but the force of Gaddis's own hand as orchestrator of the novel's uproar. The difficulty of attaching the often anonymous voices of this novel to the characters to whom they belong is a textual quality which *resists* the reader's suspension of disbelief; Gaddis's reader is repeatedly forced to assimilate each of the novel's individual voices and characterisations into the totality of its overarching narratological organisation, an idea which is underpinned by the lack of chapter demarcations (indeed, all 726 pages of the novel comprise one continuous chain of narrative). Only when we regard the novel in its entirety is it often possible to identify which character is speaking at any given point, usually by cross-referencing unique speech patterns or turns of phrase.

The organisation of disembodied voices within the self-consciously embodied form of the novel creates the impression of a destabilised and, thus, destabilising text-body. Knight

⁷⁷ Wutz, p.195.

connects critical approaches to the novel which emphasise its formal conditions of dis-ease with the theme of mechanisation:

Susan Strehle observes that the narrator “leaps through television lines, or jumps telephone wires,” pursuing “motion and energy inside the text” wherever it should lead him (121). The human voice, so long fettered to a physical presence, has become disembodied; originating miles away, it is the voice of someone whom the trader has probably never met, and most likely has no expectation of meeting. It is a voice, like so many others, and thus almost anonymous. And because big business cultivates anonymity, its sense of right and wrong appears less responsive to human needs than to profits.⁷⁸

Knight’s observation that ‘big business cultivates anonymity’ and that ‘its sense of right and wrong [therefore] appears less responsive to human needs than to profits’ indicates that there is a moral dimension central to the novel’s investigation into the relationship between the technology of capitalism and embodied affect. Just as Jameson suggests that the purpose of traditional realist fiction is to ‘involve’ its reader in order to secure affective investment, McLuhan suggests that electronic informational media has the ability to ‘involve’ us all by breaking down the frames which separate its audience from its content. Gaddis, however, suggests that technology, instead of encouraging its participants to actively feel, take responsibility, or engage with the moral and ethical dimensions of the ideas it communicates, is increasingly being appropriated by the capitalist system, which abuses technology in order to couch its users in a false sense of comfort. As mechanisation challenges the material reality of the human body, the resulting sense of anonymity allows an entire commercially-conditioned generation to divorce itself from personal responsibility. This new generation does not perceive the waning of affect as a threat, but as a consolation. Indeed, in some educational programs at *J R*’s high school, teachers have been removed from the delivery of the curriculum altogether, to be replaced by fictional characters recognisable from popular culture. When Smokey Bear delivers a class on the preservation of American natural resources, Hyde remarks that ‘[t]he youngsters find it reassuring [...]. – Like seeing a commercial.’⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Knight, p.89.

⁷⁹ Gaddis, *J R*, p.38.

Real proponents of the arts and sciences, living or dead, are presented in the same manner as Smokey Bear; the real and the fictional become, thus, indistinguishable, as though by projecting their images interchangeably into the classroom, the curriculum coordinators may be able to 'sell' the reality of fiction just as effectively as the reality of history. As the board tunes in to the channel broadcasting Bast's lecture on Mozart, for example, an image of Mozart appears upon the screen. This, we are told, is designed to animate historical figures, to bring them to life for the students: '– Making the artist really come alive for these youngsters. Humanizing them, the artists that is to say, motivating... / – Warm bodies...' (p.40). The effect of this image is to remind us of the invisible presence of the author presiding over the novel, as though without any sort of technological emulation of their material reality, we might not conceive of artists in their 'human' form; indeed, we might even go further and suggest that without a two-dimensional representation of their 'warm bodies', it would be possible to abandon any memory and, thus, actualisation of 'the artist' at all. In the same ironic manner with which Gaddis illustrates Ann diCephalis' ideas about the relationship between technology and intimacy, this remark has a self-effacing quality. 'Artists' cannot be realised as 'alive' by students on the basis of their art alone, and yet technology fails to represent them as such since it is unable to effectively project the three-dimensional materiality of the artist, the 'warmth' of the human body that indicates artist as organism, rather than abstract idea.

Gaddis further emphasises technology's challenge to materiality and affective transaction through his representation of Dan diCephalis, who, as the school's resident 'psychometrician', is tasked with the responsibility of identifying the 'inborn talents and intelligence' of each individual student. He does so, Knight describes, 'not by meeting with the students or their teachers, but through expensive computerized testing', further highlighting the inherent irony in his nomination to fulfil this role, considering his background as the former 'driver's education teacher'.⁸⁰ The identification of each child's intelligence via technology implies the measurement of each child's capital value, since 'extensive computerized testing' would lack the necessary components to measure artistic sensibility, creative insight, or emotional intelligence (p.108). Gaddis thus foreshadows the role of mechanisation in the arts as

⁸⁰ Knight, p.108.

one which impedes creative authenticity, stunts affective development, and fails to challenge the finer distinctions between expressive creation and commercial reproduction.

The product of this culture is J R himself, who cannot invest his belief in anything that is not made to perform on the basis of its commercial value, who misses the point of both Mrs Joubert's and Edward Bast's attempts to anchor him in the material world by encouraging him to 'just stop and look' '[a]t the evening, the sky, the wind', or to listen to Bach.⁸¹ J R believes that museum exhibits contain genuine 'stuffed Eskimos' and 'stuffed wolves' on the basis that they are made to appear real (p.475). McLuhan postulates that '[m]edia, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. [...] When these ratios change, men change.'⁸² And while Gaddis appears to be suggesting that 'man' will not necessarily change for the better, he nevertheless creates a young protagonist with whom the reader can sympathise, whose tears, frustrations, and incomprehensions feel very real, a young boy who has fallen victim to the commercial illusion of irreality. While the first impression of the novel is 'a voice that rustled' like money, capital remains for the most part invisible for J R and its invisibility only serves to reinforce the notion that his haphazard and reckless business decisions might have no real consequences.⁸³ Even after Major Hyde is held for a ransom of thirty million dollars by the Native Indian settlement from whom J R is attempting to lease land, J R is concerned for his own workaround, asking Bast only in passing 'what are you going to do then' before elaborating on his own plans to 'go on this lecture tour at these neat colleges and all' and 'write this here book and get to go on tv', a career route specifically designed for when 'you screw everything up' in the business world (p.663). Indeed, the kidnap of Major Hyde appears to be of comparatively little concern to J R compared with his disappointment that Bast was operating out of a dilapidated shared apartment, as opposed to the sleek, high-tech offices he had imagined. Many characters suffer at the hands of J R's poorly executed business enterprise, and all for a boy who wanted to play the game for the game's own sake. Knight, for example,

⁸¹ Gaddis, *J R*, p.474.

⁸² McLuhan and Fiore, p.41.

⁸³ Gaddis, *J R*, p.3.

notes that there is little evidence to suggest that something as simple as greed is motivating his drive to succeed:

[I]f greed motivates J R, one wonders where are the tangible signs? He may now be the operating genius of a multimillion dollar empire, but he acquires only a single new possession for his own use, a pair of shoelaces (475). [...] [T]here is [...] a sad hunger driving the boy, one which his parents, school, and community have done little to satisfy.⁸⁴

It is with the character of J R that Gaddis thus secures the tragicomedy of the novel, in his creation of a spokesperson for an entire generation of youth whose affective needs have not only gone unsatisfied at the hands of an increasingly technological, capital-driven society, but have gone almost entirely unacknowledged. In spite of their frustration with him, it remains the futile work of the novel's two romantics – Amy Joubert and Edward Bast – to attempt to resensitise J R to the world around him if there is to be any hope for redeeming social and moral responsibility in the new order. Indeed, although Bast is the character Gaddis designed for his reader to feel *through*, J R is arguably the character whom Gaddis intended his reader to feel most strongly *about*: whether we share in Bast's frustration, admire his tenacity, or empathise with his 'sad hunger' and the disillusionments he encounters along the way, J R is, arguably, the focaliser for the novel's ethical underpinning and tragicomic tone, and one of the primary vehicles through which Gaddis means to secure affective investment on the part of his reader.

Humour as Didacticism: The Suspension of Disbelief and 'Responsible Intelligence' in *J R* and *A Frolic of His Own*

While Gaddis's worldview often appears particularly bleak – both a concession to and a lamentation of the 'waning of affect' in contemporary culture – it is important to acknowledge J R as a fundamentally comic character. Anja Zeidler writes that '[i]n Gaddis the tragic stance will

⁸⁴ Knight, p.91.

only appear in grotesque attire.’⁸⁵ Indeed, every hypothetical tragic element in the narratives of Gaddis is subject to unexpectedly comic distortions. Zeidler’s very metaphor for the textual implications of the unsettling disjunction between tragedy and comedy in Gaddis’s novels implies that the tragic might always be present, even where it is not always immediately perceived; the situationally comic ‘costumes’ in which tragic moments appear are inherently satirical, designed primarily in order to highlight a more sober social commentary. This is key in our consideration of how affect is intensified, rather than diminished, by the presence of humour and satire in Gaddis’s novels. Charles Burnetts discusses the intersection of affect and seriousness in relationship to Jameson’s invocation of ‘surfaces’ in his commentary on postmodernism:

‘Affect theory’ [...] is grounded indeed in a revisionism concerning the ‘depth model of truth’ [...] inherited from [...] critical work [...] predicated on the revelation of hidden truths that lie behind the ‘surface’ of texts. [...] [T]he affective turn is marked by criticism of a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ in favour of taking such textual and cultural ‘surfaces’ seriously.⁸⁶

We have already observed how Gaddis invokes a variety of surfaces in order to gesture to depth, such as his employment of the imagery of masks and reflections which imply the face that lies behind. We might consider humour as yet another ‘surface’ represented in his texts, one which utilises its own superficial levity in order to gesture to the graver concerns which so often underlie it. Humour exhibits a double function in these texts; humour, as a kind of ‘grotesque attire’, can thereby be theorised as a didactic tool in Gaddis’s novels, appearing on the surface as a form of attire designed to disguise a ‘hidden truth’, while indirectly gesturing to and emphasising the original, ugly form it conceals.

In *The Medium*, McLuhan advances the idea that two disparate elements can be ‘imaginatively poised’ in order to probe informational environments in new ways.⁸⁷ Gaddis and

⁸⁵ Anja Zeidler, ‘Mark the Music: *J R* and *Agapē Agape*’, *Paper Empire*, 211-227 (p. 218).

⁸⁶ Charles Burnetts, *Improving Passions: Sentimental Aesthetics and American Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp.99-100.

⁸⁷ McLuhan and Fiore, p.10.

McLuhan may differ in their stances on technology, but McLuhan's suggestion about the provocative positioning of otherwise contrary ideas is directly suggestive of Gaddis's own investigation into the productive relationship between the tragic and the comic. Moreover, McLuhan affirms humour as an important educational tool; rather than dismissing it as an otherwise trivial quality or mood, McLuhan suggests that humour might have a more central didactic purpose in contemporary society than ever before:

Learning, the educational process, has long been associated with the glum. [...] Our time presents a unique opportunity for learning by means of humor – a perceptive or incisive joke can be more meaningful than platitudes lying between two covers (p.10).

Not only does McLuhan's argument suggest where humour and didacticism might intersect, but it resonates with more recent theory concerning the social and political function of feeling. Burnetts goes on to indicate that in poststructuralist critical discourse, emotions 'are positioned as more than unknowable, hidden phenomena, explainable only through the revelation of personal, private histories, but also as social, visible, and constructed processes [...].'⁸⁸ The suggestions that humour can be meaningful and that feeling can be constructed in the public realm are foregrounded in the work of Gaddis to highlight the relationship between satire, affect, and the voice of social responsibility. Jameson's and Hilfer's aforementioned views, for example, are largely representative of the overarching thesis that postmodernism not only lacks feeling, but lacks moral or social direction. Gaddis, however, employs humour in his novels both in a manner which encourages affective response and demonstrates a pointed awareness of the sociopolitical concerns that threaten the essence of morality in this cultural context.

Gaddis has been explicit about his admiration for the application of humour in fiction of the 'irrational'. In an essay commissioned by Denis Scheck, Gaddis admires Dostoevski's use of satirical 'humor', writing 'at every opportunity, humor takes the measure of the disharmony, incongruity, and absurdity that mark the intrusion of the irrational in the turmoil of human affairs.'⁸⁹ Gaddis illustrates this in his own fiction through his characters' disjunctive affective

⁸⁸ Burnetts, p.101.

⁸⁹ Gaddis, *Agape*, p.233.

responses to various events and occurrences; often these situationally comic moments depict the unconscious (or otherwise) efforts of characters either to trivialise the tragic, or make tragedies of the trivial. Mister Brisboy, for example, describes J R's jubilation at the financial proliferation of the funeral industry in the light of a climbing death rate in the country in fleeting conversation with Edward Bast: 'he sounded quite ecstatic to learn that two billion dollars was spent on funerals last year and you simply must tell him the death rate is climbing steadily [...]!'⁹⁰

Indeed, Gaddis has been known to categorise elements of his own work as satire. Mark Taylor notes that although Gaddis's final full-length novel, *A Frolic of His Own* (1994), was later acknowledged as a comic masterpiece, his comic intentions were clear from his first, since 'he [...] wanted [*The Recognitions*] to be a large comic novel in the great tradition'; he writes, '[s]lipping and sliding between the sublime and the ridiculous, *The Recognitions* becomes a comedy of errors bordering on slapstick.'⁹¹ Yet, the bemused critical reception that greeted the publication of *The Recognitions* was so widespread that it suggested that critics had entirely overlooked the comedy of his debut novel.

Gaddis's novels are dominated by the 'slapstick' quality of these comedies of error, but the impact of their humour is dictated by a shift from the trivialisation of the tragic to the dramatisation of the trivial. In *The Recognitions*, for example, when Otto mistakes Frank Sinisterra for his father, who has tragically lost consciousness in the hotel lobby, the plot point is not afforded the traditional denouement that we might expect of a Shakespearean comedy or romance: Otto is never made to realise his mistake, and he is thus never consciously reunited with his father.⁹² Otto is barely better off at the end of the novel than he is at the start; the lack of denouement necessarily mutes the pathetic and the bathetic in what could be construed as an equally tragic and comic situation. Although Oscar Crease, the protagonist of *A Frolic of His Own*, is much like Otto – barely better off at the end of the novel than he is at the start – the

⁹⁰ Gaddis, *J R*, p.545.

⁹¹ Taylor, p.19.

⁹² Gaddis, *Recognitions*, p.513.

impact of the novel's slapstick comedy is far greater. Instead of trying to create comedy from tragedy through his own authorial mediation, Gaddis creates ironic distance in his later works by illustrating his characters' own efforts to elevate the comedic to the tragic. For example, Oscar dramatises the extent of the injuries he sustains in his motor accident by affecting a deliberately hunched stature in his wheelchair, an effort whose tragic proportions are undermined by the fact that the injuries were a product of managing to run himself over while attempting to jumpstart his car.⁹³ Equally, when he feels his artistic talent has been undermined by Madhar Pai, Oscar files a lawsuit in an attempt to have him convicted for battery, after he presses his finger into Oscar's sternum and slaps him on the shoulder for friendly emphasis during a conversation about Oscar's play (p.344). The comedic effect of the novel's slapstick nature could not be achieved without this ironic distance; indeed, if the novel had been contrived as an exercise in traditional realism, our protagonist Oscar would be presented as a character with whom the reader might be encouraged to identify. Yet Oscar's indignation and efforts to be taken seriously by the world which he unconsciously and ironically conditions to mock him are just human enough for his misfortunes to retain their tragedy; his 'grotesque attire' – his slump, his affected dribble, his growing gut – emphasises the 'tragic stance' of his real, lived experience, and the tragedy of Oscar Crease could not be felt quite so profoundly if we did not stand apart from him in order to observe the comic misproportions of the countenance he assumes.

The slapstick comedy and comedic mistimings that later came to define *A Frolic* were already beginning to emerge in *J.R.* When the novel is building towards its cacophonous crescendo, Gibbs is attempting to negotiate the comings and goings of various businessmen, deliverymen, and dealings at the apartment in Bast's absence. When Bast returns, he greets this pandemonium; the nature of the slapstick comedy created in this scene is generated less by its chaotic corporeality, and more by its chaotic auralty:

- [...] Christ what's happened to you!
- No I'm all right what does he want, is it the bomb?

⁹³ William Gaddis, *A Frolic of His Own* (New York: Scribner, 1995), pp.18-9.

- What bomb he’s got a fistful of subpoenas for this company you’re mixed up with will you tell me what the...
- But I have to get my mail is there any mail for me?
- Roughly sixty pounds now look... [...]
- [...] if you could look in the mail for me Mister Gibbs that check before anything happens to it...
- I’ll try yes but God damn it some things I have to talk to you about Bast something I, look out wait what the hell is all this?
- You the place order the box lunches?
- Christ bring them in why not, Bast? you all right?
- Not really but if you could look in the mail Mister Gibbs could I take a box lunch?⁹⁴

If the nature of a comedic denouement and resolution relies upon its character being better off at the end than at the start of the play or novel, and the nature of a tragic denouement and resolution relies upon its character being worse off at the end than at the start, then this scene represents a pivotal moment in the novel, uniting both the tragic and comic elements of the text. Bast is, by all material accounts, worse off at the end of the novel, having lost his teaching position, being forced to reduce his orchestral composition to a piece for solo cello, and having the financial promise of the work he does both in business for J R and in music for Crawley diminish to the point of desperation at cashing a single cheque for \$200 before it bounces. And yet, Bast’s revelation at the end of the novel promises levity; the figurative burden of the numerous projects he takes upon himself in an effort to somehow succeed – whether as composer, businessman, or even thriving son in the eyes of his father – are lifted from his shoulders when he realises the triviality of such ‘success’. The dichotomy of these parallel tragic and comic denouements are unified in this single scene, in which Bast returns to the apartment after a foiled business trip of J R’s ill-design, compromised by physical illness, and on the verge of being forced into hiding by government agency representatives attempting to serve him subpoenas, only to find much-needed solace and comfort in an otherwise negligible ‘box lunch’.

Knight suggests that the aural chaos of the novel reduces sound to ‘noise’, and that where corporeal comedy and tragedy are defined by mistimings, the aural comedy and tragedy explored in *J R* are defined by ‘misunderstandings’ which ‘range from the inconsequential and

⁹⁴ Gaddis, *J R*, p.628.

humorous [...] to the serious and tragic'.⁹⁵ This scene from *J R* encapsulates the affective range that misunderstandings can occasion in the novel; what might appear to be serious misunderstandings, such as the bomb threat, are made to appear comic since the tragic climax we are conditioned to expect never arrives (the bomb threat is just another example of false information), while what might appear to be comic misunderstandings, such as the delivery of hundreds of box lunches to a dilapidated apartment J R believes to be his business's headquarters, are made to appear tragic since the manipulative, strategic acuity of J R's box lunch order is undermined by Bast's genuine need at this point in the novel for nourishment of any sort. In the cases of both comedy and tragedy, affective impact is intensified by the unexpected, and by playing with his reader's expectations of comedy and tragedy, Gaddis develops a keener didactic purpose. Indeed, Knight suggests that 'the novels' value very much resides in the fact that their parody has a limit, especially if we believe, with Nabokov, that "Satire is a lesson, parody is a game"' (p.16). If, as Nabokov believes, 'satire is a lesson', then what lesson is the humour in Gaddis's fictional works aspiring to teach?

Gaddis's novels become more explicitly comical and humorous over the course of his career. Steven Moore, one of the most prolific of Gaddis's scholars, writes that the 'pessimistic, despairing content' of this novel is not hindered, but enhanced by its 'laugh-out-loud moments'; his reading of humour in the novel is closely linked with Gaddis's more serious fictional concern of social responsibility:

[I]n interviews, Gaddis admitted that his first two novels were animated by a missionary spirit, a naive belief that a chastised but grateful culture would take his criticisms to heart and correct society accordingly. He abandoned such quixotic notions by the time he began *A Frolic*, approaching his dark materials with [a] kind of outraged hilarity [...].⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Knight, pp.95-6.

⁹⁶ Steven Moore, *William Gaddis: Expanded Edition* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p.183.

Moore reads this 'outraged hilarity' as a different perspective from which to 'correct society', one which dispenses with the naive sobriety with which Gaddis approached social critique in his earlier novels.

This 'outraged hilarity' invites a reading of Gaddis's works in which humour and the 'comic' might be politicised, a notion that defies more popularly received critical discourse regarding postmodern literature which seeks to accuse it both of adopting an apathetic attitude towards social politics and a conservative attitude towards art. While many of Gaddis's contemporaries explicitly announced their belief that the purpose of art is *not* moral or social instruction, Knight suggests that Gaddis unites the 'cartoon' and the 'real' in an effort akin to social or political polemic. Increasingly, Gaddis not only reveals his 'intuition of the world', but instructs his reader as to how this world might be properly acknowledged and navigated were we to 'live rightly' within it:

Gaddis's fiction, despite its penchant for cartoon, [is] largely a comment and satire on the world outside its covers. [...] I am not of the opinion that there are no "real" characters in these novels, even as I acknowledge that the plethora of caricatures makes us more suspicious of even those characters [...]. [W]e do well to think of this novelist's efforts as something like a reformer's desire to change the world, to make it more like something it is not. This desire is, as I have said, predicated on [...] an intuition of the world as a place that masks its purposes [...] even as these latter things are those that we must take cognizance of if we are to live rightly in the world.⁹⁷

Knight explores these ideas through the lens of metafiction, challenging the distinction between the 'real' and the 'fictional', in order to suggest that Gaddis ultimately creates a hybrid world in which 'novelist' might become social 'reformer'. Knight is not alone in this reading. Moore writes that 'Gaddis shares Dickens's faith in the novel as an instrument for social improvement and his ability to make family disputes representative of larger social disputes.'⁹⁸ While Gaddis rejects nineteenth century realism's reliance on the willing suspension of disbelief, he shares something with nineteenth century writers that many of his postmodern contemporaries do not:

⁹⁷ Knight, pp.20-1.

⁹⁸ Moore, *William Gaddis*, p.138.

the belief that the novel *can* be socially instructive; the belief not only that the world can influence fiction, but that fiction can influence the world.

Gaddis becomes more explicit in his Dickensian quest to create a novel as an instrument for social improvement, arriving at his idea for *A Frolic* in his 60s and already suffering from ill health. It was at this point that he allowed himself to be more didactic, inserting his own views into the novel, thus creating what Moore describes as his ‘greatest rhetorical achievement, the grandest display of the full range of his linguistic resources and of his willingness to push his rhetorical strategies’ (p.165). Suspecting it ‘might be his “last act”’, Moore suggests that Gaddis ‘took advantage of the occasion to work in many of his personal beliefs and biases’ (p.177). *A Frolic of His Own* thus became ‘his closing argument on “what America is all about,”’ (p.149). Moore’s apt description illustrates Gaddis’s heightened sensibilities regarding both aesthetic and moral responsibility in his final novel. Its metafictional overtones announce themselves in the novel’s central event: Oscar Crease’s lawsuit against Constantine Kiester for the plagiarism of his Civil War play, *Once At Antietam*: a frame within a frame. Law thus becomes the framework through which the moral and political power of fiction might be revealed.

Gaddis highlights the relationship between the ideal of ‘justice’ and the flawed model of the ‘law’ as the novel’s foremost metaphor for the relationship between idea and creative expression: ‘Justice? – You get justice in the next world, in this world you have the law.’⁹⁹ If the law gives form to the abstract idea of justice in the same way as fiction gives form to the abstract idea of social reform, this novel can be seen to foreground what is at stake morally, socially, and even politically when art formalises abstract content. In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant examines the formal expression of abstract ideas when she considers the relationship between truth and communication:

Intensely political seasons spawn reveries of a different immediacy. People imagine alternative environments where authenticity trumps ideology, truths cannot be concealed, and communication feels intimate, face-to-face. [...] [T]here is no communication without noise, as noise interferes from within any utterance, threatening

⁹⁹ Gaddis, *A Frolic of His Own*, p.13.

its tractability. The performance of distortion that constitutes communication therefore demands discernment, or filtering. However steadfast one's commitment to truth, there is no avoiding the noise.¹⁰⁰

The question of what it means to filter truth from noise, idea from expression, and to concern oneself with the ethics of communication, lies at the heart of *A Frolic*. It is in this novel that Gaddis achieves new heights of experimentation with various typefaces, styles of nonfiction writing, cacophonous dialogue, and lyrical description. More ambitious than its predecessors in this respect, one of the most effective techniques Gaddis employs in this novel is the inclusion of legal transcripts documenting the interactions that take place between his protagonist Oscar Crease and Mr Madhar Pai, in which not only the capital, but the moral and political difficulties entailed by the separation of idea from artistic execution are explored. Just as Berlant illustrates the impossibility of committing to truth independently of committing to the process of acknowledging and filtering through the noise which surrounds it, Gaddis explores the line of questioning which seeks to determine if and how truth can be separated from the artistic form embodying it, as well as the ethical implications of the different forms truth might take.

In her analysis of the role communication plays in political campaigning, Berlant cites George W. Bush's ambition to speak directly to his audience in order to achieve 'unfiltered' communication; Berlant points out the irony in this notion, by suggesting that without the filter, any 'truth' inherent to the communication would become muddled and corrupted by the inevitability of its accompanying noise (p.223). The legal exchange that takes place between Mr Madhar Pai and Oscar Crease (along with the numerous interjections on the part of Crease's legal representative, Mr Basie) is, in itself, representative of the flawed practice designed to identify the 'truth' in order to deliver the appropriate justice; it fails, however, on the basis of its meandering digressions and heavy emphasis on minor technicalities, which serve only to complicate and corrupt the overarching moral it attempts to extrapolate. Gaddis thus illustrates how an idea with moral and ethical purpose can fail not only its plaintiffs and defendants, but itself, having been waylaid and burdened in its attempts to decipher truth and deliver justice by those who would deliberately abuse its purpose.

¹⁰⁰ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), pp.223-4.

The impossibility of extrapolating truth from noise, or idea from expression, is central to a consideration of how Gaddis develops his reflections on the ethics of embodiment in this novel. On a more explicitly political and didactic level than in any of his previous novels, Gaddis employs a complex network of metaphors including the American Civil War, the relationship between the abstract notion of delivering justice and its practical application via the hand of the law, and a doubling of identities which extends beyond the mirror and mask imagery of his previous novels (Oscar, for example, is misreported as being called 'Oswald' in an article detailing his law case, and is embroiled in another in which he is acting as both plaintiff and defendant). In every respect, these metaphors interact in order to reveal the complexities of metafiction and frame-breaking at play in the text, recalling to his reader the literary bodies, ideological bodies, and human bodies (both real and imagined) that occupy the spaces beyond the margins of its fiction.

Gaddis's acerbic reminders to the reader that no person, no work of art, and no political ideology exists in a vacuum, are tied to an overarching critique of the capitalist system in this novel. *A Frolic* sardonically details a small town's effort to capitalise on the lawsuit of Szyrk v. Village of Tatamount by producing stuffed toys, children's books, and motion pictures inspired by the dog that has become trapped in an architect's postmodern sculpture, an instance in which a Church leader and preacher attempts to extort money from Lily's parents to ensure their dead son's safe passage to heaven, and numerous legal cases in which writers, filmmakers, and the estates of dead artists, squabble over the financial rights to the artistic expression or embodiment of abstract ideas. In his study, Knight cites Heilbroner, who writes 'the circuit of capital has no intrinsic moral dimension, no vision of art or idea aside from the commodity form in which it is embodied. In this setting, ideas thrive but morality languishes'.¹⁰¹ Gaddis uses the aforementioned examples to illustrate the manner in which embodiment may become commodified, and morality may thus 'languish'. While these examples largely dominate the text, Gaddis deliberately recalls other, more marginal examples of embodiment in order to

¹⁰¹ Knight, p.133.

demonstrate how the bodies we cannot so easily substitute for capital value are sidelined, abandoned, or removed to the invisible extra-textual realm.

Steven Moore, for example, identifies this quality in Gaddis's treatment of Vietnam in *Carpenter's Gothic*:

[Michael Herr's] *Dispatches*, like Gaddis's novel, investigates the gap between the "truth" and what really happens, specifically, the Pentagon's pathological allegiance to an official truth that has no basis in reality. The references to Vietnam in *Carpenter's Gothic* act as a grim reminder that this theme is no abstract problem in epistemology but one that in this case left "130,000 American casualties dead, maimed, and missing" [...].¹⁰²

We might say the same for Gaddis's treatment of the American Civil War in *A Frolic*, a novel in which raging debates about the appropriation of history and artistic expression among its characters reduce the human casualties of war to mere abstract ideas. By this late stage in his career, Gaddis uses a variety of frame-breaking devices, such as intertextual references to his prior novels, explicit acknowledgements of the real-world literary canon (for example, Plato, Shakespeare, and the estate of Eugene O'Neill, by whom Oscar Crease is accused of plagiarism), and a range of fictional and nonfictional textual styles in order to highlight his characters' hypocrisy and the irony in their claims to artistic originality, particularly those that are motivated by capital or financial gain.

A sense of ethical and moral responsibility is evident in these texts, recalling to the reader the 'bodies' (literary, ideological, human) that we are prone to relegate to the extra-textual margins of our own collective consciousness. Although it remains a dominant idea in his later novels, Gaddis repeatedly reminds his reader of the bodies sacrificed to the machines of commercialism in his earlier works. Knight, for example, notes that '[*J R*'s] bystanders are [...]' "real" people (296), and Gaddis's sympathies go out to them even as he deplores what has become of them, reduced to cogs in Instrumental Reason's monstrous machine.¹⁰³ In its

¹⁰² Moore, *William Gaddis*, p.140.

¹⁰³ Knight, p.122.

opposition to the monstrous machine of 'Instrumental Reason', Gaddis's fiction challenges not only our own ability to embody affective response, but to affectively identify with that which we might otherwise overlook, undermine, or even 'deplore'. Through his examination of metaphors of concealment, his investigation into the possibility of framing what's absent, and his employment of humour to gesture to the world's forgotten human forms, Gaddis's writing can be found to be profoundly political on the basis of its self-conscious acknowledgement of the affective realities that lie behind, beneath, and beyond the structures that are often used to support not only literary fictions, but the narratives that give structure to our systems of power.

In a rare speech, Gaddis addresses the similarities and crucial differences between the 'fictions' created as a product of artistic expression and the 'fictions' created as a product of political or commercial agendas:

We who struggle to create fictions of various sorts, and with varying success, must regard the state with awe, for the state itself may be the grandest fiction to be concocted by man, barring only one.

The collision course on which we as writers frequently find ourselves with this Leviathan lies in the efforts of the state to preserve and protect its own imagined version of itself, confronted by the writer's individual imagined version of what the state [...] could and should, or at least should not be.

Thus much of our fiction, going back well over a century, has been increasingly fueled by outrage or, at the least, by indignation.¹⁰⁴

At their most metafictional, Gaddis's novels represent fictions designed to reflect on the nature of the narratives manipulated by state or religious politics. Gaddis presents us with novels which do not filter the truth from the noise, in which everything is present, and nothing is absent. Just as Berlant describes Bush's ambition to forego the filtering process altogether, Gaddis creates narratives which simultaneously mimic the interwoven threads of fact and fiction in political propaganda while challenging the reader to acknowledge them as such. Gaddis achieves this, ultimately, by threatening the reader's natural inclination to suspend disbelief through his/her self-conscious disclosure of fiction's contrived construction; the bodies typically dismissed by

¹⁰⁴ Gaddis, *Agape*, p.223.

the agendas of political narratives haunt Gaddis's novels to the extent that their presence can be felt even in their invisibility or lack of textual representation.

Gaddis, therefore, explores state fictions in the same manner as we might interpret Jameson's reading of literary realism: narratives that encourage their readers or audiences to willingly suspend disbelief, to feel *through* a conduit (whether character or spokesperson) in order to understand something about ourselves or our place in society. It is only through the willing suspension of disbelief, Gaddis suggests, that these dangerous fictions can be preserved, as they thrive on their reader's ability to affectively invest in the reality they present directly. In order to provoke his reader to question these narratives, Gaddis does not, however, present narratives altogether void of affect. Instead, he creates often deliberately ugly, difficult, immature, or selfish characters, those that naturally resist our readerly identification because we do not *want* to believe that we might be able to identify with them, and develops our ability, over the course of the narratives, to feel *for* them, while allowing them to exist independently. Michael Dirda writes that *A Frolic of His Own* is 'a superb comic novel', precisely because 'you begin by laughing at the characters and end by caring for them deeply.'¹⁰⁵ Gaddis demonstrates to his reader that we can learn to challenge political propaganda, to develop a sense of moral and social responsibility, by learning to feel for those with whom we aren't immediately encouraged to identify and to question the authority of those with whom we do.

Ultimately, Gaddis succeeds in creating fictions which do not require the willing suspension of disbelief in order to be fully experienced; it remains crucial to highlight the notion that the bafflement and frustration that readers frequently experience when encountering Gaddis's novels are not by-products of their difficulty, but central experiences in the worlds Gaddis creates. These legitimate textual responses constitute affective evidence that in a society characterised by cynicism, corporate gain, and the relegation of truth to fake news and false narratives, we can still allow ourselves to undergo often uncomfortable personal and social developments; we can still be made to feel about others; and we can, therefore, still influence social change:

¹⁰⁵ Gaddis, *A Frolic of His Own*, back cover.

The purpose [of Gaddis's works] is not to baffle or frustrate the readers (as some allege) but to force them to participate in the activity of the novel, [...] to experience rather than merely observe the complications that drive Gaddis's characters to distraction.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Moore, *William Gaddis*, p.183.

Chapter Two

The Embodiment, Excavation, and Exhibition of Affect: William H. Gass and The Text-as-Body

No critic has yet been able to articulate William H. Gass's philosophy of fiction better than Gass himself. A long-standing philosophy professor, serving at both Purdue University and Washington University over the course of his academic career, Gass is just as prolific a nonfiction writer as he is a fiction writer; only a handful of years following his death, he is now often better remembered for his academic essays than his novels and short stories. Gass's nonfiction played an important a role in shaping the landscape of American postmodern fiction; he established himself as a leading voice in the arena of American literary scholarship in 1970 with his collection of essays, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*. In this work, he anticipates the features of fiction that would later be thought to dictate a shift from modernism to postmodernism in theory and practice. In 'Philosophy and the Form of Fiction', he coins one particular term that would come to represent a foundational pillar of literary postmodernism:

There are metatheorems in mathematics and logic, ethics has its linguistic oversoul, everywhere lingos to converse about lingos are being contrived, and the case is no different in the novel. I don't mean those drearily predictable pieces about writers who are writing about what they are writing, but those [...] in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed. Indeed, many of the so-called antinovels are really metafiction.¹

Metafiction as a practice, of course, long predates this definition offered by Gass. Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*,

¹ William H. Gass, *The William H. Gass Reader* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018), p. 655.

Gentleman, and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, for example, illustrate an awareness of their own fictional construction. It was not until Gass in 1970, however, that the specific features and function of this alert storytelling style were formally considered and, following which, some of American postmodernism's most notable and experimental metafictionalists began to emerge.

Gass's dismissal of self-reflexivity for the sake of self-reflexivity is articulated clearly in his disapproval of 'drearily predictable pieces about writers who are writing about what they are writing'. It is evident that Gass's original understanding of metafiction was fundamentally different from the characteristics that would come to define critics' apprehensions of metafiction in the decades to follow. Ihab Hassan, for example, would disregard literary postmodernism on the basis of its 'sterile, campy, kitschy, jokey dead-end games, media stunts, and parodic conceits'; these narrow appraisals ultimately determined the postmodern novel's inward-looking reputation and helped to secure its debasement.² These critical associations are in part responsible for its reputation for 'mere thematic representation of content', a denunciation famously extended by Fredric Jameson.³ And yet, Gass's own execution of metafiction was to be quite different.

Far from anticipating the sterility with which the form was later associated, Gass viewed the novel as a productive, living organism, one which he examined frequently in his nonfiction essays from the perspective of Cartesian dualism. Watson L. Holloway, one of the most prolific Gass scholars, writes that the 'metafictional impulse is to do again [...] things that have been overly done so that there can be an end to them as conventions and clichés and so that new life can be breathed into them.'⁴ In 'The Book as a Container of Consciousness', Gass illuminates this notion by attending to the physical and figurative structures of the novel,

² Ihab Hassan, 'Globalism and its Discontents: Notes of a wandering Scholar', *Profession* (1999), 59-67 (p.60).

³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p.37.

⁴ Watson L. Holloway, *William Gass* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), p.25.

framing the physical book as material body and the essence of the text as mind or consciousness:

I have said, how bodylike the book is, how mindlike the text [...]. Dog-earing can do no damage to the significance of the sign, according to the Cartesian division; nor can the cruel reader's highlight pen clarify obscurity, a check mark change a stress, or an underline italicize a rhyme. This bifurcation of reality can be made persuasive, yet does our experience allow us to believe it?⁵

While Cartesian dualism would have us believe the essence of the text might always remain self-sufficient, existing autonomously from its book-bound body, Gass suggests that 'our experience' might not allow for so straightforward a dualistic division. No matter how desperately we might cling to the prospect of our cerebral potential existing somehow separately from the crude matter of our flesh and bones, it remains that these faculties are brought into union by others, through our relationships with them. Gass thus argues that the same is true for the novel. While its creator might have intended to communicate a specific message, the book's body and the text's consciousness 'find their union in the awareness of the reader' (p.788). In other words, the reader is in part responsible for the construction of the text; his/her resistance to this 'bifurcation of reality' is manifest in his/her compulsion to co-create the 'message' of the novel.

If we consider that, in Gass's theory of the novel, the reader is primarily responsible for bringing the novel form to life through uniting material body and textual consciousness, then it stands to reason that Jameson's view of literary postmodernism as an age in which feelings can no longer be attached to bodies, but begin to exist as 'free-floating', 'impersonal' entities, ought be corrected.⁶ Gass's understanding of the novel form as a living, organic being, not inwardly self-realising but relationally actualised, implies that Gass's contribution to literary postmodernism has been either misappropriated or altogether disregarded. What devolved into a 'drearily predictable' practice began its early life as a rich theory of the novel form which emphasised the nature of its embodiment and its affective capacity, as well as the relationship

⁵ Gass, *Gass Reader*, p.787.

⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.16.

between itself as an artificial construction and the social and cultural realities of the material world it inhabits.

The question, therefore, of how the material body/book might performatively embody the soul/text is not the only question at the heart of both Gass's theory and fiction; he is equally concerned with the question of how the novel's structure might not only compel its reader to co-create its content, but alert its reader to his/her role in the process of unifying these binary facets of its being. In 'The Man Who Spoke With His Hands', a tale from Gass's last publication, *Eyes* (2015), the protagonist – Professor Art Devise – primarily communicates through bodily gesture; his underlying thoughts and feelings can only be interpreted by others when the subtle motions of his hands performatively embody his true conscious essence. In the context of his later stories, Professor Art Devise is the centremost figure through whom Gass filters his broader commentary on the nature of art; the contrivance implied by the surname 'Devise' as well as the instructive purpose of art implied by Arthur's role as 'Professor' alerts the reader not only to art as an often calculated, artificial construction, but to the manner in which art may be made to be didactic (a notion emphasised by one of the story's key hooks, 'TEACHERS LOVE THE IGNORANT').⁷

Inside the front leaf of this story, Gass positions a diagram from William James's *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), which details a human hand connected by various dotted pathways to different centres of the brain (p.198). In this text, James ruminates over the idea that 'our entire feeling of spiritual activity, or what commonly passes by that name, is really a feeling of bodily activities whose exact nature is by most men overlooked.'⁸ We might consider Gass's theory of the novel through the critical framework of James's study of psychology: what we take for cerebral activity, might in fact be physically determined; what passes for textual content, might in fact be structurally conditioned. In order to suggest, therefore, that the reader is responsible for bringing body/book and consciousness/text into some kind of union, we must

⁷ William H. Gass, *Eyes* (New York: Vintage Books, 2016), p.208.

⁸ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover Publications, 2021), pp.301-2.

ask a further question: if what is often taken for ‘spiritual activity [...] is really a feeling of bodily activities’, then where and how do these bodily activities organically originate? In ‘The Man Who Spoke With His Hands’, Art’s own insistence that his ‘hands have become an instrument of God’s’ indicates the power dynamic at play not only between the reader and the novel, but between the writer and his own creation.⁹ The only way he is able to explain his bodily activities is through divine intervention, indicating his self-conscious awareness of existing at the mercy of a higher power (in this case, Gass himself, controlling and manipulating the fates of the many characters he creates).

Although the metafictional overtones are strong in Gass’s later works, the characters of his early stories and novels, including *Omensetter’s Luck* (1966) and *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife* (1968), also exhibit an awareness of themselves as fictional constructions whose physical and textual structures might be thought to embody textual consciousness. In the first section of this chapter, I examine how, in *Omensetter’s Luck*, Gass explores the relationship between body and consciousness through the relationship between literary structure and content. Taking in turn his principle characters, Israbestis Tott, Henry Pimber, and Jethro Furber, I explore the literary modalities (narrative, lyric, and dramatic) that Gass employs in order to structurally and self-consciously embody their states of mind. I begin by considering how the characters of *Omensetter’s Luck* are positioned as both active and passive characters within their respective literary spaces, embodying their experiences while simultaneously at the mercy of their often involuntary performances of them, a notion which is reflected in each of their relationships with the title character. I go on to consider how the protagonists of his subsequent works, such as Babs Masters (*Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife*) and Ella Bend Hess (‘Cartesian Sonata’), explore their relationships with God/the writer; this sense of self-awareness emphasises these characters as artificial constructions so that they come increasingly to be viewed as metaphors for the textual space itself, performing at the behest of their creator. Gass gradually shifts his emphasis from the marriage of textual consciousness and form to the marriage of textual consciousness and the physical book; as opposed to the stylistic plurality of *Omensetter’s Luck*, Gass takes a more structurally experimental approach in *Willie Masters’* by emphasising the physicality of

⁹ Gass, *Eyes*, p.210.

the page in relationship to the physicality of the text it contains, exploring how functions such as typeface, font size, photography, illustrations, and footnotes affect the reader's compulsion to unite book/body and text/consciousness.

In the second portion of this chapter, I examine how Gass employs the theme of excavation in his seminal novel *The Tunnel* (1995), a work which took almost thirty years to complete. Through further emphasis on the 'flesh and bones' of the text, I argue that Gass reveals his own methods of self-conscious construction in order to illustrate how affective response might be both generated and manipulated in his reader. I begin by providing close readings of passages in which Gass employs the metaphor of excavation, distinguishing between images of soft tissue and hard tissue, and mortality and immortality, which demonstrate not only the organic qualities of the textual artefact, but how partial evidence can be deliberately misappropriated. *The Tunnel's* protagonist, William Frederick Kohler, is the textual mouthpiece for the political possibilities of narrative, occupying the role of psychologically deranged professor of history and closet fascist at an unnamed American university, who is in the process of composing an introduction to his partisan account of Hitler's Germany. This section of the chapter emphasises more forcefully Gass's concerns about the relationship between narrative and political propaganda, impacting upon his treatment of the narrative construction of 'victims' and 'villains' and how a reader's psychological bias towards identification with the victim of a story can be affectively commandeered in order to produce a particular outcome. Through this novel's self-conscious construction of an inherently flawed and unreliable narrator, Gass effectively reveals the narrative function of forms of propaganda through his narrative's ability to manipulate and subvert the affective response of his reader.

The final portion of this chapter examines Gass's treatment of the theme of exhibition, which, I argue, he recruits in order to illustrate how the reader might not only increasingly come to view the text as an autonomous, organic entity, but might be alerted to his/her own participation in, or co-creation of, the text via his/her affective interaction with it. Through an examination of a selection of Gass's short stories and later works, I argue that the metaphor of exhibition self-consciously invokes the feeling body in relationship to the physical spaces in

which it operates, in order to establish the relational and social dimensions of affect, as well as specific affects attendant to the experience of self-consciousness itself. I trace, through these textual examples, allusions to the relationship between the private and the public, the domestic and the political, and the personal and the professional, in order to establish exactly how the self-consciousness of his texts seeks to reorient their readers; in doing so, I demonstrate that these apparent dichotomies are not so clearly cut, since where familiarity might often engender reader-character identification, distance does not always engender objectivity, and instead leaves room for emergent affects such as disgust, dysphoria, and vertigo.

‘The Book as a Container of Consciousness’: Cartesian Dualism and Embodied Affect in *Omensetter’s Luck*, *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife*, and Selected Stories

After numerous edits and drafts (the first of which was stolen and conspicuously adapted into a stage play by the perpetrator), *Omensetter’s Luck* became the first novel of Gass’s to be published in 1966. This novel purports to tell the story of Brackett Omensetter, ‘a wide and happy man’, who arrives in the small fictional town of Gilean, Ohio, to the disapproval of the town’s inhabitants.¹⁰ The narrative is loosely told from the indirect perspective of three characters: Israbestis Tott, now an old man attempting to recollect the mysterious set of circumstances surrounding Omensetter’s arrival to and departure from the town many years ago; Henry Pimber, the local man who let a dilapidated property to the Omensetter family, whose mysterious death prior to the Omensettters’ departure arouses the curiosity and suspicion of the local townsfolk; and Jethro Furber, the town’s unsympathetic Reverend, whose disdain for Brackett Omensetter influences a large proportion of the novel’s narrative. These distinct narrative consciousnesses are formally explicated through three stylistic modalities: ‘The Triumph of Israbestis Tott’ in the style of narrative, ‘The Love and Sorrow of Henry Pimber’ in the style of lyric, and ‘The Reverend Jethro Furber’s Change of Heart’ in the style of the dramatic.

¹⁰ William H. Gass, *Omensetter’s Luck* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), p.9.

While its title indicates Omensetter as its protagonist, the novel increasingly forces its reader to question whether this is really a narrative *about* what the townspeople describe as ‘Omensetter’s luck’, or a series of narratives which reveal something about the consciousness of each section’s focal character. Holloway suggests that Gass experiments with the conventions of history and legend to achieve this effect:

Gass takes [Robert A.] Georges’s “open-ended” view of legend in the writing of *Omensetter’s Luck*: that history is ambiguous; [...] the *past* of a legend may be “*either* recent *or* remote and *either* historical *or antihistorical*; and while a legend is set in the *past*, it might really be conceived to be *in* and *of* the *present*.”¹¹

Each character’s distinctive consciousness represents one specific viewpoint in the context of a novel investigating multiple perspectives. The challenge Gass presents to his reader is the unification of these three textual consciousnesses within the overarching structure of the novel; in the act of completing the unification process, however, we necessarily insert our own consciousness into the framework of the text, uniquely influencing the message that emerges. If Tott is narrative, Pimber is lyric, and Furber is dramatic, then what are we, the reader? How do we frame these characters through our relationship to the novel, and how does this illuminate the manner in which these characters frame Omensetter and their own stories? Does our own self-conscious involvement in the text affect our capacity to feel for its characters? An answer to these questions lies in a consideration of the relationship between form and content; Gass employs metafictional techniques to illuminate how the structure of the text might be disassembled and reassembled, allowing for the narrative authority of his characters to be challenged, undermined, and, ultimately, understood.

In ‘The Triumph of Israbestis Tott’, partial elements of the story of Brackett Omensetter are relayed with hindsight. Tott is already an old man by the time we meet him at the opening of the novel’s collective narrative, and his unreliability as unofficial town historian and storyteller is made manifest by the ironic self-contradictions which plague the anecdotes he tells to new

¹¹ Holloway, pp.25-6.

inhabitants and children of the town. This section's title in relationship to its opening passages has the same disquieting effect of the novel's title in relationship to its overarching narrative; while this portion of the novel appears to concern Tott, he is neither the subject nor the object of the novel's opening clause: Sam Peach, auctioneer, is guiding the opening narrative, and attention is drawn instantly to 'Missus Pimber', recently-deceased wife of Henry Pimber, and her 'things'.¹² From the opening sentence, Tott's currency as both agent of his own story and valued member of the community is undermined by his own distinct absence from it. This raises a number of questions about the correspondence between framing and relationality in *Omensetter's Luck*: what is revealed by Tott's agency in his own narrative? And how do the qualities of the narrative style and structure reflect ways of thinking about framing and frame-breaking and, subsequently, challenge the conventional relationship between writer and reader?

One of the first indications that the narrative's structure is designed to wittingly undermine Tott's belief in his own authority is the fact that his textual consciousness is perspectively childlike. In *Cinema 1* (1983), Gilles Deleuze's explication of visual framing in its relationship to perspective resonates semantically with the vocabulary of metafiction:

[T]he frame is related to an angle of framing. This is because the closed set is itself an optical system which refers to a point of view on the set of parts. Of course, the point of view can be – or appear to be – bizarre or paradoxical: the cinema shows extraordinary points of view – at ground level, or from high to low, from low to high, etc.¹³

So, too, might we think of Tott's section of the narrative as a kind of 'closed set'; Gass employs a 'low to high' perspective in order to frame Tott as a naive and vulnerable character in spite of his age and experience. Within the opening few paragraphs of the novel, Tott's formal re-entry into the world following an unnamed illness is relayed in the context of a child's first experience outside of the home:

¹² Gass, *Omensetter's Luck*, p.1.

¹³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1* (London: Continuum, 2005), p.16.

It was his first excursion. He had tottered about in the yard for several weeks despite the high grass, and for three months he had practiced in his bedroom and in the living room and halls, but he was going to try himself in earnest now.¹⁴

The low to high perspective is indicated by the threat of ‘the high grass’, as well as the vocabulary of inexperience suggested by the fact that this is Tott’s ‘first’ excursion, that even after ‘he had practiced’ and ‘tottered’, he remained keen to ‘try himself in earnest’. When Tott is revealed to be an old man, a character who values himself on his knowledge and experience of his home town, bathos is generated by the narratological perspective, which illuminates the apparent divergence between Tott’s self-image and his lived reality (and, on a broader level, between Tott’s textual consciousness and the formal structure of his narrative).

Throughout, Gass relies on metafictional techniques to frame – and then self-consciously expose – the true nature of Tott’s perspective. Gass’s plural approach to narrative framing is further illuminated in Deleuze’s consideration of the function of secondary and tertiary frames:

[T]he powers of Nature are not framed in the same way as people or things, and individuals are not framed in the same way as crowds, [...] so that there are many different frames in the frame. Doors, windows, box office windows, skylights, car windows, mirrors, are all frames in frames.¹⁵

Tott is lost in his own frame: he is frequently depicted as an individual drowning in a crowd; the physical and metaphorical ‘broken’ frames of the windows and doors of long-dilapidated buildings in his hometown pose a challenge to the otherwise ‘square and firm’ properties of the Pimbers’ house as it remains in Tott’s memory: ‘A crowd was gathering by the barn. [...] The main door hung by one hinge. Windows were broken and the darkness jagged. The house, however, was square and firm [...]. The sound of the crowd grew as he came slowly along.’¹⁶ This framework captures Tott lagging, the illusion of his own authority shattered with the

¹⁴ Gass, *Omensetter*, p.1.

¹⁵ Deleuze, p.15.

¹⁶ Gass, *Omensetter*, p.2.

passing of time like the windows and doorways he encounters, now, lost in the cacophony of the crowd.

Deleuze's concept of secondary and tertiary frames greatly influences Tott's understanding of his own sense of memory and consciousness, as well as the reader's ability to accurately investigate the divergence between his memory of the town during which time Omensetter was an inhabitant and the objective reality of the present moment. At one time, Tott recalls, his sense of autonomy was determined not only by his authority as a storyteller, but by his ability to physiologically form these stories: 'I know these stories. Most of them are mine, my mouth gave each of them its shape' (p.6). There exists in young Tott a union of the consciousness in which his stories reside and the framework constituted by his body, his mouth, and his voice, which bear them into the material world. As an old man, however, Tott's conscious recollection and historicisation of the town in which he has spent his entire life is represented by a separate structure than that of his body, one to which he no longer has access: 'Sometimes the walls in Israbestis' room closed at their corners like a book and would not let him remember' (p.6).

The image of the closing book reflects this chapter's structure; it provides only a fleeting glimpse into Tott's mind: 'Tott—you've shut your house. [...] You can't forget, and you don't dare remember' (p.28). The reader's quest to uncover the corruption of Tott's memory through the subsequent sections of the novel allows Gass to expose 'history' as pure narrative. While Tott, as one of the 'old leaves' of the town, makes an effort to establish himself as a fountain of historical truth – 'I remember Omensetter coming' – he betrays the fragility of his own memory when he concedes that '[t]he child had died. But the child had survived' (p.16). When all narrative is subjective – vulnerable to the threat of unreliable memory and liable to imaginative embellishment – all history is necessarily transitory. What emerges as the single verifiable fact of Tott's chapter is that 'Omensetter was a wide and happy man. [...] At least he had that straight', and this is only verifiable in the context of the novel as a whole, because it is mysteriously echoed by the anonymous third-person narrator in the novel's subsequent section (p.9; p.31).

Alex Rosenberg explains how the relationship between narrative and history not only engenders affective consequences such as individual emotional suffering, but extends its potential to human suffering on a social scale:

[A]cademic history isn't the history that we consume to explain individual human actions and the lives they constitute, [...] fateful choices and their all too often tragic consequences. That's because nowadays academic history is rarely narrative. [...] [M]ost history is narrative, narrative is stories, and stories are chronologies stitched together into plots we understand better than anything else, or at least we think we do. The [...] science that reveals why we view the world through the lens of narrative also shows that the lens not only distorts what we see but is the source of illusions [...]. [...] [I]t's the nature of the most compelling stories [historians] tell that's responsible for the trail of tears, pain, suffering, carnage, and sometimes extermination that make up most of human history.¹⁷

Tott's unreliable memory of Omensetter's departure from the town following the illness of his newborn child is alerted to the reader by the two distinct possibilities afforded by his own single perspective: 'The child had died. But the child had survived.' The possibility of the child's death is later revealed to be a 'tragic consequence' of the stories woven by the Reverend Furber, which the townsfolk find 'compelling' enough to constitute the truth. Tott's compulsion to organise his memory via 'chronologies stitched together into plots' is not only indicative of his own impulse to attempt to 'understand' the past through a lens which, in fact, 'distorts' the past, but emerges as a characteristic of the narrative form which is designed to stretch the reader's own impulse to do the same thing.

Tott's conspicuous lack of agency as an authoritative storyteller presents a challenge to the reader; his stories are neither reliably true nor 'compelling'. When Tott finds himself thwarted in his attempts to strike up conversations with other adults at the local auction, he takes to talking to a small boy. At the mildest show of interest on the boy's part, Tott ventures to tell the story of Omensetter, '[n]ow Brackett Omensetter, though –' but the boy repeatedly interrupts: '– I know it'.¹⁸ By professing existing knowledge of the tale, the boy diminishes the

¹⁷ Alex Rosenberg, *How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019), pp.2-5.

¹⁸ Gass, *Omensetter*, p.23.

value of Tott's narrative. On the topic of the name of 'Kick's cat', for example, the boy intervenes with a tale of his own: 'I know a kid got his name erased and he went away forever' (p.23). This emphasises the transience of the myth of Omensetter's luck; without form to give them shape, the content of these tales will be surrendered to the relentless passage of time. In Tott's present day, the story of Omensetter, like Tott himself, no longer has currency. It also reflects the state of the novel more broadly: for oral histories to be sustained, an expectant ear is required, just as, for the novel to be sustained, an expectant reader is required. In this sense, the relationship between Tott and the young boy in this chapter enacts the significance of the reader's role in uniting the novel's form with its content.

Tott, however, agonises over the possibility of losing narrative history, and the cost of surrendering history to academia, which might well cost 'individual human actions and the lives they constitute', however easily it might otherwise be distorted, embellished, or corrupted in the process of being handed down. Thinking of the young boy, Tott laments, 'how would he learn his history now? Imagine growing up in a world where only generals and geniuses, empires and companies, had histories, not your own town or grandfather, house or Samantha—none of the things you'd loved' (p.27). For Tott, it is the individual's history that gives the collective history of a society affective significance; purely academic history might profess to lay claim to factual truth, but without the eminently mutable and corruptible personal narrative, 'love' might be lost from the memory of that society altogether.

The relationship between oral historian and community, therefore, is reflected in the relationship between writer and reader. This relationship is further strained in Gass's description of an interaction during which the boy's imagination begins to encroach upon, influence, and challenge Tott's story, a risk the writer, too, runs when the otherwise 'closed set' of the novel begins to interact with the material world it purports, in part, to represent:

I bet he knew when trains got to Chicago Illinois.
 He knew when trains did anything. [...]
 I bet. I bet he could fly.
 Of course he couldn't.
 He could. [...]
 Say, who knows about this cat, boy, you or me?

Tell me how he knew about trains and stations.
You going to listen or talk? (p.24).

The attenuation of Tott's command over his own narrative mimics the manner in which a writer's authority is diminished by the interpretation imposed upon it by his reader. No matter how clear a message a writer/storyteller believes he may be conveying, he always runs the risk of having it misinterpreted, redirected, or altogether corrupted, and of losing his credence as a consequence.

While 'The Triumph of Israbestis Tott' depends upon looking back to the past in order to demonstrate how a narrative might gain or lose currency in the material world according to the disparity between its form and its content, Henry Pimber is the first character whose perspective provides contemporaneous insight into Brackett Omensetter's time spent in Gilean. In this section, Gass explores the lyrical style in a poetic lamentation of regret on the part of Pimber, a fragile man who, in equal part, envies, misleads, and admires Brackett Omensetter, and who, realising that he can never be content to surrender to the ebbs and flows of nature in the same manner as Omensetter, resolves to kill himself. Although the tale of Henry Pimber is framed by a different period of time and different literary modality, it is clear that, like Tott, Pimber is not the agent of his own story; the forces of nature that have typically supported Omensetter's easy-going nature have diminished Pimber's influence in the material world: 'The wind flowed around him as around a rock, and Henry didn't feel his voice was strong enough to salmon such a current' (p.65).

Pimber's fragility is emphasised both by his physical body and the shape of his narrative. His first encounter with Omensetter is described in the metaphorical context of physical injury: 'he received the terrible wound of the man's smile. His weakness surprised him and he leaned heavily against the door' (p.35). Later, Pimber is stricken with a real injury – lockjaw – when a bullet rebounds into his face, following the haphazard shooting of a fox outside of the house Omensetter rents from him. The realisation that he has betrayed Omensetter's wishes by killing the fox, coupled with the fact that Omensetter's beetroot poultice appeared to have been responsible for saving his life, forces Pimber to undergo a

complete spiritual transformation, one which is explored, again, through the physical body: 'he sometimes thought his pain might simply be the pain of his shedding, since it often seemed that he was sloughing like a snake the skins of all his seasons'; 'Henry was newborn' (p.52). In spite of the disparity between their respective literary forms, Tott and Pimber share a childlike fragility; they are adults reversing their journey through time, reverting to the innocence and vulnerability of the 'newborn'.

In spite of the similarities between Tott and Pimber, however, the diminishment of Pimber's agency is explored primarily through his relationship with the novel's title character. While Pimber suggests that 'Omensetter was no better than an animal', Omensetter's framing by the natural world indicates the power of his innocently simplistic order of experience (p.45). Omensetter's body as an instinctive expression is deemed by Pimber to be a product of his being in the present moment: 'did he move so easily because, despite his size, he wasn't fat inside; he hadn't packed the past around his bones, or put his soul in suet' (p.46). This is an aspect of Omensetter's existence that Pimber particularly resents, since he (like Tott) so often finds his experience of the present moment contaminated by the influence of his memories and his childhood conditioning. When he determines to kill the trapped fox, Pimber remarks that 'he did feel strange. He had sensed his past too vividly. [...] He knew, of course, it was Omensetter he had struck at' (p.47). Throughout this novel, Omensetter both unconsciously limits the agency of those he comes into contact with, while falling victim himself to the narratives and experiences that others project upon him.

Pimber, therefore, might be thought of as one of three characters designed to represent 'the reader' in relationship to a text, and Brackett Omensetter to represent the text itself; the relationship between Pimber and Omensetter illustrates not only how the reader might impose his/her own meaning onto the text, but how the reader might directly impact the self-consciousness of the text. By striving towards an epistemological understanding of the rhythms of Omensetter's natural, organically-existing being, Pimber not only complicates his understanding of Omensetter, but complicates Omensetter's understanding of himself. Once Omensetter 'knew' that he possessed 'the secret of how to live', it becomes his undoing – he

relies solely on his luck when the life of his sick son is placed in jeopardy, refusing to call for Doctor Orcutt: 'We've got to trust my luck' (p.261). And yet, the self-consciousness with which Omensetter is afflicted is determined precisely by those who impose it upon him, just as the very self-consciousness the postmodern novel appears to exhibit is equally dependent upon a reader imposing that condition upon the text.

Omensetter's prime candidacy for illustrating a text's developing self-consciousness is reflected in his doomed journey from innocence to self-knowledge, in his transformation from unconscious animal to reasoning human. In *A Discourse on Method* (1637), Descartes illuminates what it means to exist as a rational being:

I observed that I could suppose that I had no body, and that there was no world nor any place in which I might be; but that I could not therefore suppose that I was not; [...] it most clearly and certainly followed that I was; while, on the other hand, if I had only ceased to think, although all the other objects which I had ever imagined had been in reality existent, I would have had no reason to believe that I existed; I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material thing; so that "I," that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body [...].¹⁹

In 'The Book as a Container of Consciousness', Gass challenges Cartesian dualism in relationship to literary theory by citing the union of textual consciousness and the material body of ink and fibre as realised through that of the reader. What we see illustrated in Omensetter's transformation from animal to human is not a transformation from union to duality, but a transformation from self-union to relational contingency. The 'Cartesian position' – that 'animals are merely machines without feelings' – is indicative of the Gilean townsfolk's attitude towards Omensetter; he cannot be conscious of his own existence while his nature is not inclined towards doubt.²⁰ Henry Pimber muses that '[i]f Brackett Omensetter had ever had the

¹⁹ René Descartes, *A Discourse on Method* (London: Everyman's Library, 1965), p.27.

²⁰ W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Introduction: The Rights of Things' in Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), ix-xiv (p.ix).

secret of how to live, he hadn't known it.'²¹ When he first arrives in the town, he is animal, not human; he is fully immersed in himself and the nature of his own being. When his state of being is ultimately corrupted by human knowledge, he not only becomes human in the sense that he begins to doubt, but the union of his body and his consciousness depends upon the narratives of others.

John Berger illuminates our seemingly contradictory association with animals by suggesting that '[a]n animal's blood flowed like human blood, but its species was undying [...]'. This – maybe the first existential dualism – was reflected in the treatment of animals. They were subjected *and* worshipped, bred *and* sacrificed.'²² Berger's proposal that humankind's complex relationship with animals is reflected in our treatment of them – our desire to both dominate and submit to the natural world – is indicative of the attitudes of awe and disdain that Gilean simultaneously develops towards Omensetter. The community's admiration for the fact that '[h]e's happy, ain't he, the sonofabitch' quickly develops into suspicion and envy when it recalls to the town's inhabitants that their own lives appear to be lacking in comparison: 'That Omensetter had a secret no one doubted now. Gossip was continuous, opinion split, the atmosphere political.'²³ Berger attempts to explain the intensity of this reaction by suggesting that 'the animal seems to [man] to enjoy a kind of innocence. The animal has been emptied of experience and secrets, and this new invented "innocence" begins to provoke in man a kind of nostalgia.'²⁴

Unlike Descartes, whose sense of being is determined by his understanding of himself as 'a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking', Pimber asserts that 'Omensetter [had] lived by *not* observing—by joining himself to what he knew' in a state of pure

²¹ Gass, *Omensetter*, p.73.

²² John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), pp.6-7.

²³ Gass, *Omensetter*, p.51.

²⁴ Berger, p.12.

and natural innocence.²⁵ Once the town's inhabitants project their narratives onto Omensetter as totalising knowledge, he not only loses his ability to join himself to what he knew before, but loses his ability to know himself through his body; Omensetter's pure being becomes ultimately corrupted by *others'* efforts to unriddle his mysteries:

Omensetter cast interest like a shade. It was as though one could, by knowing when his beans went in or when he cut his firewood for washing, hoed, or simply walked a morning in the oak and maple woods like a tree among the trees himself, learn his secret, whatever his secret was, [...] for as Doctor Orcutt was so fond of pointing out, every measle was a sign of the disease (p.48).

While both Omensetter and the 'book' can achieve union of consciousness and material body by being 'realised' through the framework of a third party, that union comes at a cost: the object of interpretation becomes irreversibly corrupted and loses its ability to realise its own unity.

Tott's, Pimber's, and Furber's perceptions of Omensetter are not only limited to the respective literary frameworks Gass uses to structure them, but indicate how their own sense of singularity or duality influences their understanding of others. Through H. O. Mounce's defence of Cartesian dualism, the distinction between our own mind and body, and the mind and body of others, is revealed through a consideration of affect and bodily sensation:

I may feel pain [which] may certainly be linked to bodily phenomena. For example I may writhe and groan. But if a doctor asks me to describe how my pain varies in intensity, he is not asking me to describe my behaviour. [...] The phenomena are distinct. [O]ne can be in pain without exhibiting pain behaviour and exhibit pain behaviour without being in pain.²⁶

Mounce argues that the behavioural idiosyncrasies that manifest as a consequence of pain cannot be equated with the conscious experience of pain itself, and cognitive empathy would require us to believe that the same must be true for others. Gass confounds Mounce's otherwise easy defence of Cartesian dualism by indicating that this is not often the case; when we take Tott, Pimber, and Furber not only as different representations of literary expression, but different

²⁵ Gass, *Omensetter*, p.69.

²⁶ H. O. Mounce, 'On Dualism', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 91, No. 1034 (July 2010), 401-407 (p.403).

representations of the role of the reader, we can see how their inability to cognitively empathise or identify with Omensetter prevents them from being able to perceive his body and mind as separate entities.

In *Against Empathy* (2016), Paul Bloom addresses the relationship between psychological essentialism and empathy and its subsequent impact upon the way we read others' minds and bodies:

[P]eople usually think of themselves and those close to them as possessing a special human essence. But [...] [w]e might see members of certain groups as having not fully realized their essences, as primitive and childlike. We might deny them an essence altogether, seeing them as nonhuman, perhaps as objects or things. And in the worst case, we can [...] attribute to them a subhuman essence and hence think of them as akin to dogs or rats. [...] In laboratory studies, researchers have found that people are prone to think of members of unfamiliar or opposing groups as lacking emotions that are seen as uniquely human, such as envy and regret. We can see them as akin to savages or, at best, as children.²⁷

As readers, too, Gass suggests, we are compelled to unite the textual consciousness of a novel with its book-body; in the context of the narrative, however, Tott's, Pimber's, and Furber's meditations on the bestial instinct and innocence of Omensetter's body and behaviour as a reflection of his insensible consciousness betrays the attitude of mis/recognition that the reader brings to his/her judgement of the novel's characters. Part of the challenge of this novel is to confront the question of whether we do to Tott, Pimber, and Furber as Tott, Pimber, and Furber do to Omensetter. Certainly, the framing of the narrative seems to indicate this: as Bloom argues, our instinct, when faced with an individual or group with whom we cannot identify, is to 'see them as akin to savages or, at best, as children.' While Tott and Pimber are framed as unsophisticated and childlike, when we meet Jethro Furber – Gilean's anti-hero, whose perspective dominates the majority of the novel's narrative – a violent, hateful man who sets himself the task of turning the townspeople against Omensetter, he is revealed as one we might be inclined to describe as 'savage'.

²⁷ Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy* (London: Penguin Random House, 2018), pp.202-3.

Despite being the title character, Holloway argues that '[i]t is not Brackett Omensetter at all, of course, but Jethro Furber, a wordmongering frontier minister, who is the leading voice (and therefore, for Gass, the hero) of the work.'²⁸ He is not only positioned as the central character of the work for his 'wordmongering', however; Saltzman suggests that 'Reverend Jethro Furber dominates the novel because he most consistently carries forward Gass's principal theoretical considerations regarding the nature and function of literary art'.²⁹ Furber is thereby positioned not only as the antithesis of the simple Omensetter, but as a metaphor for the potential of the language of the novel form. Throughout the novel, much is made of their vastly different minds and bodies: Furber is calculating while Omensetter is innocent; Furber is 'tiny' while Omensetter is referred to as the 'big one'; Furber is 'neat, stiff, pressed' while Omensetter is 'foolish, dirty, careless'.³⁰ Furber's 'change of heart', however, begins to see him developing the same qualities that Saltzman uses to describe Omensetter: 'uninhibited'; developing the 'ability to exist in the world without abstracting it'.³¹ This change is not only textually enacted by the cessation of Furber's otherwise 'polished and professional' monologue at the end of the novel, but by his final descent into 'illness', which sees him growing to resemble the man he once feared and despised: 'Furber's body shook with the spasms of uncontrollable laughter, his mouth gaped and his chest heaved as if he were Brackett Omensetter himself'.³²

Furber's dramatic monologues are illustrative of the power of the language of the novel; he is a Reverend whose responsibility is to his congregation, and yet, as Saltzman suggests, he is 'in love with the form of his sermons, not with the audience he addresses'.³³ He has a local reputation for being entirely preoccupied with form at the expense of content. When Furber

²⁸ Holloway, p.18.

²⁹ Arthur M. Saltzman, *The Fiction of William Gass: The Consolation of Language* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p.25.

³⁰ Gass, *Omensetter*, pp.6-7; p.7; p.40.

³¹ Saltzman, p.26.

³² Gass, *Omensetter*, p.302.

³³ Saltzman, p.46.

attempts to convince him that Omensetter has been engaging in practices associated with dark magic, the local blacksmith remarks that ‘you’re always sort of making mountains, you know, making mysteries out of molehills’.³⁴ Saltzman argues that ‘Furber is an artist who abuses the artist’s power to modify the consciousness of his audience. He reduces the wonder of Omensetter to a symbol to be manipulated inside a fiction’.³⁵

Furber is, therefore, the most convincing representation of both the reader *and* the writer in this novel. The manner in which Gass fluidly shifts between first and third-person to expose and highlight the fickle nature of Furber’s conflicting feelings concerning Omensetter alerts the reader to the power form can exercise over content. For instance, when Furber is contemplating the relationship between prelapsarian innocence and Omensetter’s simple existence, he asks

[w]ere men to love unmindful, below the beasts [...] [W]atching Omensetter I sometimes think I’m trembling on the lip of understanding it. [...] For whatever Omensetter does he does without desire in the ordinary sense, with a kind of abandon, a stony mindlessness that makes me always think of Eden.³⁶

For Pimber, it is Omensetter’s lack of self-knowledge, and for Furber, it is Omensetter’s lack of desire that secures his Edenic innocence. However, this ‘stony mindlessness’ that indicates Omensetter’s purity is also a symptom, for Furber, of his bestial nature. This instance is one of only a handful of moments of relief from Furber’s otherwise overbearing suspicion that Omensetter’s possession of the ‘secret’ of living contentedly is suggestive of his dark and evil essence.

When Furber confronts Omensetter following his sermon, the narrative appears to slip in and out of third-person narrative and free indirect speech, the rhythm and repetition of which emphasise Furber’s trance-like conviction that Omensetter is a ‘lesser’ being. Furber indicates

³⁴ Gass, *Omensetter*, p.179.

³⁵ Saltzman, pp.48-9.

³⁶ Gass, *Omensetter*, p.155.

that Omensetter's 'body' was that of 'a beast, a cow, exactly: wary, stupid, dumb; yes, as he thought back there was nothing in his manner that could be ascribed to an animal higher' (p. 143). When he begins to unconsciously mimic these physical mannerisms following the church service, therefore, Furber becomes increasingly preoccupied with the notion that his own body has become inhabited by Omensetter's soul:

Looking back he realized he had unwittingly mimicked Omensetter's habitual manner [...]. If this was a consequence of simply shaking hands, it made him a kind of deadly infection. I am inhabited, Furber said. Ah god, I am possessed. [...] Why do you inhabit me, he cried, why do you possess my tongue and turn it from the way it wants to go? (p. 143).

Furber indicates his fear of the metaphorical contamination that might be bred by physical contact with Omensetter, but his greatest fear by far is that Omensetter's consciousness, in inhabiting his body, might also corrupt his language; as Saltzman suggests, language is Furber's most powerful tool, and when – albeit falsely – Furber suspects that Omensetter has a magical ability to 'possess [his] tongue and turn it from the way it wants to go', it forces us to reflect on the relationship not only between body and mind, but between verbal form and content.

Jacques Derrida explores the impact of the animal gaze on a person's conscious awareness of their own mind and body in his essay 'The Animal That Therefore I Am'. With a particular emphasis on the affect of shame in relationship to the self-consciousness of the naked state, Derrida explains why we feel exposed – and, thus, are made self-aware – under the gaze of another animal:

The impropriety [*malséance*] of a certain animal nude before the other animal, from that point on one might call it a kind of *animalséance*: the single, incomparable and original experience of the impropriety that would come from appearing in truth naked, in front of the insistent gaze of the animal [...]. It is as if I were ashamed, therefore, naked in front of this cat, but also ashamed for being ashamed.³⁷

Furber certainly exhibits the essence of *animalséance* described by Derrida. Furber indicates that his 'shame' is anchored in the metaphorical exposure of his 'private parts'; for the

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More To Follow)', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Winter 2002), 369-418 (p.372).

Reverend, his 'private parts' are the host of negative affects that define his experience of the world. Furber's self-awareness is a vessel through which his troubled conditions can be highlighted by Omensetter, the 'animal' of the novel, whose existence is blissfully bereft of them:

Who hadn't envy of the animals? He had, certainly, his share. They were the trunk of his life—these envious feelings. [...] Pride—confessed. Arrogance—confessed. Error—confessed. Anger—confessed. Sorrow, despair, failure, shame—confessed. Contrition, oh yes that—confessed. He might as well have advertised upon his sign: This Sunday: Your Well-loved Preacher's Personal Parts Exposed [...].³⁸

It is only because Omensetter is so unaffected by his nature that Furber is made to be so self-conscious of his own. In this moment of exposure, we are afforded insight into Furber's most true, 'naked' self. This not only heightens Furber's self-conscious investigation into the relationship between his own body and his mind, but is instrumental in affecting his 'change of heart'. Just as the preacher deliberately channels the metaphor of the exposure of his physical 'private parts' to reflect upon the shadows of his conscious and subconscious mind, Gass reveals to the reader the manner in which the dramatic form of Furber's monologistic narrative equally reflects the exposure of his psyche.

In 'The Book as a Container of Consciousness', Gass describes how writers must be sensitive to the manner in which mood might be 'soothed or inflamed by immediate feeling', a notion which is not only reflected in Furber's attitude toward Omensetter, but one which directly bears upon the relationship the reader builds with him.³⁹ As Bloom suggests, our ability to empathise or identify with the emotions of another is determined primarily by our cultural or social proximity to that person. The townspeople's inability to acknowledge Omensetter as a cognisant and feeling being stems from their incapacity to relate to his experience; furthermore, we – as readers – mimic this impulse from within the confines of the narrative. In the light of Furber's dismissal of Omensetter as both savage and childlike, why is the reader so inclined to judge Furber by the same standards? Like Furber, we, too, are vulnerable to the notion that

³⁸ Gass, *Omensetter*, pp.136-7.

³⁹ Gass, *Gass Reader*, p.792.

‘whatever we desire [...], we call good, and whatever we are fearful of and loathe, we insist is bad’ (p.793).

Gass deliberately plays with the reader’s preconditioned cognitive and emotional responses by casting Furber as a character we are inclined to fear and loathe: his fantasies of sexual deviance, his relentless pursuit of Omensetter’s downfall, his performative arrogance and condescension are all qualities designed to make him unsympathetic to the average reader. Gass conditions his reader to believe that Furber is ‘bad’ as long as we fear and loathe him. However, Gass not only emphasises Furber’s fabrications and exaggerations as artificial constructions of his own making, but alerts the reader to the contrivance of the overarching fictional process through the metafictional structures he employs to contain them. Thinking of Furber in these terms allows him to be reduced to a metaphor for the textual space itself, self-consciously performing at the hands of his creator. His sense of embodiment reflects directly upon the relationship between text and book, content and form:

Heavenly Father, You may call our soul our best, but this, our body, is our love. He lifted one of Henry’s legs and let it fall like wood. How simply is our fondness for it guaranteed: we can’t live outside of it, not as we are, not as we wish. So this is someone else’s body now.⁴⁰

Furber’s relationship to his own body reduces him to a literary abstraction – a structural referent – at the same time as it emphasises his state of being as organic and animate. In contrast with the lifeless limbs of Pimber’s corpse, Furber’s corporeal vibrancy – in spite of his loathsome mind – bears a likeness to our own. In this manner Furber becomes lifelike, just proximate enough to our own experience of embodied being that he reflects something of ourselves back to us in the same manner that Omensetter reflects something of Furber back to him.

Just as Omensetter’s animal nature causes Furber to develop a sense of self-consciousness, Furber’s self-consciousness causes Gass’s reader to become aware of the impact and effect of his/her own gaze. In conversation with Carole Spearin McCauley, Gass remarks

⁴⁰ Gass, *Omensetter*, p.272.

Omensetter is a reflector. People use him the way they use their gods or other public figures—like ink blots—and upon them they project their hopes and fears. Who cared to know Omensetter? And when their hopes were dashed, they blamed the image in the mirror. So of course Omensetter is a mystery and he had to be left, in a sense, blank. Readers are now doing to him exactly what the characters in the book did.⁴¹

Omensetter is not the only ‘reflector’ in this novel, however; more so than Omensetter, Gass uses Furber as a fictional departure point for his investigation into the godlike relationship between a writer and his characters. While Gass reminds his reader that it is not for Furber to judge Omensetter, he equally reminds his reader that it is not for him/her to judge Furber, however tempting it might be; judgement ought be left to God, Gass’s most oft-used stand-in for the writer himself. The ironic self-consciousness of the novel allows the reader to recognise that our role is one which naturally invites us to impose our own narratives, judgements, and affective preconditions upon the fictional content of a tale; in doing so, we both bring its characters to life and confine them to the impressions of our own biased perspectives. Furber is, therefore, not simply a referent for the textual space, but a referent for the reader too.

The relationship between Cartesian dualism and textual self-consciousness explicitly informs Gass’s subsequent works, *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife* (1968) and a sequence of novellas collected under the eponymous novella’s title *Cartesian Sonata* (1998). Many of the single-author studies of Gass’s works (including Holloway’s and Salzman’s) were written prior to the publication of *Cartesian Sonata*, and their readings of *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife* are thus informed only by the works that pre-date it (and a selection of pre-published extracts from *The Tunnel*). This is significant because Gass did not consider his work on *Willie Masters’* to be entirely successful:

I was trying out some things. [...] Most of them didn’t work. [...] [M]y ability to manipulate the spatial and visual side of the medium was so hopelessly amateurish [...],

⁴¹ Carole Spearin McCauley, ‘William H. Gass’, *Conversations with William H. Gass*, ed. Theodore G. Ammon (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 3-12 (pp. 6-7).

and the work also had to go through so many hands, that the visual business was only occasionally successful [...]. Too many of my ideas turned out to be only ideas [...].⁴²

Nevertheless, the first novella of Gass's later collection, 'Cartesian Sonata', helps to illuminate some of the more radical 'ideas' in *Willie Masters*; while it represents a stark formal departure from the lyrical late modernism of *Omensetter's Luck*, it retains that novel's central concern with the relationship between body and mind, and book and text.

Willie Masters and 'Cartesian Sonata', unlike *Omensetter's Luck*, do not simply rely on character to enact different ways of writing and/or reading; these later works' emphases on the animation of text as a self-consciously fictive character and of writer as a self-consciously godlike narrator not only complicate the reader's capacity to suspend disbelief, but directly implicate the reader in the conscious co-creation of the narrative. Linda Hutcheon illuminates this idea in her seminal study of metafiction:

As creator, the writer has always had only limited control over the particular responses of his reader. [...] [T]he work of art has no existence in and of itself; only through the imagination and understanding of the reader is it made to live. [...] Metafiction explicitly adds the dimension of reading as a process parallel to writing as an imaginative creative act.⁴³

Gass deliberately experiments with the notion of the writer's 'limited control' over the text, when so much of its interpretation and analysis depend upon a – potentially – ill-equipped reader. Indeed, the metafictionality of 'Cartesian Sonata' places specific emphasis on authorial consciousness in relationship to the 'imagination and understanding' of the reader by revealing the writer/narrator of its first chapter to be a clumsy, godlike entity, repeatedly questioning and correcting the composition of his own words, paragraphs, and sentences:

⁴² Thomas LeClair, 'William Gass: The Art of Fiction', *Conversations with William H. Gass*, 17-38 (p.22).

⁴³ Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), pp.150-1.

You see how little pride I have, to let you watch me fumble. I could have sent that wretched word away and written what I wanted, you'd have been no wiser; but I haven't got that kind of courage anymore, the courage of the liar.⁴⁴

What emerges from this self-conscious narration is a more specific meditation on the writer's own struggle to unite the body and the soul of the text. The 'fumbling' narrator of 'Cartesian Sonata' echoes Gass's own concerns, those of both his literary criticism and his earlier fiction: only the 'soul' of the text can remain a fixed entity, while the form that gives the text structure is vulnerable to revision or appropriation. The narrator remarks, '[t]he plot, which is the soul, as Aristotle says, remains the same. Only the body undergoes a change' (p.16). This notion is routinely and self-consciously enacted in episodes during which the narrator organises and re-organises the structural transmission of information for particular poetic effect: 'There is a film of dust on everything. It is August. The roads are dry. No. It is August. The roads are dry. There is a film of dust on everything' (p.23).

While the writer can attempt to revise, correct, and edit the body of his work in an effort to infallibly communicate its core message, what Gass's clumsy narrator often fails to recall is the key role the reader plays in imposing his/her own interpretation on the prose: 'Now the careful reader will have noticed— / Bless me. The careful reader. I had forgotten him' (pp.16-7). As Gass determines in his literary criticism, it is for the reader to unite the body and soul of the text, and – as Hutcheon suggests – there is little the writer can do to control a reader's response and ensure that the body and soul of the text are united in the manner the writer had intended. The narrator of 'Cartesian Sonata' acknowledges this: 'My god, remember I'm supposed to think and feel and see for everyone—imagine!—that's the true author's business' (p.21). Not only does the writer have a responsibility to think and feel and see for his characters, but his 'business' is to anticipate the thinking, feeling, and seeing of his reader.

The narrator of 'Cartesian Sonata', therefore, is ultimately forced to concede that the text, as an autonomous entity, bears the burden of both writer and reader, operating – to borrow

⁴⁴ William H. Gass, *Cartesian Sonata and other novellas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), p.3.

Hutcheon's term – in 'parallel' with one another, remaining as proximate to one another as they are to the text, while never coming into full contact. Gass animates the text independently of the writer and the reader through the metaphor of snakeskin:

[I]nstead of a judgment, they are an injunction: writer, reader, weigh everything twice, make everything count, and separate yourself from your writing reading the way the snake sheds its skin, while bearing in mind, too, who you reader writer are—you are the slough, and your common text is the sly shining snake (p.25).

The narrator subverts the reader's expectations of the snakeskin metaphor, by indicating not the text as the 'slough' of the writer or reader, but the reader and the writer as the 'slough' of the text; establishing the text as 'the sly shining snake' affirms not only its autonomy but its incorruptible essence. Once the text is born into the world by the writer, the writer becomes dispensable and is consequently shed; so, too, does the reader's interpretation of the text represent something that becomes both increasingly separate from it and, thus, *inanimate* in relationship to the text's own mutably organic form. In both cases, the metaphor illustrates how the writer and the reader inform the physical structure of the text; the writer initially bestows form upon an idea, while the reader imposes his/her own framework upon the finished product.

The idea of language as both a challenge to and a referent for the physical body of a flawed yet transcendent writer was borne forth from Gass's earlier novella, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*:

Imagination is its medium realized. You are your body—you do not choose the feet you walk in—and the poet is his language. He sees his world, and words form in his eyes just like the streams and trees there. He feels everything verbally.⁴⁵

In this work, Gass creates the indomitable 'Babs', described by Saltzman as a 'lyrically minded babbler' who is first and foremost 'a textual entity, a wordbody formed as cunningly, lovingly, and articulately as ourselves', whose 'composition is actually superior to ours [since a] figure of

⁴⁵ William H. Gass, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2014), unpaginated.

language will easily outlast one of flesh, and what's more, the verbal body is incorruptible.⁴⁶ Babs alerts the reader both to herself and to the text as artificial constructions of Gass's; not only this, but her sexual relations with fictional men force the reader to reflect on his/her own relationship with the book s/he holds.

Since the publication of *Willie Masters*, Gass's contribution to the literary theory of self-consciousness has become so well established through both his fiction and his nonfiction that Hutcheon borrows his ideas in her analysis of challenges to reader-character identification in *Narcissistic Narrative*:

In self-conscious parodic literature, the reader-character identification circuit is often broken. [...] By reminding the reader of the book's identity as artifice, the text parodies his expectations, his desire for verisimilitude, and forces him to an awareness of his own role in creating the universe of fiction. Reading and writing share those two significantly human paradigmatic functions. [...] In the beginning *is* the word, as William Gass too has remarked, and the word creates a world through the co-operative activity of the sender and the receiver of the text.⁴⁷

Hutcheon emphasises Gass's own conviction that the relationship between the word and the world is one which relies as much upon the reader as the writer. This function is central to *Willie Masters*, which Holloway explains here:

[T]he text calls out to the reader directly, inviting confrontation and interaction, setting up a colloquy between reader and text, or, as Larry McCaffery states, the engagement of the reader in a "dialogue about the book he is reading."⁴⁸

Indeed, the reader is not necessarily encouraged to identify with Babs – the novella's narrator/protagonist and referent for the textual body – but confronted by the manner in which s/he most frequently interacts with a text: one, in a long line of inadequate suitors, who – for Gass – will exploit the textual body for his/her own needs and purposes. Revealingly, Hutcheon

⁴⁶ Saltzman, p.106.

⁴⁷ Hutcheon, pp.139-40.

⁴⁸ Holloway, p.75.

indicates how the reader-text relationship is highlighted in a self-conscious work by using imagery semantically akin to Waugh's dichotomy of frame/frame-break:

The critical and the creative meet in their fiction as they do in all narcissistic texts. *The reader, like the writer, becomes the critic* [...]. He is both drawn intramurally and pulled extramurally, into and through the looking glass. Reading is sequential and open to memory and association; criticism is usually systematic and reasoned discourse.⁴⁹

What Waugh describes as 'revealing' the framework of a text is a process which simultaneously draws the reader 'intramurally' and pulls the reader 'extramurally'. For Jameson, it is the quality of being 'pulled extramurally' that precludes reader-character identification and, thus, what are deemed to be the fuller affective possibilities of literature. When the framework supporting the structure of the text is revealed as a man-made construction, it draws the reader out of the three-dimensionality of the world contained within it; and yet, as is so often the case with the metafictional novel, that world within the frame strengthens its resolve to reach out of the frame and draw the reader back in. The text will find new ways to figuratively touch the reader, a concept which is not lost on Gass, who exploits visual images and photography of Babs' body in a bold effort to re-establish the three-dimensionality of the textual space in spite of its highly contrived form.

Babs, too, self-consciously muses on the affective implications of a lover's relations with a body for whom s/he supplies the three-dimensionality. She remarks that, as an object of love, she is deprived not only of her subjectivity, but her form; through the act of 'imagination', the lover imposes form upon her for his/her own 'excitement':

But I don't understand what excites them in the first place. It's nothing about me; it's not *me* they love. [...] I think, imagining, for them, is like a babyhood disease, embarrassing to have past ten [...]. I feel sometimes as if I *were* imagination [...] – imagination imagining itself imagine.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Hutcheon, p.144.

⁵⁰ Gass, *Willie Masters*, unpaginated.

It is telling, too, that as an object of love, Babs indicates that she is deprived even of her objectivity; 'it's not *me* they love', she states, suggesting that her form as an object is entirely conditioned by the eye of the beholder. Once she is appropriated by another's 'imagination', she loses all sense of autonomous structure. This is paralleled in this novel's exploration of the relationship between reader and text. Saltzman writes '[t]hat the pages of *Willie Masters*' are frequently ringed by drinking glasses that have rested upon them gives further evidence of the insensitivity of past suitors.'⁵¹ Indeed, a curious impression of dysmorphia arises from the textual interchangeability of paper/page and flesh/body, in examples such as 'there'll be rings on my belly where men have set down drinks'.⁵² While the contrivance of the text's experimentation pulls the reader extramurally, s/he is directly implicated by explicit parallels drawn between his/her interaction with the hard structure of the book itself and Babs' named-and-shamed lovers' interactions with the metaphorical structure of her physical body.

The text takes great pains to assert itself as an autonomous form, one which continues to exist organically and independently of any reader. Holloway affirms that '[a]s a book on the shelf, she is immortal (First). The reader, like a lover, finishes his coital relationship, but Babs is still there, used, lonely, but not dead'; 'she is the novel and therefore superior to the mortal reader in every way'.⁵³ Babs/the text is the 'sly shining snake' of 'Cartesian Sonata', attempting to exploit her own form in an effort to elicit an affective response from her reader:

Oh, I'm the girl upon this couch, all right, you needn't fear; the one who's waltzed you through these pages, clothed and bare, who's hated you for her humiliations, sought your love, just as the striptease dancer does, soliciting male eyes for cash and feeling the light against her like a swelling organ. Could you love me?⁵⁴

Babs explores the range of affective possibilities available to her lover/reader: fear, desire, love. And yet, what is less often remarked upon is Babs' own affective range. Here, alone, she

⁵¹ Saltzman, p.109.

⁵² Gass, *Willie Masters*', unpaginated.

⁵³ Holloway, p.81.

⁵⁴ Gass, *Willie Masters*', unpaginated.

describes the organic experience of hatred and humiliation, affirming herself/the text as a living being as capable of animate feeling as any reader.

At times narrated directly by Babs, at times punctuated by Gass's own voice, which filters through the prose in order to point a finger at his ill-equipped reader, *Willie Masters'* not only implicates the reader and challenges his/her responsibility to a text in the act of bringing it into an organic, living state, but illustrates how these roles might be reversed, affirming the text as an autonomous affective entity capable of avenging its misuse. Towards the end of the novella, Gass appears to emerge from the text himself in order to poke fun at the reader he has been taunting throughout:

You've been had, haven't you, jocko? you sad sour stew-faced sonofabitch. Really, did you read this far? puzzle your head? turn the pages this and that, around about? Was it racy enough to suit? There wasn't too much plot? [...] But, honestly, you skipped a lot. Is that any way to make love to a lady [...]? (unpaginated).

Yet, for the complex interplay of ire, mockery, and frustration directed towards the reader in *Willie Masters'*, Gass himself remains a sympathetic party, a reader as much as he is a writer, experimenting with the body of the book in an effort to recall to the reader the reverence and respect the effort of the text affords. Gass recalls the times he defaced his own books with annotations, underlining, and accidental staining. For Gass, the writer, these habits in readers of his own prove trying, but for Gass, the reader, these habits have held their own charm, transforming the book from an object of 'cupidity' into an object of 'love':

The book contains a text. A text is words, words, more words. But some books want to be otherwise [...]. They want to be persons, companions, old friends. And part of their personality naturally comes from use. The collector's copy, slipcased and virginal, touched with gloves, may be an object of cupidity but not of love. I remember still a jelly stain upon the corner of an early page of *Treasure Island*. [...] I scribbled many a youthfully assured "shit!" in my earliest books, [...] but such silly defacements keep these volumes young, [...] treasures from a reading time when books were, like a prisoner's filched tin spoon, utensils of escape, enlargements of life, wonders of the world – more than companions; also healers, friends. One is built of such books, [...] adventures undertaken in the mind, lives held in reverential hands.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Gass, *Gass Reader*, p.791.

As aggressively as Gass defends his philosophy that art ought bear no moral responsibility to the 'real' world, it is nevertheless the case that self-conscious art, in particular, fundamentally relies upon engagement with those in the 'real' world in order to, as Holloway suggests, 'acquire life'; language, he argues, can acquire life by 'pointing back to that world of things', but it takes a reader – one of the very 'things' that make up this world – to realise the relationship between a fiction's form and content, body and consciousness.⁵⁶

'Fascism of the Heart': The 'Soft' Structures of Expression and Repression in William H. Gass's *The Tunnel*

[...] my rotting body rotting beneath its rotting clothing, my modest bones blushing at what they will reveal, and what the world would understand if it understood bonespeak, since the soft glands have another language—liver, lungs, brain's pale blossom, or the heart—for hearts don't break, what a misconception! hearts burst, or leak, or sag, or sour on themselves, mainly hearts seep, but bones, bones sliver, bones crack, bones snap, lungs are breath and spirit, but bones are regimen and order, and when I lie there in my hole I imagine that's what's rising to my buried surface, I'm becoming bug, turning turtle, and instead of lung or liver, then, hanging like a washrag from a rib, my threaded bones will control, conceal, and skeletize my consciousness—me in my words—so if they, those explorers of the dirt, were to dig me up one day while searching for a city, they'd find a jaw, some teeth, and well inside its grin, my ill humor like an atmosphere, a final fart of feeling.⁵⁷

The Tunnel (1995) remains William Gass's most explicitly metafictional novel. It tells the story of Professor William Frederick Kohler as he struggles to compose an Introduction to what he believes to be his own recently completed masterpiece, *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*. Over the course of the novel, as Kohler grapples with the personal and political complexities of emotional and intellectual expression, his internal narrative guides the reader into the rich world of his consciousness, through childhood memories, romantic affairs, his experience of marriage and fatherhood, and, notably, his apparent participation in Kristallnacht in 1938. Masquerading as an introduction to his academic work, *The Tunnel* comes to represent the private counterpart to Kohler's public persona.

⁵⁶ Holloway, p.76.

⁵⁷ William H. Gass, *The Tunnel* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012), p.635.

Watson Holloway suggests that ‘Gass has done what he has announced that he wants to do in this novel. He has made readers identify, even if just a little, with the narrator’.⁵⁸ This, itself, is no easy feat, as Kohler is a narrator with a clear fascist bias. Nevertheless, as the repressed beliefs and memories that rise to the surface of the text oscillate between the personal and political, so, too, do the reader’s affective responses oscillate between empathetic identification and disgust. As Holloway argues, ‘[i]f we have been led to find Kohler attractive, we must now also see him for the “shit” that he is’ (p.95). This choice phrase resonates strongly with this novel, which is deeply concerned with the structures and functions of the human body and the detritus of the mind; it is the novel’s engagement with what is structurally soft, perishable, and mutable, I will argue, that engenders the reader’s complex affective engagement with both the novel’s narrator and its self-reflective textual substance.

In the final few pages of the novel, Kohler muses on what I will refer to as the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ structures of the body and imagines what they might communicate in the absence of his soul or spirit. As the soft tissues of the body rot away, Kohler describes the skeletisation of his consciousness; the bones of his body are the only evidence of Kohler that remains, communicating in a manner he describes as ‘bonespeak’. Having recently studied a selection of Gass’s shorter fiction with a group of students, the metaphor seemed particularly relevant. One student, here speaking of Gass’s earlier novel *Omensetter’s Luck*, stated, ‘I don’t like it. The characters seem well written, but somehow I don’t believe in any of them. The book doesn’t have any bones.’

To use the terminology of Gass’s own analogy, the student implied that the novel was without proper skeletisation, that it was comprised only of the sort of ‘soft’ or ‘elastic’ tissue that rots away. With nothing as lasting as the ‘hard’ or ‘plastic’ matter of a skeletised structure, the student seemed to feel that the novel was not sufficiently supported, and, as a consequence, was somehow both structurally and affectively unstable. Although Kohler affords his skeleton body the autonomy of personhood – describing his ‘modest bones’ as ‘blushing’, as possessing the capacity to ‘reveal’ – what he ultimately aspires to for the skeletisation of his consciousness

⁵⁸ Holloway, p.94.

is that its 'hard' and 'plastic' structure will be sufficient to 'control' and 'conceal' the affective reality once experienced and contained by his 'soft' tissues.

For this reason, I would suggest that the student's apparent experience of reading a book with no bones is a deliberate structural choice on Gass's part, and one that affords particular affective consequences. While Kohler admires the 'regimen' and 'order' that bones represent, a sentiment echoed in his admiration of the Nazi regime, *The Tunnel* is a novel made up of primarily soft tissue. While bones are all that can immortalise and express the materiality of a once-complete and multifaceted human body, they also possess the capacity to repress the narrative of an alternative lived reality, and Gass's literary structures immortalise the otherwise perishable tissues of the body on the page. The suggestion that a book with no bones can neither possess nor engender feeling is a suggestion that Gass undermines in the final component of his metaphor: 'they'd find a jaw, some teeth, and well inside its grin' is hidden 'my ill humor like an atmosphere, a final fart of feeling.' The 'feeling' does not reside in the bones, however painfully they may break, but in the transience of the gasses and soft tissues the bones give structure to.

What do these observations mean for a consideration of *The Tunnel* as a metafictional novel? Patricia Waugh describes '[t]he alternation of frame and frame-break (or the construction of an illusion through the imperceptibility of the frame and the shattering of illusion through the constant exposure of the frame)' as that which 'provides the essential deconstructive method of metafiction.'⁵⁹ Waugh's employment of this metaphor evokes the semantic quality of the skeleton in Kohler's internal monologue; both bones and frames are stable structures that have the capacity to be revealed and to be broken. The self-referentiality of metafiction, for Waugh, is achieved primarily through the 'shattering' of the illusion of the frame's imperceptibility. Here, I will reorient Waugh's analogy of the frame as a plastic structure and emphasise the frame, instead, as an elastic structure, one which can be both revealed and concealed, but one which is – crucially – also subject to mutability.

⁵⁹ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen & Co., 1984), p.31.

I propose, therefore, that *The Tunnel*'s narratological framework ought be envisioned not as the novel's skeleton, but as the novel's soft tissues; instead of emphasising the duality of the frame as either revealed or concealed, broken or in tact, I propose to envision the frame as a soft structure that allows it to 'burst', 'leak', 'sag', and 'sour' in the same manner as the heart. By examining the novel's treatment of structural metaphors such as tunnels and windows, the novel's treatment of narrative modes such as the differing natures of historiographical and poetic expression, and the novel's treatment of the interplay between fascism and censorship, I aim to illuminate the affective consequences of a novel which allows its own structure to self-consciously 'sag' in order to both alert the reader to the contrivance of text as a construction while simultaneously attending to matters of the heart.

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Never look beneath the surface of life, because [...] you will not find neat schools of gently swimming fish, seaweed swaying, as Culp claims, to water music [...]; beneath the surface of life is the pit, the abyss, the awful truth, a truth that cannot be lived with, that cannot be abided: human worthlessness, our worthlessness, yours and mine.⁶⁰

Although Fredric Jameson notably denounced postmodernism for its 'waning of affect', Hutcheon identifies metafiction specifically as the narrative form which met with the most hostile critical response.⁶¹ Hutcheon defends metafiction, arguing that '[i]t is simplistic to say, as reviewers did for years, that this kind of narrative is sterile, that it has nothing to do with "life."⁶² As often as metafiction is associated with the imposition of distance between life and art, and between reader and text, it is associated with the nihilism that came to define the tone of the black humourists (the term used to describe some of literary postmodernism's originators, before the term 'metafiction' came into popular use), as this group of writers acknowledged that '[t]he defiant self of existentialism had come to seem somewhat ludicrous.'⁶³

⁶⁰ Gass, *The Tunnel*, pp.196-7.

⁶¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.10.

⁶² Hutcheon, p.5.

⁶³ Tony Hilfer, *American Fiction Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1992), p.102.

Flavours of this abandonment of the ‘defiant self’, as well as the increasingly alienating nature of existence, echo among Gass’s metaphors in *The Tunnel*: the abyss, windows, walls, photographs, and even tunnels themselves are figuratively investigated and excavated in this novel for the nuances of affective experience they illuminate. Yet, while Gass attends to alienation as a central facet of his narrator’s experience in this novel, this novel is not designed to alienate its reader. As Hutcheon suggests, the writer-protagonist of the metafictional novel is not so self-referential as to preclude the reader’s participation, but directly implicates him/her:

Reading and writing belong to the processes of “life” as much as they do to those of “art.” [...] On the one hand, he is forced to acknowledge the artifice, the “art,” of what he is reading; on the other, explicit demands are made upon him, as a co-creator, for intellectual and affective responses comparable in scope and intensity to those of his life experience.⁶⁴

Affective identification entails discomfort for the reader of this novel. Gass tasks his reader with co-creating a textual reality with a morally dubious narrator, one which requires us to ‘look beneath the surface of life’ and confront ‘the pit, the abyss, the awful truth’ that awaits. Most significantly, although we may at times be desperate to distance ourselves from the ethically corrupted mind of Kohler, the structure of this novel forces us to share the experience of ‘human worthlessness’ – not *his* ‘human worthlessness’, but ‘our worthlessness, yours and mine.’

Within its fictional context, the novel constitutes an Introduction to Kohler’s recently completed historical study, *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler’s Germany*. Kohler describes his experience of writing certain passages of this book, a research project which appeared to flow with relative ease; when tasked with the job of writing an introduction, however, Kohler’s narrative begins to meander. At the same time as he begins to struggle with the process of composing his introduction, Kohler begins digging a tunnel from his basement, unbeknownst to his wife. Both the act of digging the tunnel and the act of writing subsequently come to represent Kohler’s looking ‘beneath the surface of life’.

⁶⁴ Hutcheon, p.5.

This very process recalls the story of Ibn Khaldun, the fourteenth century historian and social scientist often described as the father of historiography, whose own *Introduction* became a more striking achievement than the historical study it preceded:

[Khaldun] settled in Algeria, where his nervousness was quietened by the book he now wanted to write, a comprehensive history of the Arabs and the Berbers. But, he decided, before such a task could be undertaken, he must first produce, by way of an introduction, a philosophy of history. [...] The magnificent *Introduction*, which itself evolved into a series of books, was to become his masterpiece.⁶⁵

The birth of historiography, the study of the study of history, was several centuries later to give rise to the study of historiography itself. Rob Boddice defines the purpose of Hayden White's historiographical work, *Metahistory*, for example, as demonstrating 'the extent to which histories really say something about historians and the context in which those historians produced their works.'⁶⁶ The nature of metahistory resonates with Kohler's own concurrent projects: the composition of his *Introduction* and the digging of his tunnel. Both tasks are motivated by the context of his own past, and both rely on a sense of creating a figurative or physical structure within which he might preserve his experience and memories.

Arthur M. Saltzman argues that

like a tunnel, whose walls must be supported solidly enough to ensure that the project does not collapse and bury the excavator, the novel is an elaborate burrowing by the historian into his own past, which is scaffolded by the academic project.⁶⁷

The idea that an historian's academic work might represent a kind of hard scaffolding that supports the softer structures of one's own personal history illuminates Gass's structural conception of this novelistic project. In an interview, he describes the 'three-fold difficulty the tunnel metaphor implies':

⁶⁵ Hisham Matar, *A Month in Siena* (New York: Viking, 2019), p.87.

⁶⁶ Rob Boddice, *The History of Emotions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), p.15.

⁶⁷ Saltzman, p.117.

There has to be the emptiness that constitutes the tunnel, the void, the absence. Then there is the dirt that's taken out, of course, which must be hidden. Finally, there is the structure, which has to be supportive. So the book is three things. The debris, the negation—the hollow—and the hand that holds the hollow. So the book in a way has to have no structure, has to represent anti-structure. Only *my* structure, the supportive structure, has to be very intense to hold the mess it's presumably binding together (p. 118).

Where Kohler is excavating his own past, interpreting the 'bonespeak' of the residual hard structures that once gave shape to what was subject to decay and decomposition, Gass tasks his reader with the role of interpreting the 'flesh speak' of the soft debris, the 'etherspeak' of the gas that fills the hollow. These soft structures are foregrounded in the textual quality of Kohler's own writing, which constitutes the novel's 'anti-structure', effectively concealing the 'supportive structure' of the narratological framework Gass employs in order to 'bind' the 'mess' together. While only the soft structures remain visible, the reader's affective emphasis shifts from a reasoned, distanced interpretation of the bones which underpin the structure of the flesh to an alternately claustrophobic and vertiginous identification with the impending entropic decay of its surface tissues.

The tunnel, as both a physical structure and a figurative metaphor, projects the affective experiences of claustrophobia and vertigo onto the novel's reader. Holloway suggests that 'Gass wants the reader of this novel to have an experience that will be a temporary ersatz for his daily consciousness. We are supposed to share the sensation of enclosure, feel ourselves surrounded by armed guards.'⁶⁸ The threat of 'the sensation of enclosure' is governed as effectively by these 'armed guards', by the hand holding the 'hollow' of the tunnel, as it is by the tunnel itself. On the occasion that part of the tunnel collapses upon Kohler while he's digging, what frightens him more than the sensation of claustrophobia engendered by his physical entrapment, is the psychologically claustrophobic threat of his wife's discovery of the 'hole':

Last night I gave myself a good scare. Two scares actually. I nearly buried myself alive. [...] I've still got gunk in my hair, and when I blow my nose, my snot blows black, I imagine like a miner's. Moreover my hole was nearly discovered.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Holloway, p.95.

⁶⁹ Gass, *The Tunnel*, p.493.

Not only is the collapsible structure of the tunnel aligned with the mutability of the human body, but the evidence of the tunnel's collapse in Kohler's own soft tissues and bodily excretions – the 'gurk' in his hair, the 'black' of his snot – reveals the private and personal nature of the act of excavating his own past and peering 'beneath the surface' of life. The reader's experience of 'ersatz', therefore, is two-fold. In one respect, our experience is that of Kohler; the relatability of his fear and pain allows the reader to more easily substitute him/herself in Kohler's place and to experience the claustrophobic threat of the 'armed guards' who threaten to discover his darkest secrets. In another respect, however, our experience is that of Kohler's wife; in appropriating the voyeuristic vantage point of extra-textuality, the reader is literally called upon to enact the role of the 'armed guards', policing Kohler's intimate self-investigation at every narrative turn. In both respects, the affective capacity of claustrophobia highlights the self-conscious role of the reader in relationship to this text, alerting him/her consistently to the narratological boundary between the public and the private, the professional and the domestic.

Apart from the threat of claustrophobia, the novel also engages with the affective impact of vertigo. The act of tunnelling is akin to the act of burrowing down, sharing the semantic quality of peering 'beneath' the surface. When Kohler begins to excavate the burial ground of his own past – an act paralleled in the reader's role of excavating the text – we are made to feel that we are looking down, into a shapeless cavern of an immeasurable depth. When Kohler first describes his experience of beginning the dig, he describes the affect of embarking upon the journey:

I am enormously excited. Enormously. Today I began to dig; took my first bite of the earth; put in my first pick. [...] With that first blow—what elation I felt! Feel. I *am* light. I float although there is no wind. I swoop low to gather altitude the way the roller coaster does, and there I see the thick world differently. [...] I have learned the place like a lover. I know it better than I know myself (pp.146-7).

With the excitement of the 'first bite of the earth', Kohler acknowledges that the elation affords a sense of lightness, of floating, of gathering altitude. The affective quality of gathering altitude, as Gass describes in this metaphor, is relative to a perception of height. On a roller coaster, for

example, the suspension emphasises the distance between yourself and the ground; the tunnel, however, is elusive: we feel our feet firmly on the ground while simultaneously witnessing it open up before us. Encountering a tunnel, therefore, is more affectively unexpected than experiencing a roller coaster ride: feeling precedes seeing, the empirical precedes the rational; there is no way of accurately discerning the length or depth of the burrow by visual estimation alone.

Kohler's mentor, Magus Tabor, elucidates this when he remarks

[t]he war is Thucydides, I tell you. He waged it when he wrote. [...] That cruel fools' war has changed us—I mean the man who, with it, made our memories, he changed us, for when he writes, we *feel* before we *see* (p.264).

Vertigo, the sensation the world around you is moving or spinning, lends itself to this description; historians, Tabor argues, can literally change the past, and change our experiences of the world along with it. Being able to affect such a change depends upon a writer's ability to make us *feel* before we *see*. The vertiginous affect conditioned by what we perceive to be a solid surface collapsing before our eyes and immeasurably descending into an abyss depends upon the fact that we cannot see the bottom. Kohler likens this effect to the process of reading a book:

You can lose yourself in a book (as I was more and more frequently to do) [...]; I did not trade myself for any other, turn myself in for Tom Jones; and I instinctively understood why Alice went after the rabbit [...]: the tunnel, all the other side, was more attractive (p.296).

In his employment of this metaphor, Kohler collectivises the experience of all readers: any reader attracted by the nature of the novel is attracted to 'the tunnel', and to what the tunnel represents – 'all the other side' – and no reader can be fully aware of the trajectory of this journey until s/he embarks upon his/her own descent.

The tunnel as a metaphorical structure is not the only device employed by Gass in order to emphasise the framework of the novel as collapsible, malleable, or subject to entropy. In the section of the novel entitled 'Why Windows Are Important To Me', Gass explores the

metaphorical possibilities of the glass pane as a structure through which experience might be framed:

[I]t's always a window which lets me see. Windows, therefore, are important to me. [...] These windows are the porches of appearance. Through them move the only uncoded messages which I receive. [...] This half-closed eye I have here, or my wide one at the office, they let in whatever chooses them, and not at any shout of mine will they behave. [...] For picture after picture they provide the frame, proscenium to stage, and everything is altered in them into art... or into history... which seems, in circumstances of my kind, the same (pp.282-3).

Kohler's poignant description of windows not only as frame, but as proscenium and porch, echoes Waugh's employment of the metaphor of framework through which she explores the possibilities of metafiction. By likening windows to frames, Gass examines the structural function of the glass as a means of filtering the chaos of the material world into an ordered, two-dimensional realm which simultaneously retains its lifelike appearance. As Waugh contends, the framework of fiction only functions effectively in the context of literary realism when it remains in tact, and, thus, inconspicuous. Similarly, Gass acknowledges a window's capacity to 'alter' reality into 'art' or into 'history' (respective modalities I will consider in due course), owing to their ability to 'let in whatever chooses them'. Without the acknowledgement of the window, the partial view of the material world is more liable to be taken as a complete, three-dimensional world of its own, rather than as a limited representation of that world. Windows, therefore, become a central metaphor in the novel through which Gass, like Waugh, can muse upon the nature and structure of fiction as a metapractice.

Kohler elaborates on this through a childhood memory, in which he recalls a homework task he wrote about windows as a metaphor for books:

A book, I wrote, is like a deck of windows: each page perceives a world and tells a fortune; each page at least faintly reflects the face of its reader, and hands down a judgment; each page is made of mind, and it is that same mind that perceives the world outside, and it is that same mind that reflects a world within, and it is that same mind that stands translucently between perception and reflection, uniting and dividing, double dealing (p.302).

Windows/books, for Kohler, are not only responsible for capturing the material ‘world outside’; each window and, thus, ‘each page’ must also reflect ‘the face of its reader’. The reflexivity of both the window and the mind indicate the ‘double dealing’, the ‘uniting and dividing’ at play, since – as long as the window/textual framework remains inconspicuously in tact – the delineation between the ‘world outside’ and the ‘world within’ becomes increasingly obscure. As such, Kohler contends that windows – and, by extension, books – are as useful for looking in as they are for looking out: ‘Windows [...] are handy for displaying yourself as well, as though you were on sale, or rent’ (p.303). While they may offer an insight into what is taking place on the opposite side, windows/books also afford outsiders the opportunity to look in; being able to see out of a window is contingent upon ‘displaying yourself’, too, within its frame.

This highlights the role that voyeurism plays in the reading process, complicating the reader’s relationship with Kohler over the course of the novel. We are aware that Kohler is, at once, directly addressing his reader, while acknowledging that these intensely private, domestic recollections of his past and personal relationships are those he hides even from those closest to him. However, as long as the window/textual framework remains in tact, Kohler can present just a portion of himself to the world, enabling him to conceal those parts that he believes may give others too full a picture; just as Kohler acknowledges that windows can ‘let in whatever chooses them’, so, too, can Kohler restrict the elements of the picture of himself he desires to conceal.

It is notable that the incident regarding windows Kohler dwells on repeatedly is that during which he implies his involvement in the wave of SA paramilitary and civilian crimes against the Jewish population of Nazi Germany, otherwise known as Kristallnacht, in 1938:

[T]he store was as black as a Jew’s suit. I got rid of my burden, heaving it overhand [...], and it did seem to hang quite a long time and seem to fall from a great height, although I could never have seen its flight only heard it hit and the glass implode, fragments like sleet flying everywhere, sheets shattering inside the shop, fewer on the street (p.331).

Kohler returns to this incident on a number of occasions, recalling it slightly differently each time, until the reader is no longer sure how far he is either attempting to repress the reality and

subsequent implications of his participation, or attempting to exaggerate the event in order to establish his 'Germanness', a facet of his heritage that he has inflated over the course of his academic career.

Holloway suggests that '[Kohler's] participation in *Kristallnacht* [...] is a violation that he himself feels deeply owing to his reverence for windows as a meeting ground of the mind and whatever is meant by reality beyond the glass.'⁷⁰ On this occasion he describes the glass shattering as the rock he throws collides with the window of the Jewish-owned shop. I would argue, therefore, that Kohler's affective experience of this incident is conditioned less by his childhood 'reverence' for windows, and, instead, by his fear that in violating the division between himself and the material world, he has thus violated the frame through which he is able to manipulate not only the proportion of the world the window will allow him to see, but the proportion of himself that he allows to be 'displayed'.

The metaphorical significance of the shattered glass implies that, on this occasion, the division was compromised; as the glass 'implodes', Kohler realises, too late, that he can no longer repress the implications that *Kristallnacht* had for the subsequent execution of the Final Solution in the early 1940s by simply manipulating and restricting his perspective of Hitler's Germany, and neither can he repress the acknowledgement of his own collusion with the regime. *The Tunnel*, itself, then represents the shattering of the window of this Jewish shop, the disintegration of the boundary which separates the material world from its selective representation, in which Kohler's full consciousness is laid bare.

Windows are not the only metaphor that Gass employs to illustrate this idea. Less akin to Waugh's frame/frame-break dichotomy, and more akin to the mutability of the soft tissues Kohler describes at the end of the novel, Gass uses the imagery of walls to demonstrate how a seemingly stable structure can be made to appear malleable when the two worlds a wall separates begin to bleed into and influence one another. In a recollection of his early married life, Kohler describes how the thin walls not only afford he and his wife a voyeuristic glimpse

⁷⁰ Holloway, p.102.

into the domestic realm of the couple next door, but amplify their experience of paranoia and shame when the sounds of their own private activities begin to betray the reality of their daily lives:

It was like living in front of a mike as you might pose and smirk in front of a mirror. We heard ourselves as others might hear us; we read every sound the way we read the daily paper; and we came to feel as though we were being chased, caught, charged, and humiliatingly arraigned for crimes against the public silence [...]. Martha no longer cried out when she came, and I grew uncertain of her love.⁷¹

Just as the shattering of the glass allows for the world outside and the world within to be fully exposed to one another, the thinness of the walls in Kohler and Martha's first apartment prevents them from successfully dividing, containing, and preserving each respective couple's private and autonomous experiences. Kohler remarks that 'they were our Siamese twin, [...] the mocking shadow of our sensuality' (p.339). As a consequence, these distinct realms of experience begin to influence one another. Kohler describes how he became increasingly concerned with how he might influence the lives of the couple next door, manipulating them into false beliefs about their own lives in retaliation against the perceived violation of their privacy: 'we considered confusing them with a barrage of false sounds [...]; I suggested some interesting scenarios, but Martha would not fall in with them' (p.339).

Walls no longer behave as a division between the material world occupied by Kohler and Martha and what they perceive to be its representation next door; instead, these worlds become conjoined, a notion characterised by Kohler's suggestion that he comes increasingly to consider the couple next door as their 'Siamese twin'. This resonates with the 'double dealing' quality of windows previously explored; when Kohler indicates that 'each page perceives a world and tells a fortune', and that 'each page at least faintly reflects the face of its reader', he suggests the stability of the fictional framework must remain in tact for a reader to be able to experience the world of a novel, without the world of the novel affecting the way the reader lives in the 'world outside'. Like the unbroken window, for example, a work of literary realism only 'faintly' reflects the face of its reader, wherein a reader might be able to identify oneself

⁷¹ Gass, *The Tunnel*, pp.336-7.

with the proportion of the world it captures, but without being entirely conscious of oneself in the process of exploring that world. Just as metafiction calls attention to itself as a work of art, Gass calls upon the imagery of broken windows and thin walls to illustrate how the more vulnerable, mutable structures that support the postmodern novel both affect the reader's identification with a novel's characters and heighten not only the text's, but the reader's own self-consciousness.

Kohler describes the increasing tension and hostility in his relationship as he and Martha begin to align their respective sympathies with different people on the other side of the wall:

We tended to take sides, Martha preferring the trail the male left, naturally [...]. My trust twisted to suspicion. Perhaps she was already their accomplice; perhaps she heard their passion more eagerly than she felt mine. Was the other side of the wall growing greener grass? (p.339).

Apart from the paranoia engendered by the thinness of the walls, a sense of suspicion towards his own wife begins to result from their 'taking sides'; as Kohler questions 'was the other side of the wall growing greener grass?' he finds himself no longer concerned exclusively with the life of the couple next door, but increasingly resentful of his own. The affect of paranoia that results from this structural instability reflects the nature of the novel and its impact upon the reader. As long as the world on the other side of the window or wall remains separate, we can acknowledge it as 'realistic' on the basis of the fact that it bears some semblance to our own while retaining its and *our* own autonomy. Once the window is broken, or the wall no longer offers a stable division, these disparate worlds begin to influence and, thus, *become* one another. The world on the other side of the wall is no longer simply 'realistic', it is *made real* by the tangible effect it has on the side occupied by Kohler. So, too, is the reader's own self-consciousness and affective implication within the fiction emphasised by the instability of the novel's structure.

Through our exposure to Kohler's most intimate moments, we are alerted to our own role as voyeur within the novel's textual fabric, becoming increasingly aware of our own

‘shameful’ secrets and rituals through our identification with Kohler. Kohler thus becomes Gass’s reader’s ‘Siamese twin’ – our desire for autonomy is no longer afforded by the text, and we are threatened with the affective consequences of the violation of our own privacy:

It shames me to think that someone else may hear what I just heard, [...] because these are my sounds, almost internal to me, Koh, the minor music of my privacy, and to hear them is to put a hand on me in a very personal place (p.351).

What we determine to be representations of a world that bears some semblance to our own, therefore, do not need to be directly concerned with our own in order to affect the one exploring it. While Holloway concedes that Gass believes ‘art should not be mixed with the world; writing should be composed for itself’, a sentiment which stands in direct opposition to realist contemporaries of Gass’s at the time, such as John Gardner, it can affect us on a deeply personal level without purporting to make ‘[i]rresponsible artistic pronouncements about life’ in a manner which emphasises political homogeneity.⁷² Indeed, the instability of art as a representation of life is illuminated in a passage during which Kohler revisits old photographs of his deceased family members:

So, my father said to me, let’s end this painful visit, and with a weak arm I hadn’t thought was strong enough, shooed me from his sickroom. Perhaps out of the sight of my eye his knotted bones undid themselves and he slid apart as you see here these train parts have, achieving the composure of decomposition. Bits and pieces. That’s the picture.⁷³

Kohler considers the possibility that his father might not materially exist independently or autonomously of his own perception of him; without a photograph or a window to capture his father’s likeness, or thin walls through which sound can recall to Kohler his father’s daily routines, his ‘knotted bones’ might undo themselves, and he might altogether ‘slid[e] apart’. Kohler recollects a variety of instances over the course of the novel which indicate their strained relationship, striving to erase the ‘painful’ legacy of his parents from his consciousness; and yet, when he is confronted with a representation of his father’s likeness, Kohler’s understanding of

⁷² Holloway, p.99.

⁷³ Gass, *The Tunnel*, p.373.

the transience of his father's material body is not enough to preclude the affective reality of his memory.

Although art can never presume to reflect a simultaneously realistic and complete picture of human life, therefore, *The Tunnel* impacts upon its reader in the same way that the picture impacts upon Kohler: mutable representations of our life experiences have the capacity to instantly resensitise us to those 'painful' moments we might prefer to forget, affects which become amplified by the fragmented and chaotic 'bits and pieces' which make up the picture. Only through the self-conscious disintegration of the framework which holds us in our own world can the novel achieve 'the composure of decomposition', wherein the boundaries between our own lives and those of the characters we encounter in texts break down and force us to acknowledge something of ourselves in a character with whom we might otherwise desperately resist identification.

While many of the metaphors Gass employs in *The Tunnel* indicate the instability of the boundary between lived experience and aesthetic representation, between reader and text, his novel is most explicitly metafictional on account of its narrator's musings on literature itself. Kohler, for example, echoes the sentiments of Gass's own nonfiction when he asks, '[w]hat is a book but a container of consciousness [...]?' (p.69). By no means limited to concerning itself with the form of the novel, *The Tunnel* explores the implications of poetic sentimentality and historical rigidity through Kohler's colleague Culp's 'limerickal' history of the world, and subsequently asks how far historical narrative can penetrate the 'truth' of the past, the present, or the future. By continually reminding his reader of Kohler's narrative attempts to straddle the uncomfortable boundary between his public and private personas, between historical and poetic expression, between the masculine and the feminine, Gass exposes the structural precarity of his own novel, forcing his reader to confront the affective register of a literary modality which extends beyond these straightforward dichotomies. *The Tunnel* reveals to its readers what we feel when we can no longer accept the elementary duality of our own material world and the representational world of the text, asserting an alternative, highly affective experience that transcends the clichés concerning the 'moral' character of reading.

Kohler documents his own experiences of engaging with a variety of literatures as a youth over the course of a series of childhood memories, one of which outlines the indecorous affects of reading against the romantic clichés long-attached to the moral properties of literature:

When I was in high school I had to write an essay duplicating the manner and subject of Bacon's "On Reading," and I remember including all the comfortable clichés. I said nothing about how books made me masturbate. I said nothing about nightmares, about daydreaming, about aching, cock-stiffening loneliness. I said something about wonder and curiosity, the improvement of character, quickening of sensibility, enlargement of mind, but nothing about the disappearance of the self in a terrible quake of earth (p.71).

The conspicuously public nature of the academic essay forces Kohler to yield to these clichés, citing well-established albeit predictable moral properties attached to the act of reading. These admirable aspects fail to acknowledge the ignominious affective realities of the reading experience. In the comparatively private space of his personal memoirs, Kohler recognises 'how books made me masturbate', how reading caused him to experience 'nightmares', 'daydreaming', 'aching, cock-stiffening loneliness', all of which are explored in the context of the viscerally taboo. Indeed, the notion that reading itself might engender 'the disappearance of the self in a terrible quake of earth', not only echoes literary postmodernism's abandonment of the defiant self, but also resonates with Gass's aforementioned structural motifs, those which are most notably subject to decay or collapse. The shift to literary postmodernism hails a new mode of reading which does not necessarily encourage self-improvement, but self-conscious self-excavation; when there is no character or narrative feature of fiction with which we are comfortable identifying, we are forced to filter ourselves from the debris of the textual quake and confront ourselves as we confront Kohler: through the discomfort of the aching, the arousal, and the uncertainty that accompanies us on the journey of reading.

A book, therefore, not only becomes a 'container of consciousness' on behalf of the writer, but a 'container of consciousness' on behalf of the reader, a self-contained world of private – even taboo – experience, otherwise repressed in the public realm. Indeed, the disjunction between the contrivance of romantic clichés associated with literary fiction and the affectively uglier reality of experiencing it is further explored by Kohler in his more explicit

meditations on poetic expression. He remembers, as a youth, that '[g]irls liked poets. Why? They didn't like poetry. They liked the idea of poetry: they liked boys who sounded sensitive, soft as themselves, malleable' (p.638). Here, the 'idea of poetry' is aligned with the physical property of 'softness' as well as the emotional property of 'sensitivity', both of which serve to gender the structures of poetry as decidedly feminine. Kohler further describes girls as 'sentimental', 'desiring the valentine life and someone to share it'. In an effort to seek 'relief for the dreams of my imprisoned self', he 'went about ardently contriving poetic moods', 'looking for basins to piss my passions in' (p.638).

As an aspiring writer, the 'poetic moods' contrived by young Kohler are contingent precisely upon his perceived readership; his understanding of the sentimentality of the female reader is conditioned by his belief that girls' affinity with the poetic form runs concurrently with their desire for 'someone' with which to share 'the valentine life'. This romantic expectation of poetry, Kohler suggests, encourages little genuine expression on the part of the writer and, therefore, little genuine experience on the part of the reader. In a manner akin to the terminology often used to describe the reader's expectations of literary realism – which, 'above all', requires 'affective investment' in 'the hierarchy of [its] characters' – Kohler identifies his female reader's desire to 'share' in the rose-tinted 'valentine life' of poetry as one which compels the poet to posture himself 'like a puppet'.⁷⁴ While seeking 'relief' in the expression of poetic sensibility, the poet, therefore, finds himself further constrained by the limited range of affect allowed by the reader.

Poetry represents a naive and restrictive mode of expression for Kohler, one he regards with increasing suspicion over the course of his adolescence. He describes that 'I had begun life with the poet's outlook, in the celebrational mode, for the poet cannot do otherwise than praise, even if, in a momentary slough of despond [...], he thinks of ending his miserable life' (p.638). A poet's 'words will [...] raise his suffering to the level of the reader's repeated delight' (pp. 638-9). The apparent disjunction between the experience of the writer and the experience of the

⁷⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2015), p.11; Gass, *The Tunnel*, p.638.

reader is something which simultaneously intrigues and troubles Kohler. While admiring the poet's 'skillful depiction of the superficial', his conviction that, as readers, 'the stupid can amuse us, the unfortunate inspire, and there is no purer pleasure than that of the tragic' suggests that the contrivance of the poetic form not only limits the writer's range of affective expression, but the reader's own range of affective response (p.639).

While his enduring nostalgia for poetry and literary realism appears to enchant the young Kohler, owing to these forms' fulfilment of affective expectation, these same qualities are responsible for the adult Kohler's ultimate rejection of them in favour of what he interprets to be the more stable, masculine form of narrative:

Hardy's novel gave me a hearty clap on the back like an old friend. [But] I had been duped. I was a dunce. And those others—they were educated, older, they knew—they were liars. It may have been at that time that my ascent of Mount Parnassus slowed, and I began to turn toward history (p.67).

This turning away from poetry and 'toward history' indicates Kohler's impression of these forms as diametrically opposed. Where poetry, for Kohler, leans towards femininity on the gender spectrum, he understands history as masculine on account of its emotional detachment, structural stability, and ability to penetrate the 'truth'. While his attraction to historical narrative is seemingly founded on these rigid principles, Kohler increasingly realises that history is just as vulnerable as poetry to inconsistency, irresolution, and affective precarity. When he considers the relationship of his recently completed historical study to the introduction he is currently in the process of writing, Kohler begins to arrive at this revelation:

I began my book in love and need; shall I finish in fear and trembling? [...] I gave up noble sentiments for truth. Perhaps my long German book was an exterior, a façade, for which I am now constructing an inside [...] (p.95).

Kohler's conviction that he has sacrificed 'sentiment' in favour of 'truth' does not preclude his own affective relationship with the text he has produced, as he might once have hoped. Beginning his historical study in 'love and need', terms which self-consciously reflect the 'desire' and the 'sentiment' which he so deplored in his female counterparts' admiration of

poetry, equally does not preclude ‘fear and trembling’, terms which resonate with the uglier affective taboos Kohler associates with reading literary fiction as an adolescent. Kohler also envisions his historical study as ‘an exterior, a façade’, and the ongoing process of writing his introduction as that of ‘constructing an inside’. While he may once have perceived historical narrative as representing skeletal stability and endurance, or ‘bonespeak’, he later acknowledges it as a surface alone, a kind of epithelial tissue which, by extension, is vulnerable to decay – a disguise which might, at any moment, waste away to reveal the reality of its underpinning.

Kohler ultimately revises his impression of history, until all texts for Kohler – and, to a certain extent, his colleagues – begin to resemble one another. Herschel, for example, ‘ventured the opinion that history was, after all, a process through which human consciousness perhaps endeavored to achieve self-contained existence’ (p.142). Poetic and historical expression are no longer divided into the feminine and the masculine, the soft and the hard, the romantically clichéd and the realistically truthful; a narrative, regardless of its mode of literary expression, is recognised as an effort ‘to achieve self-contained existence’, to preserve ‘human consciousness’. Kohler turns to history at a particular stage in his life, hoping it will provide a skeletal structure to his otherwise chaotic textual consciousness, only to find that historical narrative is just as malleable a tissue as personal narrative: both, ultimately, achieve homogeneity through the imagery of detritus used by Gass to unite them: ‘Causes collect like waste in the bowels of history’ (p.175).

Gass meditates further on the incongruity between form and content through the vehicle of Culp, one of Kohler’s colleagues at the University, who attempts to write a limerickal history of the world. Kohler agonises, ‘[i]n the hands of my friend Culp, what does the limerick do to history?’ as though an idea’s formal expression might radically alter the essence of its message (p.32). Holloway, pinpointing Kohler’s disdain for Culp’s employment of the limerick, argues that the limerickal form appears to undermine the ‘seriousness’ of Kohler’s own academic project and, by extension, his efforts to elevate history to a level of purity by uniting form with content:

Kohler hates Culp's limerick history because it is a sarcastic counterpart to Kohler's own serious book; Culp's humorous playfulness is an indictment of Kohler's vain attempt to see history/fiction as more than what it really is, just words. Culp's work, in other words, is a healthy counterweight to Kohler's in that it constantly points to itself as something made up, something not to be confused with real life.⁷⁵

The limerick exposes the 'made-upness' of history in counterpoint to Kohler's contention that history represents 'truth', thereby drawing it in line with poetic expression and literary fiction as yet another inadequate representation of the material world. While I would concur with Holloway's argument, I would go further by illuminating Kohler's distrust of the limerickal form with Sianne Ngai's recent study of the gimmick.

Ngai, in *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (2020), argues that the classification of a device as a gimmick stems from 'distrust or aversion' to something that might initially have caused 'euphoria', an ambiguity which arises out of the 'way in which it seems to work both too hard and too little.'⁷⁶ The gimmick, Ngai argues, 'lets us down': '[w]e express contempt for it as a laborsaving trick because our attention was in fact caught by its promises of saving labor' (p.62). Culp's limerickal history of the world falls into this category precisely because the self-conscious contrivance of its form threatens to undermine the 'seriousness' of Kohler's own academic labour; by proclaiming its ability to contain the entire chaotic historical record of the world in a comparatively compact and tightly structured form, the limerick-as-historical-record becomes an 'aesthetic failure' at the very moment it is revealed to be a 'laborsaving trick' (p.62): 'Culp says, the point is to use this very orderly little object [...] to manufacture disorder and to confound whatever it contains. The limerick is an instrument of disrespect.'⁷⁷ Just as Ngai argues that the gimmick's attractiveness precedes our recognition of it as an aesthetic failure, Culp suggests that the limerick's 'orderly' nature is what initially attracts us, in turn facilitating the manufacture of 'disorder'; in doing so, Culp, by extension, indicates the incongruity of his limericks' form and content.

⁷⁵ Holloway, p.101.

⁷⁶ Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), p.56.

⁷⁷ Gass, *The Tunnel*, p.165.

Ngai suggests that '[w]hen we say a work of art is gimmicky, we mean we see through it', which is why gimmicks have such a polarising effect on the societies into which they insert themselves.⁷⁸ For those who do not 'see through' the gimmick, the gimmick retains its attraction and, thus, value, while those who *do* 'see through' the gimmick elevate themselves to a level of superiority; they can both congratulate themselves on recognising the 'trick' and, at the same time, denounce it. When Kohler pronounces the limerick as 'an instrument of disrespect', he is pronouncing the simultaneity of the limerick's 'overworking/underworking'; it is on account of the fact that the limerick/gimmick holds 'power for someone else' that it is so dangerous for Kohler, since it might genuinely undermine the labour of his own work to uphold the standards of history for posterity (p.62; p.97).

In contrast with Kohler's persistent efforts to look 'beneath' the surface of life, Culp asserts that the limerick 'is all surface', '[t]here's no inside however long or far you travel on it [...]'. It forces you to face the facts without ever producing any'.⁷⁹ Like the gimmick, we respond to the limerick 'dysphorically, as a cheap, fraudulent, and compromised object', one which we nonetheless take pleasure in.⁸⁰ While Gass presents neither Kohler's public academic efforts to look beneath the surface of history nor Kohler's private personal efforts to look beneath the surface of his own consciousness as entirely successful, he presents Kohler's written work, collectively, as an effort to rebuild the substance of literary expression which has begun to succumb to the influence of the instantaneity and immediate gratification of the capitalist gimmick. While Fredric Jameson asserts that literary postmodernism is representative of a kind of depthlessness that sought 'to escape from the high seriousness of modernism', Gass seems to

⁷⁸ Ngai, *Gimmick*, p.83.

⁷⁹ Gass, *The Tunnel*, p.178.

⁸⁰ Ngai, *Gimmick*, p.94.

suggest that depthlessness arises not from art's self-consciousness alone, but from self-conscious incongruity between form and content.⁸¹

While, in his adolescence, Kohler naively aspires to a dry, surface-level quality of historical narrative that relays pure truth, his academic mentor Magus Tabor illuminates history's depth and substance in many of the conversations that Kohler later recalls:

Listen. We do things differently, Tabor told me. [...] It's all new to you, you Yankees. You tabulate. You codify. Interpret. You explain. All this, in Germany, we take for granted [...]—we assume. History's old hat to us. [...] Instead we show the folks [...] what it is to have a feeling. Don't you grasp the grades of difference? History must move—it must be moving! [...] History [...] is not a mode of knowing. Never was.⁸²

Tabor identifies Kohler's impulse to 'interpret' and 'explain', or, otherwise, to control and gloss the historical record. On the other hand, in Germany – and, by extension, Europe – history does not represent 'a mode of knowing' but a mode of 'feeling'. Kohler clings to 'History' as a stable entity; his anxiety around the claustrophobic and vertiginous affective experience of interrogating the nature of his own personal past impacts upon his desire to orient himself on solid ground. However, Tabor's suggestion that 'History must move – it must be moving!' further brings the quality of historical narrative in line with that of the literary and the poetic: history is revealed to be just as affectively charged as literature, with narratives in the public realm designed to 'show the folks', to be eternally 'moving' in a way that engenders a similar sense of vertigo to that of writing or reading a personal narrative.

Kohler suggests in his own private narrative that he is receptive to the ideas and theories of Tabor, which ultimately brings him to a series of questions regarding the motivations driving his own academic study:

⁸¹ Nico Baumbach, Damon R. Young, Genevieve Yue, 'Revisiting Postmodernism: An Interview with Fredric Jameson', *Social Text*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (127) (June 2016), 143–160 (p.144).

⁸² Gass, *The Tunnel*, p.215.

When I write about the Third Reich, or now, when I write about myself, is it truly the truth I want? What *do* I want? to find out who I am? What is the good of that? I want to feel a little less uneasy. We drag our acts behind us like a string of monsters (p.106).

Kohler establishes that instead of wanting ‘the truth’, he simply wants ‘to feel a little less uneasy.’ Acknowledging that ‘[w]e drag our acts behind us like a string of monsters’, however, implies that no amount of ‘writing’ – about either the Third Reich or himself – will erase this uneasiness altogether. Indeed, Kohler ultimately determines that ‘writing is hiding from history, refusing to do any dying... writing is lying... in wait...’ (p.641). In his efforts to write his way, through poetry and through history, to a place of objective self-knowledge, Kohler is forced to acknowledge that writing, in fact, is ‘hiding’, writing is revising, writing is feeling, and while the hard surface of historical narrative appears to gleam with the clarity of truth and understanding, its structure is supported by the softer, more vulnerable poetic tropes that underlie it: ‘I didn’t understand then [...] that poetry was the inside of history, was the interior of the text, was the present alive in what had passed, was what sustained itself through every change of tense’ (p.642).

Gass’s employment of metaphors of diametrical opposition (inside/outside, overground/underground, high/low) become vehicles through which he is able to explore the tensions present in his own work: a fictional novel masquerading as the autobiographical musings of its main protagonist. While Kohler’s humanity shines through in many of the anxious internal monologues in which he interrogates his motivation for writing, we must, to borrow Holloway’s phrase, ‘also see him for the “shit” that he is’, since his fascist sensibilities continually find new ways to haunt the narrative, and politicise what might otherwise remain personal.

The novel’s metafictional meditations on the relationship between history and poetry further illuminate one of its most central concerns: the intersection of fascism and censorship. Yoshihiro Nagano writes that ‘[t]he psychological basis for Kohler’s [speculative political] Party is the “fascism of the heart,” which is [...] “a corrupt state of feeling, a realm of impotent

resentment”’.⁸³ Where feeling, in Kohler’s adolescent mind, was once associated with the gratuitous flourishing of literary productivity, Gass identifies fascism of the heart as a state of feeling which, instead, engenders impotence. In this novel, fascism is presented as a state of unproductive feeling, of ordered and self-contained creativity, of censored expression. Holloway’s reading of the novel interprets Gass’s implementation of fascism as explicitly instructive:

Gass in this novel continues to issue warnings about the hazard of becoming obsessed with language to the extent that a certain linguistic order takes the place of the world, where moral vigor and right action are requisite. [...] The temptation to consider history as a merely linguistic enterprise is dangerous: once the “ultimate ground” of reality is taken away, there are only “power plays” left. Gass emphasizes that there is a reality that grounds and corrects doctrine.⁸⁴

For Gass, where narrative is pure ‘linguistic enterprise’, it enters into the hazardous territory of ‘power play’, no longer anchored in any kind of reality, be it objective or affective. Rhetoric, in both art and current affairs, relies upon outrage to seduce, self-containment to express, and order to create. While in interviews Gass usually maintains his formalist ethos of ‘art for art’s sake’, Holloway reads the purpose of this novel as issuing ‘warnings’ about the dangers of becoming obsessed with language, wherein ‘linguistic order’ and ‘moral vigor’ appear increasingly at odds with one another.

The relationship between ‘linguistic order’ and political rhetoric cannot be overlooked in a text which both positions the theme of fascism at its core and is interpreted by critics contemporary to its publication as at least somewhat didactic. Theodor Adorno indicates the close connection between ‘groundless’ rhetoric and affective aggression in ‘Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda’ (1951):

The overwhelming majority of all [fascist] agitators’ statements are [...] based on psychological calculations rather than on the intention to gain followers through the

⁸³ Yoshihiro Nagano, ‘Seeking the Doom of Self-Annihilation: The “Fascism of the Heart” and the Death Drive in William Gass’s *The Tunnel*’, *Sophia University Junior College Division Faculty Journal*, No. 34 (2014), 71-86 (p.73).

⁸⁴ Holloway, p.98.

rational statement of rational aims. The term ‘rabble-rouser’ [...] is adequate in so far as it expresses the atmosphere of irrational emotional aggressiveness purposely promoted by our would-be Hitlers.⁸⁵

Adorno indicates that the rhetorical role of the fascist agitator, or ‘rabble rouser’, is closely linked with its expression of – and ability to incite – ‘irrational emotional aggressiveness’. If, as Holloway suggests, ‘there is a reality that grounds and corrects doctrine’, then where does that reality sit in relationship to a fictional novel in which ideas about linguistic order and ideological fascism are addressed and, moreover, a fictional novel which is narrated from the perspective of a self-confessed fascist protagonist?

While Holloway perceives the novel’s purpose as a ‘warning’, Nagano reads the novel’s stance as somewhat more detached:

Though the novel is replete with evil thoughts and deeds, [...], it does not explicitly denounce them nor does it offer authoritative, corrective perspectives. Instead, [...] Gass challenges us to navigate through the baffling instances of evil that he abundantly supplies and to examine them thoroughly on our own.⁸⁶

Gass validates *all* perspectives by resisting the prescriptive tone of ‘authoritative, corrective’ prose. Indeed, by acknowledging and exploring the affective limitations and consequences of the linguistic order of fascism, *The Tunnel* provides a meta-commentary on the failures of fascist expression. Holloway argues that ‘[e]radicating other consciousnesses, rather than maintaining a dialectical relationship with them [...] is for Gass the hallmark of fascism’.⁸⁷ *The Tunnel*, for all Gass’s formalist philosophical theories, succeeds where the linguistic order of fascism fails: it refuses to ‘eradicate’ the consciousness of fascism; only by accepting it as ‘valid’, even if morally ‘antithetical’ to the liberal Western world, can it be truly interrogated and understood (p.100).

⁸⁵ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2009), p.132.

⁸⁶ Nagano, p.71.

⁸⁷ Holloway, p.100.

Gass is thus able to explore fascistic ideology and linguistic order independently of his contemporary reader's innate association of it with Hitler's Germany. In a contemporary twist on the American 'campus novel', Gass indicates the university as a space in which order might be maintained at the expense of open-minded and productive cognition, and, as a consequence, becomes increasingly distanced from the reality which serves to 'ground and correct' such doctrine. Kohler is repeatedly cautioned by colleagues at his academic institution, for example, for encouraging and supervising theses with a decidedly right-wing slant. The chair of the history department, Oscar Planmantee, is described as the most insistent challenger to Kohler's students' project topics: 'This preposterous proposal for a thesis topic [...]. The last clown we were asked to consider was Ezra Pound, and now this.'⁸⁸ Furthermore, Kohler describes how, when Planmantee reads aloud from his first book, 'the reading [is] interrupted frequently by cries of "Fascist filth" from him, moans of splenetic boredom from Governali' (p.435).

This insistence on eradicating all topics concerning fascism from the academic curriculum is explored in the novel as a fascistic act itself. In retaliation against his colleagues' disapproval, Kohler makes a passionate case for interrogating the condition of villainhood:

[I]f villains are so villainous [...] why are there so many of them prospering among us; oh, sure, we love to think victim, weep victim, mourn the murdered, pity the robbed, comfort the bereft, while villains get our sympathy only if their villainy demonstrates how they, poor things, have been victimized; and how we adore the bruises of the beaten, with whom, of course, we identify; but what of the beater's calluses, the beater's weary arms? since he [...] is getting his own back [...]: now I can produce pain, not merely receive it; now I can say I hate you in your helpless ear; now I can feel in my fingers the only justice I shall ever know, the vibration of my blows [...] (pp.435-6).

Here, Kohler dichotomises villain and victim, as opposed to villain and hero. In the context of the straightforward villain/hero dichotomy, the reader is naturally compelled to support the hero and condemn the villain; in the context of the villain/victim dichotomy, however, the reader's placement of affective investment is less easily determined. As Kohler identifies, villains only 'get our sympathy' if they can prove that they have, at some time, been victims themselves. The employment of this metaphor concerns itself as much with the question of why, as readers, we

⁸⁸ Gass, *The Tunnel*, p.433.

are so dismissive of the richly affective experience of a story's villains, as it does the question of why, as readers, we are more naturally compelled to sympathise with a story's victims.

In answer to the latter, Kohler poses a simple explanation: 'I see, I say, what I want to see, note what I want to note, like the rest of the self-absorbed human race' (p.449). The human condition demands that we filter our own experiences, collecting together those that represent us as victims, and discarding those that do not. Apart from the obvious suggestion that as readers, we would likely rather not identify with the most hateful characters, there is a finer point to be made about a reader's compulsion to two-dimensionalise a villainous character if he cannot exhibit at least a degree of victimhood. We may naturally resist identifying with a villain because that might force us to detect the emotional and experiential clutter of our lives to which we would rather turn a blind eye, but why must we diminish the affective experience of the villain with whom we resist identification? As Kohler describes, 'the beater's calluses, the beater's weary arms' are their own indicators of affective experience: instead of simply being a passive receptor of affect, the villain can actively and consciously generate it in another; instead of receiving pain, the villain 'can [now] produce pain'; instead of defining one's own experience by the affects projected upon him, the villain can now 'say I hate you in your helpless ear'.

While pain, hate, and fatigue all fall under an arguably negative category of affective experience, they are no less productive than the affective experiences associated with victimhood. Gass thus reveals the dichotomy of villain and victim to be a fallacy: while a victim is made to feel the effects of pain, hate, and fatigue, a villain both actively feels *and* projects pain, hate, and fatigue; the affective experiences of villain and victim are, therefore, not entirely distinct from one another, but form a generative cycle, wherein the victims made to feel these affects are vulnerable to the possibility of being transformed into villains themselves. The affective experience of the victim is merely a reflection of the affective experience of the villain, and we can only acknowledge this when the experience of the villain is not diminished and the agenda of the villain not eradicated.

What does this mean for *The Tunnel*, a novel which so boldly plays with our pre-conditioned expectations of the villain/victim dichotomy, by revealing the affective experiences of villain and victim to be so similar? One answer lies in the novel's representation of victimhood as collective experience. Where Gass represents the affective experiences of villain and victim as two sides of the same coin, he distinguishes between them by often referring to villains in the third-person singular and victims in the third-person plural:

When the bigot blows, only his victims receive sympathy [...]. In order to understand a bigot from the inside, you need to know what it is like to have a set of feelings you prize beyond price, and of which you are at the same time ashamed. You prize them because they are all that sustain you: the record of the crimes against you [...]. That promise and your continued impotence make you patient, very patient, inside the rhetoric of your wrath [...] (p.530).

Only 'the bigot blows', while the 'victims receive sympathy'; Kohler indicates that there is, ironically, a safety and comfort in the community of victimhood, while its collective affective experience is resisted by that of the singular villain. Gass inverts this rather utilitarian approach to affect, wherein victims are legitimised by their majority status in relationship to the villain, by suggesting that the affective experience of the singular villain is much richer than that of the collective experience of his victims. Villains collect injustices, are sustained by the 'set of feelings [they] prize beyond the price', the shame and 'continued impotence' that condition both the villain's own patience and the very nature of the 'rhetoric' of his 'wrath'. Gass reclaims the three-dimensionality of the villain in this novel; instead of surrendering to the reader's proclivity to perfunctorily dismiss the antagonist as the 'bad guy', Kohler describes not only what it means 'to understand a bigot from the inside', but why this might be so critical.

Through Kohler's efforts to recover the affective experience of the villain, Gass reveals the dangers that attend the human condition's compulsion to blindly identify with community feeling. Gass indicates that a reader's natural tendency to sympathise with the community of victimhood in fiction might make him/her just as likely to sympathise with the community of the 'rabble'; as Adorno suggests, the role of the fascist agitator is to employ his rhetoric of wrath in order to reposition ordinary citizens as victims, relying on a collective sense of community to incite outrage:

[B]y making the leader his ideal [the follower] loves himself, as it were, but gets rid of the stains of frustration and discontent which mar his picture of his own empirical self. This pattern of identification through idealization, the caricature of true conscious solidarity, is, however, a collective one. It is effective in vast numbers of people with similar characterological dispositions and libidinal leanings. The fascist *community of the people* corresponds exactly to Freud's definition of a group as being "a number of individuals who have substituted one and the same object for their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego."⁸⁹

Identification with a 'leader' is described here in the same manner as we might read identification with a 'protagonist' in a work of realist fiction, and whether that 'leader' takes the form of a villain or a victim depends not on the leader, but on the perception of those who encounter him. The singular villain, who delivers his 'blows', is likely to collectivise a community of victims; the singular villain who incites the rhetoric of wrath, however, is much more dangerous, as he is likely to collectivise a community of followers who want to identify as victims. If identification through idealisation is, at best, the suspension of disbelief – a fantastical form of ego-driven escapism –, then it is, at worst, collusion with the systems of power that prop up fascist ideology.

As Adorno suggests, the success of fascist rhetoric depends upon a sense of 'solidarity', only effective 'in vast numbers of people with similar characterological dispositions'. As individuals constituting a text's wider readership, Gass's reader must interrogate his/her own 'libidinal leanings' in relationship to this novel. To return to one of the primary questions driving this study, why are so many readers so resistant to the postmodern novel? Might we resist describing this sort of literature as affective because we do not want to embody uncomfortable affects that accompany the realisation of our empirical – rather than idealised – selves? In a Schrödingerian twist, a novel's narrator might be simultaneously both villain and victim until he or she interacts with or is observed by its readership. Further to this complication, depending upon the impulse of the individual reader, the novel's narrator might be realised as *either* victim or villain, scapegoat or rabble rouser, and the novel's readership may thus either succumb to its rhetoric or delegitimise its affective range.

⁸⁹ Adorno, pp.140-1.

Kohler, who is so readily accused of being a fascist agitator by both his colleagues and the novel's readers, considers that the purpose of his writing is not to rouse the rabble, but to charge it with its crimes: 'why do you write? on such a shitty subject? my reply chuckling out of me as easily as perspiration: I write to indict mankind.'⁹⁰ Kohler characterises the problematisation of the villain/victim dichotomy: Kohler is at once villain and victim, reprehensible and identifiable, a fascist sympathiser whose domestic experiences of pain and suffering in childhood and adolescence seem all too familiar. But in *The Tunnel*, Gass challenges our expectations of reader-character identification by inverting the power dynamic: we are not here to judge Kohler; Kohler is here to judge us. And that is what, at times, makes the process of reading this novel so uncomfortable, so affectively unfavourable.

The Tunnel perfectly illustrates the irony of our one-way system of reading. Kohler acknowledges that in positioning oneself in the frame of a window so you can see out, you are necessarily also allowing others to see in; where readers have been conditioned by literary realism to collect the novel's victims under their own wing while pointing the finger at the novel's villains, postmodern metafictional structures allow the novel to point back. Kohler argues '[i]f people disliked in me what I dislike in them, I wouldn't dislike them. We would have reached an understanding' (p.458). In order to transcend simplistic dichotomies which seek to collectivise our own experiences and alienate those of others, in order to support the affective experiences of others even if they do not belong to our own, and in order to negate the reductive 'us versus them' distinction that the villain/victim dichotomy engenders, we must allow the novel to interrogate the reader just as forcefully as the reader is allowed to interrogate the novel; in order to reach 'an understanding', we must acknowledge that what we dislike in others might also be what others dislike in ourselves, an affective quality of this novel which allows us to simultaneously identify with, while feeling disgust for, a character like Kohler. Through our identification and misidentification with Kohler over the course of the novel, Gass reveals his reader to be just as vulnerable to the communal solidarity of the fascist collective as Kohler himself. Adorno writes

⁹⁰ Gass, *The Tunnel*, p.457.

Freud's theory sheds light on the all-pervasive, rigid distinction between the beloved in-group and the rejected out-group. [...] [T]he question of why people love what is like themselves and hate what is different is rarely asked seriously enough.⁹¹

We enjoy sharing our affective experiences with others, but at what cost? Ultimately, Gass indicates that liberal society's efforts to invalidate fascism have often relied upon the very power structures used to legitimate it. By further insisting upon the social divide that emphasises the power of collective experience over individual experience, we risk slipping into the same rhetorical traps that enable fascist practice. Gass, therefore, invites his reader to *become* part of the structure of the novel, to behave as the hard tissues that give its soft tissues structure, developing increasingly towards an answer to the question of why belonging remains so central to both our intellectual and social experiences.

If part of the purpose of this novel is to challenge its reader to peer beneath the surface of our own lives, to acknowledge the things we 'dislike' in others as qualities of our own, then the novel's documentation of Kohler's self-excitation mimics the reader's own experience. Nagano describes Kohler's adolescent relationship with his neighbours in a moment which reveals this parallel between reader and protagonist:

[T]he unbearable otherness of the neighbors represents an internal, evil kernel of his father and himself, a kernel that Kohler must accept as an essential part of himself. Though this evil generates a deep sense of desperation, he must find a way to live with it, if he truly wants to survive.⁹²

In order to fully and effectively interrogate his own soft tissues – his own bursting, leaking, sagging heart – Kohler must accept that his own 'evil kernel', the softest, innermost nucleus of his own identity, is that which he both recognises and resents in others, and 'he must find a way to live with it, if he truly wants to survive.' The question of Kohler's survival culminates at the moment the novel finally reaches its inevitable climax, when his wife discovers the tunnel he has been digging from the family basement:

⁹¹ Adorno, p.143.

⁹² Nagano, p.84.

“I suggest you pack it all back. And sweep the signs of it. Cover your tracks.” An entire stack of *American Legion* magazines falls in disarray. Martha’s chaos is confounding mine. [...] Martha has determined that not even hate shall hold us in common arms. As I suppose death, this dénouement is disappointing. My life’s work lies beneath a heap of yellow, gray, and bluish dirt [...]. I’ll feel about it later. [...] I had nearly run out of pages among which to conceal my mind, and now that realm itself, hidden as it had been in History, is buried beneath this dunglike slag. What will happen next? Should I close down consciousness and sell the store? Will I know happiness, feel relief, and, if not at this moment, will I enjoy it later? [...] Martha thinks I mined my mine only to dirty her drawers, [...] was never going down or out or on or forward, and maybe she is right. Though she said “holes.” She doesn’t know everything. Actually she hasn’t a clue. At least she got the joke. Did she?⁹³

The moment Martha empties the dirt from the drawers in which Kohler was concealing it is the moment that the pages containing his consciousness become, once again, ‘buried beneath this dung’. The lengthy process of excavating its most deeply buried secrets has been countermanded in the physical and figurative act of its reinterment. In an effort to recover the soft tissues of his existence before they perish, Kohler risks their discovery, and when Martha does so Kohler describes it not as a climax but a ‘dénouement’. Now those remnants of his mind will remain ‘hidden’ forever in the histories Kohler has composed, the ‘History’ he has written finally representing the skeletal structure that remains of Kohler’s life once death has taken him. While Kohler describes how he will never be able to commit his inner life to the record, never be able to preserve the soft tissues of his existence, it is enough to cause Kohler to question whether he should ‘close down consciousness’ altogether. His affective reality has been diminished not only by the erosion of the evidence of his private experience but of the negation of his shared experience with Martha: ‘not even hate shall hold us in common arms’. Where hate was all that previously bound Kohler and Martha together in communal understanding, just as it bound together the fascist ‘rabble’, the ‘chaos’ of Martha’s that confounds his own is all that remains now for Kohler. Within the context of the novel, the bonespeak of Kohler’s historical narratives will outlast the perishable fleshspeak and the etherspeak of his buried memoirs, but the novel itself manifests as these very soft tissues, memorialised on the page, the kind of narrative that bursts, leaks, and sags in the same manner as the heart, at once affectively charged and affectively challenged by the nature of its own mutability.

⁹³ Gass, *The Tunnel*, pp.649-50.

‘It was a museum of memory’: The Exhibition of Affect and the Affect of Exhibition in *Middle C* and Selected Stories

If, as William H. Gass demonstrates in *The Tunnel*, the cyclical processes of interment and excavation inevitably complicate the act of memorialisation, then the process of exhibiting what has been excavated – of framing, and thus objectifying, an artefact – additionally challenges the relational properties of objects in time. In various of the early and late short stories, as well as in his final novel *Middle C* (2013), Gass illustrates how the autonomy of objects is typically threatened by the social, cultural, and/or political properties they acquire when they are exhibited or framed in new geographical or temporal contexts.

In the short story ‘Bed and Breakfast’, Walter forensically investigates the old bedroom he has been temporarily allocated to in a family-run boarding house, remarking ‘[i]t was a museum of memory’; this metaphor is curiously reminiscent of ‘the book as a container of consciousness’, the phrase borrowed from Gass’s essay of the same name.⁹⁴ As I will demonstrate, however, Gass’s creative examination of frames and containers not only predates his fictional and philosophical work of the 1990s, but reflects directly on the impact of ‘framing’ in a literary context, illustrating the tension between the autonomy of the text and the social, cultural, and/or political properties it acquires through its relations with the reader.

The idea that when an object is framed it becomes a sort of meta-object exists at the heart of academic discussions of the curatorial. Like a text that is framed in such a way that it draws attention to itself as ‘metafictional’, Arjun Appadurai remarks that an object, when consciously framed, becomes ‘somehow more than itself’:

[T]he curatorial moment in the life of objects involves a version of Heidegger’s idea of framing. Many other moments are relatively unselfconscious [...]. But in the curatorial

⁹⁴ Gass, *Cartesian Sonata*, p.127.

moment, there is an effort to make the object be more than itself; that is, to be a side of some learning, pedagogy, pleasure, judgment of duty, or broadly speaking, education. There is a framing: something in this moment is making the object or thing a meta-object that is somehow more than itself. And that is, it seems to me, what is special about this moment. [...]

[W]e may need to think about what that metastate is, and therefore what it should be. Are there limits? Can a curatorial framing be any way one likes? Or is there something normative, something that should be allowed or not allowed in that framing? [...] When the framing happens, is the object mute? Can the curator do anything? Or is the object exercising some wish, desire, or demand that the curator who is doing the framing has to negotiate with the object?⁹⁵

Appadurai's concern that the status of the object can be made to change in the act of exhibiting it comes to constitute this 'metastate' condition; Appadurai asks whether the object becomes 'mute' at the point of exhibition, or whether the object retains a sense of autonomy by exercising a 'wish, desire, or demand' that the curator must necessarily 'negotiate with'. Furthermore, Appadurai considers whether or not an object acquires a kind of pedagogy at the point at which it becomes 'more than itself'. Gass is repeatedly seen to grapple with these concerns himself in his stories and novels by employing metaphors such as photographs, houses, rooms, shops, and galleries, to illustrate how these framing spaces not only support, but give structure to their contents, in some cases heightening and in others challenging the status of the objects contained within them. In doing so, Gass reveals that the very same questions Appadurai asks of the metaobject can be asked of metafiction: does the self-conscious framing of a text support or undermine its autonomy? Is it possible for a text to exercise a 'wish, desire, or demand' that in some way dictates the way in which it is framed? And does a text become a vehicle for 'education' at the point at which it becomes 'more than itself'?

These questions are dramatised in the short story 'In Camera', in which Gass characterises the relationship between object and frame through photography:

I don't want to see through the picture to the world, the picture is not a porthole. I want the world *in*—you see—*in*—the photo. What a world it is after all! [...] It is misery

⁹⁵ Arjun Appadurai in conversation with Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, 'Tournament of Value', *Cultures of the Curatorial: Curatorial Things*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer (London: Sternberg Press, 2019), 215-226 (pp.216-7).

begetting misery, you bet; [...] I know what it is, you know what it is, we know how it is, if not why—yet I want the world as it is rescued by the camera and redeemed.⁹⁶

Mr. Gab – the protagonist and gallery owner of ‘In Camera’ – sees fit to distinguish between what it means for a frame (the picture) to signify an object (the world) and what it means for a frame (the picture) to *contain* an object (the world). In the act of signification, the frame loses its autonomy – it simply functions on the level of signifying the object; in the act of containment, however, both frame and object become inextricably related while retaining their own self-determining properties. When one contains the other, both frame and object – while related – remain ‘objects’ in their own right. Furthermore, while this self-conscious framing can elevate the object to metaobject, the work of fiction to metafiction, Mr. Gab indicates that the act of framing might also ‘rescue’ and ‘redeem’ the nature of the object contained by it. This suggests a necessarily moral or ethical dimension to framing. Yet, as I will suggest here, the characters of Gass’s later works increasingly grapple with the question of whether it is the framework that dictates the condition of the object contained within it, or the outsider, whose efforts to reconcile the condition of the framework with the condition of the object foreground its ethical dimensions and, therefore, its affective potential. The protagonists of *Middle C*, ‘In Camera’, and ‘Bed and Breakfast’, I will argue, demonstrate their self-consciousness both as mediators between framework and object, and as objects themselves contained by different kinds of frameworks, both at the level of metaphor and at the level of textual structure.

Von Bismarck and Meyer-Krahmer explain how self-consciousness is impacted by the Western ‘understanding of things’ in their introduction to *Cultures of the Curatorial*:

The understanding of things as stable carriers of meaning forms the constitutive center of the (Western) conception of the museum. [...] From appropriated object to object of inquiry, from classified artifact to evidence-generating narrative element, things play a central role in (re)constructing culture through presentation, economic and political power, and local communities. [...] There is a clear focus on the stability of the thing as a readable sign that appears to immediately represent difference by proclaiming its materiality. Furthermore, an asymmetrical relationship between the thing and the viewer

⁹⁶ Gass, *Eyes*, pp.40-1.

is inscribed into such a conception—lifeless matter on the one side, an intellect capable of understanding on the other.⁹⁷

Crucially, for von Bismarck and Meyer-Krahmer, Western curatorial culture's emphasis on appropriating artefacts is what elevates them to 'evidence-generating narrative element[s]', a notion akin to Appadurai's description of what happens when an object becomes metaobject. Western culture's 'clear focus' on an object's readability highlights, to some extent, an artificial condition which necessitates what von Bismarck and Meyer-Krahmer describe as the 'asymmetrical relationship between the thing and the viewer'. Curatorial space self-consciously frames objects in a way that foregrounds the role of the viewer as a co-creator of the object's meaning. In the same way as culture can be '(re)construct[ed]' through self-conscious presentation, we might think of a text as being appropriated and, thus, '(re)construct[ed]' by its reader. Von Bismarck and Meyer-Krahmer interrogate the possibilities presented by the increased weight of significance placed upon the viewer:

[T]he question must be asked to what extent stability and the infinite semiosis of the thing as a "semantic monster" must be brought into harmony. Or if it's possible to conceive formats of presentation that allow this relationship to be revealed in all its complexity and thus, through reflection, become productive (p.9).

Part of what Gass investigates in his own novels and stories are the risks and rewards attendant to this condition of contingent relationality, wherein an object's inherent meaning or autonomy might be 'brought into harmony' or otherwise threatened through the act of reflecting upon its semiotic potential in new or different contexts. Ultimately, the question of whether or not this relationship might be a productive one is reflected in Gass's concerns around how far an object/text is able to retain its own autonomy having been 'appropriated' by an external influence. By extension, Gass's works dwell on the questions of how far an object/text can be inherently didactic, or whether the moral dimensions it acquires when it becomes metaobject/metafiction are necessarily only imbued by its viewer/reader.

⁹⁷ Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, 'Curatorial Things: An Introduction', *Cultures of the Curatorial*, 7-15, (p.8).

This inquiry into the significance of the viewer/reader in relation to an object/text's meaning is focalised through the 'Inhumanity Museum' of Gass's final novel, *Middle C*. In this novel, Joseph Skizzen, a fraudulent professor of modern music at a local university, establishes a private museum in the attic rooms of the house he shares with his mother, a space dedicated to the exhibition of pictures and news clippings detailing some of the most violent incidents in recent history:

On the walls of his attic area were everywhere pinned atrocity pictures, [...] clips from films that showed what struck the eyes of those who first entered the extermination camps—careless heaps of skins and bones, entirely tangled, exhibiting more knees and elbows than two-pair-to-a-death ought allow—amateurishly aimed shots of the sodden trench-dead as well as bodies hanging over barbed battlefield wire [...].⁹⁸

The objects exhibited in the Inhumanity Museum are referred to as 'atrocity pictures'. If we ask ourselves what sort of world is contained '*in*' these pictures (to borrow the words of Mr. Gab), it is not only a particularly bleak and violent one, but one which appears entirely fragmented: the pictures exhibit 'more knees and elbows than two-pair-to-a-death ought allow', 'careless heaps of skins and bones', 'bodies hanging over barbed battlefield wire'. There are no autonomous, undivided bodies contained within these pictures – only barely recognisable fragments and limbs to be formally reconciled by the viewer. Indeed, Skizzen later acknowledges that the very nature of the images contained in his Inhumanity Museum made him think about 'how the body goes back to being a mere heap of stuff that might have some nutritional value to fungi' (p.284). The force of decay operating on what might once have been a familiar object, can just as quickly reduce it to its unrecognisable rudiments. The question that emerges from this condition is how far the viewer will employ his own cognitive faculties in an effort to organise the fractured image of the world contained within these pictures.

In the case of Joseph Skizzen, this question is further complicated by the influence of mortality both on images as objects and on the objects images contain. Not only is the mortality of the human bodies contained within these pictures exhibited in a manner which distorts our

⁹⁸ William H. Gass, *Middle C* (New York: Vintage International, 2013), p.57.

comprehension of them as functioning containers of life, but the pictures themselves are revealed by Skizzen to have a lifespan of their own:

There were images that had nowhere to hang but in his head, images he remembered from books but of which he had no other copy; particularly one, [...] that depicted the martyrdom of Saint Erasmus. [...] His curiosity aroused by this calamitous vision, Skizzen sought more bio concerning Saint Erasmus. One source simply said that “although he existed, almost nothing is known about him.” This sentence stayed with Skizzen as stubbornly as the piteous illumination. What a blessed condition Erasmus must have enjoyed! Although he existed, almost nothing was known of him. Although nothing was known of him, as a saint, he existed (pp.61-2).

The reversal of terms in the final two sentences illuminates the agency of framing or exhibiting as a gesture which not only serves to contain the world, but to preserve it. Although for Skizzen, a certain sense of liberation lies in the notion that one’s existence stands alone, independently of being ‘known’, he concedes that one cannot *endure* independently of being ‘known’, when he acknowledges that ‘[t]here were images that had nowhere to hang but in his head’.

The polarity represented by man’s existence privately lived and man’s existence publicly memorialised is one which intrigues Skizzen about himself. In ‘Constellation *Intolerance*’, Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer writes that ‘in addition to different forms of framing, the presentation of the objects plays a central role—as curatorial things, their status is temporarily changed.’⁹⁹ Here, Meyer-Krahmer distinguishes between ‘framing’ and ‘presentation’, arguing that presentation is as significant, if not more significant, for the role it plays in changing the ‘status’ of objects. The differentiation between presentation and framing is illustrated in a passage during which Skizzen contemplates his naked reflection in the mirror:

[H]e would now and then stand naked in front of the mirror in his bedroom door to wonder why he was standing there, why anything—his wardrobe, his bed—was there, why he was so thin and why he had let a beard appear—oh vanity! because he wanted to be thought idiosyncratic by his students—and why his hair was unkempt—oh vanity! because he wanted to be seen as quite a character on the campus; but so naked now he couldn’t look at everything that was shamelessly mirrored there disgracing any self he might have chosen as his public image; though in better moments he would argue that his reflection, apparently stripped of all subterfuge, was really a misleading appearance and not his real self, which was five foot eight and one hundred forty-two, muscular

⁹⁹ Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, ‘Constellation *Intolerance*’, *Cultures of the Curatorial*, 57-71 (p.61).

though not by much, absent his mirror's identifying marks—for instance, the rough patch on his knee where he so often picked off scabs, and that small mole like a dot of dye on his chest—really bare of body hair and so utterly ordinary no attentions would be drawn to it even if it stood nude as a statue, loincloth unattached, in a public square.¹⁰⁰

Skizzen considers, firstly, his presentation – a condition dimensionalised specifically by the manner in which it makes the private public – by conceding that his beard and his unkempt hair have been self-fashioned to achieve a particular ‘public image’. His admission that ‘so naked now he couldn’t look at everything that was shamelessly mirrored there’ indicates a separation between the public self he presents, and the private self framed through the physical and figurative acts of self-reflection. Skizzen notes that the reflection of his body – ‘bare of body hair’, ‘muscular though not by much’, ‘five foot eight and one hundred forty-two’, the realistic condition of the container housing his consciousness – might still be ‘a misleading appearance and not his real self’. Here, his private self is consciously framed by the outline of both the mirror and his own self-awareness. Through his ‘presentation’, Skizzen’s status is changed: he is not the self-fashioned ‘character’ he has created for himself on campus. Through his ‘framing’, however, he both is and is not: his own identifying marks – ‘the rough patch on his knee’, ‘that small mole like a dot of dye on his chest’ – are reflected back to him, yet they risk contamination by the ‘mirror’s identifying marks’. The image in the mirror might reflect his true form, and yet he stands before it independently of his representation. Much like the disembodied limbs populating the pictures in Skizzen’s Inhumanity Museum, this passage evidences exhibition’s tendency to highlight individual features, requiring the onlooker to reconcile the image of the object for himself. The increasingly dysphoric condition Skizzen develops in relationship to his own body indicates how framing, as opposed to presentation, is what elevates the ‘self’ to a kind of ‘meta-self’ – one which simultaneously is and is not its ‘utterly ordinary’ original form, and one which emphasises individual details at the expense of complete embodiment. It is only when his true form is ‘shamelessly mirrored’ back to him that Skizzen is forced to acknowledge the distance between this and his ‘public image’; what’s notable about this condition is that it not only serves to ‘disgrace’ his self-fashioned form, but causes him to feel shame about the exposure of his ‘naked’ body.

¹⁰⁰ Gass, *Middle C*, p.284.

This visceral affective response comes to define Skizzen's persistent anxiety about 'how the body goes back to being a mere heap of stuff that might have some nutritional value to fungi' (p.284). Skizzen does not only struggle to fashion his own physical form, he struggles to rhetorically shape his unease regarding the persistence of the human race:

First Skizzen felt mankind must perish, then he feared it might survive.

First	Skizzen	felt	mankind	must	perish
then	he	feared	it	might	survive

Twelve tones, twelve words, twelve hours from twilight to dawn (p.352).

Throughout the novel, Skizzen revises this phrase meticulously; his nagging 'fear' that mankind 'might survive' drives his compulsion to find an entirely harmonious expression for it. When Skizzen considers the chaos of human life, he experiences something akin to vertigo, indicating the 'dizziness' that results from facing the 'impossibilities' of violence and disorder in the civilised world:

Whenever he undertook to classify all the ways human beings have killed or injured one another, he felt dizzy from the impossibilities that faced him. If wars were human necessities [...], how could he call them unnatural, inhuman, or basically unethical. Could the inevitable be immoral? (p.356).

The musically harmonious quality of the 'twelve tones, twelve words, twelve hours' seems at odds with the vertiginous fear of the thought it gives form to. It is almost as though by aspiring to musical form, the expression seeks to do away with its underlying content altogether, allowing Skizzen to cast away his fears and couch himself in the comfort of elegant articulation. Yet, Gass's later works indicate that the object contained by its linguistic frame can never be entirely disregarded; it might be changed, reformed, or elevated, but it cannot be annihilated. Indeed, to borrow Mr Gab's phrase, Skizzen's efforts to give harmony to his expression of the 'unnatural, inhuman' habits of mankind represent his efforts to 'redeem' the 'immoral'.

One's capacity to redeem the immoral through the act of self-conscious framing is further explored in 'In Camera'; the story's exposition of the relationship between 'beauty' and

the 'ordinary eye' bears a curious resemblance to Sven Lütticken's suggestion that '[t]he human mind may be a greater artificer than the human hand':¹⁰¹

If the great gray world holds sway beneath the garish commerce of color, so the perception of its beauty hides from the ordinary eye, for what does the ordinary eye do but ignore nearly everything it sees, seeking its own weak satisfactions?¹⁰²

Like Skizzen, Gab, a photography shop owner, 'had achieved an Archive, made his own museum in the midst of a maelstrom' (p.68). Through diligent curating and archiving, Gab arrives at the conclusion that we must distinguish between the 'ordinary eye' and those eyes capable of taking 'the great gray world' and perceiving 'its beauty'. If beauty is something that hides from the 'ordinary eye', is it the case that 'beauty' is an inherent, but mysteriously elusive quality of objects, or that 'beauty' is a quality attributed to an object by the great 'artificer': the 'human mind'?

The tension between an object's innately animate qualities and the human mind's proclivity to dramatise them is explored through the personification of the photographs in Gab's shop. Not only are the wire hangers framing the pictures described as 'weary', but Gab attributes the pictures themselves with human embodiment, clinging to their frames '[a]s if holding on with one hand' (p.7). It remains unclear whether the pictures are exhibiting this animated desire to remain attached to their frames, or whether it is simply Gab's febrile imagination, one of those exceptional 'eyes' capable of perceiving 'beauty', that imposes life upon them.

Gab's understanding of the animated relationship between an object and its frame is one through which he contextualises his understanding of the animated relationship between humankind and the constructed civilisation we have created for ourselves:

¹⁰¹ Sven Lütticken, 'Fetishize This! Artifacts and Other Agents at the Edge of Art', *Cultures of the Curatorial*, 283-309 (p.287)

¹⁰² Gass, *Eyes*, p.30.

We pass through frames, Mr. Gab had said. We walk about our rooms, our house, the neighborhood, and our elbow enters into a divine connection with a bus bench or bubbler in the park, a finial, a chair or letter lying on a hall table, which is, in an instant—click—dissolved (p.69).

Ultimately, the metaphor of photography provides Gass with an image through which he can foreground a broader, more expansive philosophical inquiry into the relationship between objects and frames. When an object passes through a frame, how does it change? Although *Middle C* and 'In Camera' explore framing in a rather explicit manner, Gab's suggestion that when we 'walk about our rooms, our house, the neighborhood' we enter 'into a divine connection' with these frames, echoes Gass's investigation into rooms, houses, and neighbourhoods in his earlier short stories 'Icicles' and 'Bed and Breakfast', both of which explore the relationship of mankind to the framework of modern human life.

'Icicles' was published in Gass's first collection of short stories, *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* (1968). It tells the story of a disenchanted real estate agent, Fender, struggling to find warmth, heart, and meaning in the frozen landscape of his local neighbourhood and the empty houses he is responsible for showcasing. Fender's attitude is set against that of his employer, Mr. Pearson, whose harsh, sales-oriented approach to life is nonetheless animated by his conviction that properties exhibit the same characteristics as people:

[I]f there was an address—anywhere—it caught his eye, for an address was the name of a property, [...] because properties were like people, they had characters; they suffered from vicissitudes, as he'd told Fender often, and fell upon evil times like the best of us did, only to rise up again and be renewed [...].¹⁰³

Just as objects can become metaobjects by becoming framed and, thus, known in some way, Pearson describes how a property becomes elevated by its 'address' (name), its 'character', and its 'vicissitudes'. Pearson describes properties as exhibiting the capacity to be both passive and active agents in the creation of their own destinies – they might fall 'upon evil times', but they can, too, 'rise up again and be renewed'. For Mr Gab, photographs can rescue and 'redeem' the

¹⁰³ William H. Gass, *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2015), p.127.

images of the world that they contain, while properties, for Pearson, can ‘rise up’ and renew themselves; can the same be said for properties in relationship to the people they contain?

‘Icicles’ grapples with this very position by asking what is the active agent in the relationship between the framework of an otherwise inanimate property and what we reason to be the real, animate people who dwell within it:

People are property. [...] People own property—that’s what we say—that’s what we think. Oh sure. Sure. A howler—that one. Listen: *property owns people*. [...] Stands to reason. [...] So the property that lives, Fender, that lasts and lives and goes right on, Fender, and then goes on again, that overlives us, Fender, that *overlives*... well, that’s the property that’s real, and *it—it owns the rest* (pp.130-1).

Pearson’s emphatic inversion of the assumption that ‘[p]eople own property’ positions property, instead, as the animate force: not only does property own people, but it ‘lasts and lives’. The framework, therefore, not only has an active role to play in the containment of its object, but ‘overlives’ it. This explication of the relationship between property and people anticipates the explication of the relationship between photography and the world expounded by the likes of Gab and Skizzen from ‘In Camera’ and *Middle C*: when the contents are perishable, the durability of the framework can be tasked with the responsibility of memorialising them.

In ‘Icicles’, Gass anticipates the suggestion that the conscious framing of an object might increase that object’s own self-consciousness and elevate it to the status of metaobject. Fender is left to cope with the revelation that not only will his own house ‘overlive’ him, but that, once consciously framed, his status as object undergoes an irreversible shift:

[I]t did seem a hard saying...hard to bear. His little house possessed him, it was true. He’d been cut to fit its walls. He saw what it permitted. He did not reach beyond the rooms. [...] Pearson was right. The question his buyers should have asked—do I want to belong to this house?—they never asked. [...] His car owned him and his shirts and shoes owned him [...]. He moved uneasily in his clothes, staring at his suit. [...] Body too—Pearson would lean over the desk and whisper—your body owns you... another house, isn’t it? (p.131).

Fender, like Kohler of *The Tunnel*, is forced to acknowledge that his perception of the world is conditioned by the framework in which he finds himself contained: ‘[h]e saw what it permitted.’

Fender, like Skizzen of *Middle C*, is forced to acknowledge that he is not who he thought he was in relationship to the public face that he felt he had fashioned for himself: '[h]e moved uneasily in his clothes'. When Pearson ultimately remarks that 'your body owns you... another house, isn't it?', Fender experiences the same dysmorphic sensation as Skizzen: if his body is the frame, then is his soul the object? And if so, can it be defined independently of what frames it?

These questions begin to echo those established within *Omensetter's Luck* and *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*: what is the relationship between body and soul? How do they interact with one another? Can one exist independently of the other? This investigation of Gass's work has brought us both full circle and to a new and unique point of enquiry: if the characters in these novels and short stories express themselves both physically and metaphorically as text 'objects', and if the literary form in which they are contained serves as the property, the photograph, or the neighbourhood that frames them, can we think of the text-object as 'negotiating' with its curator (in this case, the writer himself), as 'exercising some wish, desire, or demand' to be contained in a certain way? And how does this incite the affective investment of its reader?

The story which answers these questions most comprehensively and most coherently, through both a physical and figurative consideration of the relationship between text-object and formal framework, is 'Bed and Breakfast'. The story follows Walter Riffaterre, a travelling accountant subsisting on a ever-dwindling wage, who develops a slow-burning obsession with the objects contained within the guest rooms he occupies. This obsession culminates in a troubling revelation which challenges the reverence he feels for one of the couples who offers to house him.

The status of Walter both as an object aficionado and an object himself is revealed through his relationship with physical books, narratives, and the imagination:

But he didn't riffle through the books. He held them gingerly, glancing at the jackets, sampling a bit of the flap copy sometimes, [...] drawn and repelled by all these—well—

former volumes—books no more now that they were never read. There was something about them—abandonment maybe—which resembled him [...]’¹⁰⁴

Walter is established early in the story as a character who is predominantly concerned with frames at the expense of the objects contained within them; his handling of the ‘jackets’ and the ‘flap copy’ dictates the extent to which he engages with books, repressing his compulsion to ‘riffle through’ them in order to avoid their contents. Walter acknowledges that the books ‘resembled him’ in their abandoned state; their abandonment indicates both that there is something innate about the status of objects, existing as they do in their ‘former’ state, independently of appropriation by others, while being simultaneously threatened with losing their status, the notion of their being forgotten a very real possibility ‘now that they were never read.’ Like Skizzen, Walter’s main concern is not only that the mortality of an object might be determined by the mortality of its frame, but that if an object’s status is not changed and, thus, acknowledged by the great ‘artificer’ – the human mind – an object might lose its status altogether. In the context of the literary object, this, too, suggests the influence of the human mind: if a frame (form) is responsible for preserving an object (content), then it is the job of the great ‘artificer’ to imbue the object with life: when the object becomes an ‘object of inquiry’, it opens itself up to the possibility of a change in status, a change in meaning.

One of the contextual changes that takes place when a book is read is that the private autonomy of the object gains a public face: its content is negotiated by its curator/creator, framed by its form, and appropriated by its reader. Walter, while occasionally serving as stand-in for the status of the object, also enacts the role of the reader in this tale. When he arrives at Missus Ambrose’s bed and breakfast in Illinois, Walter considers that ‘it would be someone else’s place, full of foreign things, personal and uncommercial’ (p.86). His first thought, therefore, is that these ‘personal’ and ‘foreign things’ exist and perhaps, indeed, thrive independently of his relationship to them. Later, however, he asks himself ‘[o]r were these objects, like so much else, here only to be admired?’ (p.94). This afterthought indicates a rather different condition: Walter concedes that the ‘objects’ contained within the guest house might be

¹⁰⁴ Gass, *Cartesian Sonata*, p.83.

purely aesthetic; if this is the case, then he who admires them plays an active role in co-creating their value. For Walter, this is a role about which he is at least somewhat intentional, since he admits that ‘he did take an interest [...] in the innumerable number of objects, ornaments, and endearments she had amassed’ (pp.97-8).

The interplay between matter, mind, and affective movement becomes increasingly complex as the relationship between object/text and viewer/reader develops as a multifaceted entity:

Walter’s mind had at last managed to move his emotions.

History was here, too. History. Not a life lost, not a thought gone, not a feeling faded, but retained by these things, in the memories they continually encourage, the actions they record, the emotions they represent, not once upon a time, but in the precious present, where the eye sees and the heart beats (p.107).

For Walter, the revelation that objects are animated by the ‘memories’, ‘actions’, and ‘emotions’ they retain through time is a distinctly affective one. Through a consideration of the emotions stored by an object, Walter, too, finds his own ‘emotions’ moved. An object can retain its own autonomy through its ‘history’; its lifespan runs in parallel to those with whom it comes into contact. And yet, ‘memories’, ‘actions’, and ‘emotions’ long passed can be brought into ‘the precious present’ by the eye that ‘sees’ and the heart that ‘beats’, by one who brings such an object into unity with the moment in which it is beheld.

The complexity of this relationship between an object and its beholder is explored by Graham Harman in *Art and Objects* (2019):

The autonomy of artworks does not mean that they would remain artworks even if all humans were exterminated [...]. What it does mean is that, despite being a necessary ingredient of every artwork, the human beholder cannot exhaustively grasp the artwork of which he or she is the ingredient.¹⁰⁵

For Harman, an artwork – as an ‘object’ – cannot be *entirely* autonomous without a beholder, but an artwork possesses an innate character which the beholder cannot ‘exhaustively grasp’.

¹⁰⁵ Graham Harman, *Art and Objects* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), p.45.

This means that an artwork is made to perform for its beholder; just as an object's 'memories', 'actions', and 'emotions' can be animated by the beholder, the beholder's own 'memories', 'actions', and 'emotions' can be animated by the object. Harman argues that '[f]or OOO [object-oriented ontology], the meaning of beauty is not some vague appeal to an ill-defined aestheticism, but [...] the disappearance of a real object behind its sensual qualities. [...] [T]his always has a theatrical effect' (p.24). The 'real object' continues to exist behind the 'sensual qualities' that appeal directly to its beholder, which gives rise to a tension between visibility and invisibility.

Annette Bhagwati takes this notion further in relationship to curatorial practice by suggesting that the very act of concealing something draws attention both to its aesthetic and its functional qualities:

By concealing something, attention is drawn to the thing concealed—and thereby to its function, shape, and cultural importance. In fact, the act of concealing something is indexical in nature. [...] [I]ts space of attention is not generated by display, but by its very opposite: the denial of visibility.¹⁰⁶

If framing the sensual qualities of an object so as to make it performative can inhibit the visibility of its 'realness', denying the object visibility altogether not only indicates the object through its absence, but disorients the beholder within the space that resists its performance. Concealment of an object, therefore, gives space for attention to its 'denial of visibility'. Attention is not only drawn to its 'function, shape, and cultural importance', but encourages speculation about what its relationship might be to the space in which it is concealed as well as to the other objects contained within that space. When a particular object is made visible or invisible, does it change the overall culture of the objects that remain within the performative space, objects 'here only to be admired?'

For Walter, the visible objects in the room cohere in an historical narrative that testifies to the virtue and sanctity of the Ambroses' marriage:

¹⁰⁶ Annette Bhagwati, 'Modes of Aesthetic Display in African Art', *Cultures of the Curatorial*, 133-162 (p.152).

Next to the card, on another white doily with a pink string fringe—boy—upside down and open in a V like a Boy Scout tent, was propped a wedding booklet. [...] Walter held the booklet in his hand while walking about the bedroom in a kind of trance of possession. The desk was a wedding monument... that's what it was. It was a museum of memory. And maybe this was a bridal bed and maybe this space was the same space as the space of the First Night. The Vows.¹⁰⁷

This passage echoes curiously with that in which Walter handles books by their covers, their bindings, their flap copies, but refuses to riffle through the pages to discover the contents that lie within them. Walter's mind begins to dominate the culture of the space, as he holds the booklet 'in his hand' while creating his own narrative for it in a 'trance of possession'. Crucially, Walter becomes possessed by the narrative possibilities offered by these objects, rather than the reality they conceal. His assurance that '[t]he desk was a wedding monument', 'a museum of memory', quickly devolves into uncertainty as he muses 'maybe this was a bridal bed' and 'maybe this space was the same space as the space of the First Night.' It is the narrative he imposes upon the objects performing in this space that culminates in his metaphorical consecration of their contribution to the 'First Night. The Vows.'

The bedroom space in which these objects are contained is not the only curatorial space in this passage, facilitating the framing and performance of these objects, but the objects themselves testify to the nature of preserving and memorialising, of translating their own semiosis through time. It is not the room that is 'a museum of memory', but the desk, the object contained within it. This abrupt admission of Walter's suggests that something like a desk can function as both an object *and* the structure that frames it, can function both as an historical receptacle and the curatorial framework that facilitates its performance in the present moment. Walter remarks that 'the past was real, he knew—he knew it—and were these wedding guests gone now; had they become bone and tomb and stone and attic'd objects, gone into the past which filled this room?' (p.131). Akin to Skizzen's revelation that the people represented by the historical artefacts collected in his Inhumanity Museum are just as mortal as the artefacts themselves, Walter asks whether the 'wedding guests' memorialised in the guest book might be

¹⁰⁷ Gass, *Cartesian Sonata*, p.127.

thought of in the same way as the ‘attic’d objects’ which filled the room: simultaneously absent and present.

The ‘denial of visibility’, however, most animates a reader/beholder, because it allows for a writer/curator to deliberately introduce resistance into the relationship between absent things and their textual/performative representations in order to illuminate the qualities of the asymmetrical relationship between reader/beholder and text/object: ‘lifeless matter on the one side, an intellect capable of understanding on the other’.¹⁰⁸ If this is the case, the reader/ beholder claims just as much, if not *more* responsibility when it comes to (re)constructing its meaning, its function, and its aesthetic value. Indeed, what was once an organic, autonomous object might, in the present moment, be ‘lifeless matter’; and yet, through its framing and recontextualisation, it can be reanimated through the imagination of reader/beholder.

Walter arrives at this revelation when he muses ‘[m]aybe he could strike a bargain. [...] They were still here: his things, his home, his history’.¹⁰⁹ The ‘bargain’, that involves not only settling for his own narrative reconstruction of this space in relationship to the objects within it, but integrating himself into that very space as an object himself, is threatened when one of the ‘invisible’ objects makes itself visible:

Beneath the desktop was a drawer, which he hoped might contain a pad of writing paper. [...] His hand found nothing, which was surprising—wait—a piece of soft cloth, which he drew out and held up. [...] Between his two hands he had a... [...] was it what they called a thong? Skimpy as could be. But it was filmy. It was underwear.

Walter wadded the G-string in his fist as if to conceal it from himself, his face hot with shame and shock. This lascivious thing, he thought, in the matrimonial temple (pp. 141-2).

The discovery of this hitherto invisible object threatens the coherence of Walter’s narrative reconstruction of the museal space of the wedding night as one of virtue, sanctity, and decency. Not only does this discovery threaten Walter’s successful appropriation of this space and these

¹⁰⁸ von Bismarck and Meyer-Krahmer, ‘Introduction’, p.8.

¹⁰⁹ Gass, *Cartesian Sonata*, p.132.

objects, but it threatens his own status as object. This is evident not only in his affective response to the discovery – the ‘shame’ and ‘shock’ he feels in the moments announcing this object’s sudden visibility – but in his immediate desire to return the object to absence: when he wads ‘the G-string in his fist’ it is not only to conceal the object from the performative space of the bedroom, but ‘to conceal it from himself’.

Walter thus enacts Wolfgang Iser’s understanding of the role of the reader in relationship to the text. In *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), Iser suggests that while a reader interacting with a text represents an effort to ‘formulate’ narrative continuity by imbuing the text with meaning, it also represents an effort on the reader’s part to ‘formulate’ him/herself:

The constitution of meaning not only implies the creation of a totality emerging from interacting textual perspectives [. . .] but also, through formulating this totality, it enables us to formulate ourselves and thus discover an inner world of which we had hitherto not been conscious.¹¹⁰

By framing his idealised self – ‘his things, his home, his history’ – within another’s domestic space, Walter attempts to reconstruct himself in a manner coherent with his idealistic impressions of the room based on what is visible at a surface level. His status as an object within this space is changed when he forces himself to uncover the invisible (he continues to ‘grope’ about despite initially finding ‘nothing’), an action which allows him to ‘discover an inner world of which [he] had hitherto not been conscious.’ The difference between the revelation that Walter experiences and the cathartic revelatory pathos one might experience upon reading a classical tragedy or traditional romance novel, is that the ‘inner world’ Walter discovers is one he would rather repress.

In this chapter, I have outlined some of the affects readers are conditioned to experience when they interact with Gass’s prose: dysphoria, fear, disgust, claustrophobia, vertigo. Here, the ‘shame’ and ‘shock’ that Walter experiences when he uncovers a new dimension of this

¹¹⁰ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p.158.

domestic space are akin to the uncomfortable affects the reader is forced to confront in him/herself through his/her interaction with postmodern fiction: the self-conscious quality of literary postmodernism's formal framing causes the text 'object' to undergo a shift, a shift which makes what was once invisible visible: the text-object, the framework supporting it, and even the reader, whose interaction with the text-object enlivens it. The 'inner world' of our own that we discover is an enactment of what literary postmodernism achieves in actively pulling to the surface that which we would rather repress. Gass's examination of the textual embodiment, excavation, and exhibition of aspects of characterological consciousness does not limit itself to enacting the processes of embodying, excavating, and exhibiting the self-consciousness of the postmodern literary artefact; these qualities also force the reader to examine his/her own sense of embodiment in relationship to the body of the text, to interrogate the biases of his/her own cognitive fluctuations in relationship to the text's rhetorical influence, and to confront the affective reality of awkwardly encountering one's own self-consciousness through the self-conscious exhibition of the text-object. Walter's idealistic impression of Missus Ambrose, for example, is not only tainted by the visibility of the G-string; Walter himself experiences a visceral, second-hand sense of shame. So, too, is the reader of Gass's *The Tunnel* seduced into identifying with Kohler before Kohler's true fascist nature is revealed; the resultant disgust experienced by the reader is made all the more visceral by the fact that s/he must confront the reality that in order to identify with Kohler, s/he must have recognised something of him/herself within him.

In answer to the question of whether or not this can be seen to be a productive quality of postmodern narratives, I would argue that it can. It is not simply that the process of reading often convoluted postmodern texts can be uncomfortable, but that the process of discovering an hitherto unconscious 'inner world' can be uncomfortable, and this discovery can be educative. To channel Appadurai's claim, the text 'object' *can* become more than itself, it *can* serve a pedagogical function, even if it does naturally resist the tone of socially and politically corrective moralising. If the self-conscious framework of the postmodern novel is the domestic guest room of 'Bed and Breakfast', drawing attention to itself as a brightly-lit stage which forces us to recognise how the visible objects are performing, while simultaneously shining its

light into the darker corners to reveal what has been concealed, then the discovery of the G-string is one of those elusive textual moments that only literary self-consciousness can illuminate: it is an invisible object made visible in order to challenge the idealistic coherence that the reader attempts to impose upon the narrative order of its surface detail.

Walter arrives at the same conclusion:

But now his thoughts began to sort themselves out. He'd found it where it had been left, with all the other mementos, all the bridal things. [...] This then—he held the garment in his hands again, displayed it for himself—this was a part of the bride's wedding outfit.¹¹¹

His initial resistance – his initial impulse to push the object back into the margins of his unconscious by denying it visibility – is replaced by a softening, by a surrendering to the discomfort it causes him. Only once 'his thoughts began to sort themselves out' is he able to reconstruct the culture of the room in the light of the relations between *all* the objects contained within it: 'this was a part of the bride's wedding outfit.' What we are left with is a much less idealistic, and much more realistic picture of the world. In order for the world to be redeemed by its representation, it must stand fully and shamelessly exposed, and the reader/holder must open him/herself to the possibility of feeling his/her way through the darker corners s/he would prefer to avoid. Ultimately, this can only be achieved when the reader acknowledges that his/her own affective range does not determine that of the text. Like the objects Gass investigates in his narratives, the postmodern text 'object' is framed in a way that reveals it as a compound of which the reader is just one ingredient: for a narrative's full potency and pedagogy to be realised, it must teach its reader that it carries its own 'memories', 'actions', and 'emotions', and that its historically innate condition – and our own – can be better understood by surrendering to it in its entirety: 'the heart's been here and cared for even this little lost place; nothing has been neglected; nothing has been overlooked, nothing rejected. Even this, Walter said in amazement, his face in the satin. Ummm...this. This too' (p.143).

¹¹¹ Gass, *Cartesian Sonata*, p.142.

Chapter Three

‘Inside, safe, or outside, lost’: Referential Uncertainty and the Affect of Division in the Works of Thomas Pynchon

In some ways, there could be no writer more antithetical to William H. Gass than Thomas Pynchon. While Gass produced copious philosophical nonfiction over the course of his career, Pynchon’s notoriously reclusive lifestyle, ritual avoidance of award ceremonies and public speaking events, and refusal to provide much in the way of self-reflective commentary (the introduction to *Slow Learner* is an unprecedented exception), clearly indicate that he intends to allow his works to speak for themselves. Yet both writers railed against the dominant culture of the mid-twentieth century American literary canon, and both writers have been hailed as instrumental in the inception of American literature’s postmodern tradition.

Based on academic output, one might argue that critical interest in Gaddis and Gass pales in comparison to Thomas Pynchon. Thanks to what David Cowart describes as Pynchon’s ‘various avatars’, critical interpretations of his works encompass ‘atheistic Pynchon, religious Pynchon, Marxist Pynchon, Pynchon the American visionary, Pynchon the iconoclast, modern Pynchon, postmodern Pynchon, post-postmodern Pynchon and so on.’¹ Since his works span an extraordinary period of literary and cultural history – his first novel, *V.*, was published in 1963, and his most recent novel, *Bleeding Edge*, published 50 years later in 2013 – the ‘avatars’ readers have associated with his works have changed over time. Hanjo Berressem notes that

¹ David Cowart, ‘Pynchon in literary history’, *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*, eds. Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman and Brian McHale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 83-96 (p.93).

initially ‘Pynchon was read as a prophet of doom and miscommunication who brought ideas from science, technology, politics, history, philosophy and art into resonance [...]’.² With time, however, ‘the image of the “prophet of doom” had lost its allure’, and so, too, had Pynchon’s reputation ‘as a prophet of pure play and as master of ironical detachment’ become ‘less interesting’; as trends in literary criticism changed with the passing decades, Berressem notes that what endures in Pynchon’s works is ‘a certain intensity, an affective urgency’ (p.170).

Whichever avatar individual readers attribute to Pynchon's works, it is impossible to neglect the fact that, like Gaddis and Gass, his early fiction coincides with a pivotal moment in the development of literary postmodernism. Brian McHale argues that Pynchon, perhaps more than any other writer, is responsible for the very vocabulary that is now used to frame our understanding of the postmodern novel:

[W]e might go so far as to say, not that postmodern theory depends on Pynchon’s fiction for exemplification, but that, without Pynchon’s fiction, there might never have been such a pressing need to develop a theory of literary postmodernism in the first place.³

McHale, along with Inger H. Dalsgaard and Luc Herman describe how Pynchon, ‘[n]ot satisfied with the work of Norman Mailer, the Beats and other contemporaries and predecessors, [...] forged a new poetics’.⁴ Pynchon’s fiction could only later be seen to ‘exemplify various theories of postmodernity – the historical and cultural conditions of the postmodern period’, as well as ‘various theories of postmodernism’, exhibiting characteristics such as ‘double-coding (Huyssen, Jencks), suspensive irony and pastiche (Wilde, Jameson), the ontological dominant (McHale) and cognitive mapping (Jameson)’ (p.5).

For other critics, such as Joanna Freer, Pynchon’s novels fall into Linda Hutcheon’s category of historiographic metafiction, for their integration of ‘fiction’ and ‘(often obscure)

² Hanjo Berressem, ‘Coda: How to read Pynchon’, *Cambridge Companion*, 168-177 (p. 169).

³ Brian McHale, ‘Pynchon’s postmodernism’, *Cambridge Companion*, 97-111 (p.97).

⁴ Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman and Brian McHale, ‘Introduction’, *Cambridge Companion*, 1-8 (p.5).

historical fact'.⁵ Freer cites the emergence of the 'encyclopaedic' novel form, noting that while 'postmodern texts are often seen as closed off [...], as self-absorbed and apolitical', Pynchon's work, instead, is 'laden with political critique' (p.1). Although Pynchon's fiction became a catalysing influence on the development of a vocabulary of postmodernism, the culture of postmodernism's more recently established reputation for 'sterile, campy, kitschy, jokey dead-end games, media stunts, and parodic conceits', could not, therefore, be further from the intentions of those that originally inspired the movement. Freer goes so far as to suggest that Pynchon's objective is to prove that postmodern 'literature can, in fact, exert an influence and promote social change.'⁶

This chapter neither entertains the temptation to establish a new 'avatar' through which we might interpret Pynchon's novels, nor does it aim to outline, clarify, or challenge the existing avatars inaugurated by other critics. Instead, this chapter aims to explore Freer's claim that, through Pynchon, we might come to understand how postmodern literature can 'exert an influence and promote social change', and assess how far this can be seen to be a direct effect of the 'affective urgency' that Berressem identifies in Pynchon's works. The relationship between the promotion of 'social change' and 'affective urgency' is focalised in Pynchon's works through his employment of literary structure, specifically the metafictional paradigms of framing and frame-breaking.

Pynchon's utilisation of what Patricia Waugh describes as 'framing' and 'frame-breaking' succeeds in confusing the boundaries between the familiar and the alien in his works.⁷ Fredric Jameson famously describes how the cultural condition of alienation contemporaneous to Pynchon's literary output is aligned with disembodiment, surface-dwelling, and 'a waning of

⁵ Joanna Freer, *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p.1.

⁶ Ihab Hassan, 'Globalism and its Discontents: Notes of a wandering Scholar', *Profession* (1999), 59-67 (p.60); Freer, p.2.

⁷ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen & Co., 1984), p.31.

affect'.⁸ Pynchon's engagement with what it means to find oneself either familiarised with or alienated within one's own environment, however, is predominantly embodied, affective, and deeply concerned with what it means to encounter surfaces, barriers, and boundaries. Pynchon's novels play with these ideas by playing with the image of boundaries. This 'play', however, ought not be thought of as trivial; instead, a range of negative affects attendant to the conditions of disorientation (vertigo, paranoia, disgust, etc.) in this body of fiction expose twentieth century America's advancement of capitalism and cultural exceptionalism as primary forces of alienation in contemporary society.

In order to understand how Pynchon engages literary framing and frame-breaking in the context of postmodernism, it is important to outline how approaches to both fiction and criticism evolved from the end of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. McHale, for example, argues that postmodernism represents a shift from the modernist preoccupation with epistemology (or what it means 'to know') to ontology (or what it means 'to be').⁹ However, McHale concedes that it is difficult to situate Pynchon in the context of this divide. He suggests delineating between Pynchon's early works, such as *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, which indicate 'modernist problems of epistemology', and later works, beginning with *Gravity's Rainbow*, which is marked initially by Slothrop's 'epistemological quest' to discover 'the fate of [the] Rocket' and 'the truth of his own upbringing', and eventually explores a more ontological dimension when we see 'the questing detective himself disintegrat[ing]'.¹⁰ McHale thus argues that Pynchon's novels become increasingly more ontological, and, in this context, his collected works can be seen to enact the literary canon's development out of its established modernist traditions and into new postmodernist territory.

Many critics have attempted to forge clear distinctions between the traditions of nineteenth century realism, high modernism, and experimental postmodernism. To confine our

⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p.10.

⁹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp.9-10.

¹⁰ McHale, 'Pynchon's postmodernism', p.104.

understanding of this cultural progression to these categories, however, would be to fail to take into account the shared similarities not only between modernism and postmodernism, but between realism and postmodernism, two theoretical and aesthetic approaches which are often considered in opposition. Even McHale acknowledges an inevitable overlap between epistemology and ontology:

Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they “tip over” into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions – the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional and reversible.¹¹

Although, here, McHale specifically addresses fiction, similar concerns can be traced through the critical and theoretical attitudes of these otherwise differentiated cultural periods. Simon Malpas and Andrew Taylor argue that a reading of Pynchon’s works through the lens of modernist and postmodernist critical trends can help to situate them in ‘literary history’.¹² They argue that *V.*, for example, is ‘a disruption of the image of modernism’s conceptions of “autonomous art” and the “rage for order” propagated by the New Criticism [...] during the period in which Pynchon was studying’; this suggests that the questions informing critical approaches prior to the 1960s were just as influential on Pynchon as the questions that had previously informed fiction (p.83).

While the development from modernist to postmodernist fiction can be largely understood through the development from the epistemological quest to the ontological crisis, New Criticism, the dominant mode of literary criticism during the period of American modernism, appears to be grappling with the implications of both knowledge and existence. For example, Cleanth Brooks, one of America’s foremost proponents of New Criticism, was influenced by the notions of ‘Intentional Fallacy’ and ‘Affective Fallacy’ in his consideration of textual origin versus textual effect. The terms were coined by W. K. Wimsatt and M. C.

¹¹ McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p.11.

¹² Simon Malpas and Andrew Taylor, *Thomas Pynchon* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), p.83.

Beardsley in the 1940s, and are indicative of the epistemological and ontological questions driving New Criticism's approach to literary analysis:

The Intentional Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its origins [...]. It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological *causes* of the poem and ends in biography and relativism. The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*), a special case of epistemological skepticism [...]. It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome of either Fallacy [...] is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear.¹³

Wimsatt and Beardsley place emphasis on what a text 'is'; where and how a text originated, and the effect a text has, are secondary to the words on the page. If the risk of devolving into either 'biography and relativism' or 'impressionism and relativism' somehow threatens the visibility or viability of the source text as 'object', then the Affective Fallacy not only represents a 'special case of epistemological skepticism', but impacts upon the ontological status of the text too.

The boundary between visibility and invisibility is just one of many examples of the binaries and divisions that Pynchon employs in his fiction to illustrate the intersection between epistemology and ontology. Berressem suggests that Pynchon's engagement of this particular boundary raises important questions about aesthetic form:

While Pynchon tends to lead his narratives to moments that promise a possible conjunction of the bodily and the spiritual [...] he invariably leaves the reader in suspension both about the validity of these conjunctions and about their possible extension into the transcendental. This, however, is not a cruel or cynical literary game. Rather, it is a form of realism.¹⁴

The 'possible conjunction of the bodily and the spiritual' and the validity of 'their possible extension into the transcendental' are themes not often associated with 'realism', since that which is spiritual and transcendental tends to resist objectively naturalistic representation. In *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century*

¹³ W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, 'The Affective Fallacy', *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Winter 1949), 31-55 (p.31).

¹⁴ Berressem, p.171.

(1984), N. Katherine Hayles suggests that '[b]ecause this inward-turning literature is nonmimetic in its orientation, the term "anti-realism" can properly be applied to it.'¹⁵ Yet, Pynchon's employment of certain aesthetic forms and literary structures illustrates his direct engagement with the conventions of realism. Berressem suggests that '[d]epending on one's aesthetic convictions, fictional narratives either mirror the world or they express it':

[A] narrative that aims at creating the illusion of life must [...] be infinitely complicated and multiplicitous. Only if fiction "offers us... life *without* rearrangement do we feel that we are touching the truth; in proportion as we see it *with* rearrangement do we feel that we are being put off with a substitute."¹⁶

Ironically, for Berressem, aesthetic forms that attempt to 'mirror' the world inevitably distort it, owing to their continual endeavour to achieve structural order. While critics, therefore, frequently cite division between the nineteenth century realist novel (that which attempts to 'mirror' the world) and the high modernist novel (that which attempts to 'express' it), the division is not always so clearly cut. Indeed, the relationship between formal expression and the realist tradition is effectively focalised through twentieth century visual art.

Brendan Prendeville, in *Realism in 20th Century Painting* (2000), argues that, rather than enacting an aesthetic division, '[r]ealism, in its radical address to present experience, came into [direct] association with modernity and modernism.'¹⁷ For Prendeville, it was form as much as content that governed the changing face of realism; he suggests that while academic art was traditionally inclined to 'exclude as vulgar or ugly subjects or artistic practices felt to be too basely material', artists of the early twentieth century placed great emphasis on 'the material of painting', since new methods of artistic creation, such as the 'exploitation of oil paint,' allowed artists to foster 'the emergence of more corporeally realist tendencies' (p.8). By unexpectedly

¹⁵ N. Katherine Hayles, *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.23.

¹⁶ Berressem, p.173.

¹⁷ Brendan Prendeville, *Realism in 20th Century Painting* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2000), p.9.

exploiting new uses of texture and colour on the canvas, oil painting broke from academic convention by ‘expressing’ the world, rather than simply ‘mirroring’ it.

Prendeville argues that this emerging quality of modern art ‘made viewers apprehend in a new way their own orientation to the painting’ (p.9). He identifies ‘[f]latness’ as an inherently modern artistic quality, since it heightens the viewer’s experience of the world on the surface of the canvas, as opposed to the world it aspires to represent (p.13). Although realism in twentieth century painting emphasises the ‘surface of the canvas’ – a quality Jameson associates more explicitly with postmodernism – this formal quality precludes neither depth nor affective urgency.¹⁸ Prendeville indicates that ‘there is more in the painted surface than the paint: there are signs and traces that refer us to perception and feeling, to bodily awareness, and to social existence – including the sociality of art itself’.¹⁹ If surface refers us to perception, feeling, and bodily awareness, then it not only implies depth, it engenders a sense of embodied self-awareness and social existence in the viewer.

In *The Antinomies of Realism*, Jameson establishes a comparable relationship between literary realism’s techniques and their affective consequences, suggesting that ‘scenic elaboration, description and above all affective investment’ will ‘allow it to develop towards a scenic present’.²⁰ While Jameson appears to agree with Prendeville that one of the most significant features of ‘[w]hat we call realism’ is that it must encourage ‘affective investment’, he declines to acknowledge the same self-conscious quality in literary realism that Prendeville identifies in realist painting. Both critics, therefore, identify an affective urgency in the aesthetics of realism, but for rather different reasons: Jameson recognises ‘scenic elaboration’ and ‘description’, which indicate that realism’s objective is more inclined towards mirroring than expressing; Prendeville, however, argues that art’s self-conscious expression is responsible for securing ‘affective investment’:

¹⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.9.

¹⁹ Prendeville, pp.13-4.

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2015), p.11.

[I]n order to convey the livingness of their subjects, painters [...] demanded the viewer's continued awareness of the painted surface. [...] Through suggestion, painters were able to convey phenomena that could not be shown, such as the vitality of a portrait subject, the emotional quality of a situation, its atmosphere. This implied a complicity with the viewer; [...] closeness and recognition: an illusion not of distance but of nearness.²¹

A viewer's 'continued awareness of the painted surface', therefore, contributes directly to the effect of creating a relationship of 'complicity with the viewer'; the painter uses surface to imply depth by visually conveying only a portion of what the picture expresses. By only indirectly suggesting 'the emotional quality of a situation' or its 'atmosphere', this style of painting, which emphasises its own artifice, does not impose distance between itself and its viewer, but creates 'an illusion' of 'nearness', one which fosters a sense of 'closeness and recognition' in spite of its resistance to the suspension of disbelief.

I labour what the history of visual art has to teach us about the ways that realism and postmodernism build upon and overlap with one another – not only in terms of form, but in terms of effect – because it speaks directly to a more contemporary school of critical thought: affect theory. While the Affective Fallacy teaches us that dwelling on a text's effects minimises or even erases the status of the object-text, recent critics such as Sara Ahmed take a different approach, arguing that 'emotions work to shape the "surfaces" of individual and collective bodies. Bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others.'²² The text as object or 'body', therefore, enters into a contingent relationship with the reader at the point at which an emotional response is catalysed; not only is the nature of that emotion determined by the body of the text, but the body of the text is, in turn, determined by that emotional response, opening itself to the possibility of being shaped, or reshaped, by a third party.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Ahmed describes how this process might come to take place, that '[t]he use of metaphors of "softness" and "hardness"' might show us 'how emotions become attributes of collectives, which get constructed as "being" through

²¹ Prendeville, p.32.

²² Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p.1.

“feeling” (p.2). In this resonant echo of McHale’s employment of ontological terminology to describe the characteristics of the postmodern novel, Ahmed establishes where and how ‘being’ and ‘feeling’ might intersect. If postmodern fiction concerns what it means to ‘be’, Ahmed might argue that what it means to ‘be’ is conditioned by what it means to ‘feel’. Not only that, but in contemporary culture, Ahmed argues, ‘emotions become attributes of collectives’, which means that feeling not only determines what it means to ‘be’ on an individual level, but may also determine what it means to ‘be’ on a social level.

Ahmed attributes an orientational quality to this idea. She describes how ‘[e]motions are relational: they involve (re)actions or relations of “towardness” or “awayness” in relation to such objects’ (p.8). This quality of feeling depends upon community, since ‘emotions are not simply located in the individual, but move between bodies’ (p.10). If we think of emotion as a kind of social transaction between bodies, then the way we orient ourselves towards or away from other bodies – or works of art – affects the shapes of both.

Understanding how affect might be seen as a kind of social orientation is crucial to an understanding of Pynchon’s fiction. Pynchon’s protagonists usually engage on some level with the idea of the quest narrative; in their respective pursuits for knowledge, they navigate their journeys through interactions with the communities that they come into contact with, and in relation to which they are either ‘inside, safe, or outside, lost’.²³ Cowart notes that ‘[r]eified as V., the Trystero, the Rocket, the goal of each quest is knowledge that metastasizes and flees before the seeker. Thus the quest never ends’.²⁴ Pynchon’s protagonists, therefore, often appear to embody the experience of Pynchon’s reader. We, like Oedipa, Stencil, and Slothrop, are on a ‘quest’ to uncover answers that will explain the patterns carefully laid within these novels, finding our efforts repeatedly frustrated by tightly-woven layers that appear to prevent such answers from being entirely unveiled; we are, by turns, compelled to orient ourselves ‘toward’ and ‘away’ from the body of the text. The ‘emotion’ that arises from such relations constitutes

²³ Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Vintage, 2000), p.98.

²⁴ Cowart, ‘Pynchon in literary history’, p.89.

the formation of a 'social body', a contract entered into between the reader and the text, which might determine the shaping or re-shaping of either individual body.

Pynchon's novels and stories, therefore, are far more complex than our current blueprint for literary postmodernism allows. Pynchon's branch of postmodernism employs conventions from realist painting that broke with academic tradition, by employing the idea that a viewer's or reader's complicity with a work of art or fiction depends upon a 'continued awareness' of its conscious construction. It also anticipates what affect theorists would later determine about the relationship between emotion and the social body, by examining the idea that emotions and textures not only bind bodies together, but shape them. Both theoretical notions are informed by a keen sense of what it means to orient oneself within (or without) a given framework.

This is not to say that Pynchon was inspired exclusively by realism (although he is noted for having declared that 'the traditional realistic' novel is 'the only kind of novel that is worth a shit'), nor that he single-handedly inspired the affect theory movement that would closely follow.²⁵ A number of cultural conditions contemporaneous to Pynchon's development as a writer would not only inform Pynchon's fiction, but postmodernism more broadly. Of these, one of the most notable is scientific development in the early twentieth century. Numerous critics have cited the influence of Norbert Wiener's *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (1950), for example, for inspiring Pynchon's fascination with information theory and entropy.

Although, in the introduction to his short story collection *Slow Learner*, Pynchon would later claim that his handle on entropy is flimsy at best, his explicit invocation of the scientific concept is paramount to an understanding of the structural integrity of his own texts. In *Art and Entropy: An Essay on Disorder and Order* (1971), Rudolf Arnheim describes entropy as 'the gradual or sudden destruction of inviolate objects—a degradation involving the breaking-up of

²⁵ John M. Krafft, 'Biographical note', *Cambridge Companion*, 9-16 (p.13).

shape, the dissolution of functional contexts, the abolition of meaningful location.’²⁶ While the principle of entropy typically refers to the second law of thermodynamics or information theory, Pynchon’s fiction aestheticises entropy by exploring ways in which structural and thematic shifts from order to disorder take place. Cowart argues that this notion is central to the wider canon of postmodern fiction, identifying that ‘[t]he real shift [...] is towards representation of the less and less representable; [...] the postmoderns seek to represent the unrepresentable in representation itself.’²⁷ How is it possible to navigate the terrain of contemporary life, Pynchon’s works ask, how can we understand ourselves in relation to a world which in every moment appears to be losing its shape, forgetting its functional contexts, and erasing the cosy familiarity of meaningful location? However, while these difficulties are common to postmodernism, their origins can be found in what McHale would arguably identify as the intellectual territory of modernism. Cowart remarks that ‘[t]his is not ontology but a more subtle epistemology—a grappling with the problematics of representation’ (p.83).

Through engaging the intellectual ideologies of realism, modernism, and postmodernism, theories of sociality and self-consciousness, and the boundaries between high and low cultural developments of the mid-twentieth century, Pynchon’s novels and stories can be seen to challenge Fredric Jameson’s oft-quoted assertion that postmodernism sees a ‘waning of affect’. Malpas and Taylor read Oedipa’s story arc of *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) in a manner that arguably extends to many of Pynchon’s key protagonists:

Oedipa [...] encounters the world as loaded with feeling and affect [...]. [E]ach cry is “specific”, unique, [...] transforming perception from instant to instant as the world is “refracted” in its own way by each cry. This sense that the perception of the world is simultaneously reception of images and projection of feelings and ideas is, of course, far from unique to *The Crying of Lot 49*: it is central to modern and [...] postmodern ideas of knowledge and art.²⁸

²⁶ Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Entropy: An Essay on Disorder and Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p.12.

²⁷ David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon & The Dark Passages of History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), p.83.

²⁸ Malpas and Taylor, p.55.

Although the ‘world’ that both Oedipa and the reader encounter in this slender novella is not one we can objectively or even fully perceive (since ‘perception’ transforms from ‘instant to instant’ throughout this text), it *is* a world ‘loaded with feeling and affect’, echoing Ahmed’s suggestion that the world, shape, or body of this text might in part be shaped by its encounter with both its protagonist and its reader. This study of Pynchon’s work aims to resituate him in the context of postmodernism, both by assessing his engagement with a range of different aesthetics and ideologies by no means peculiar to postmodernism, and by providing a close reading of his works that emphasises the structures and frameworks that underpin them. In doing so, I aim to establish not only that Pynchon’s work is inherently ‘loaded with feeling and affect’, but that it proposes a blueprint for postmodernism that implies depth through its preoccupation with surface and, therefore, encourages the kind of ‘affective investment’ more often associated with the realist tradition.

I begin this study by closely examining Pynchon’s use of metaphor. Malpas and Taylor argue that ‘Pynchon has [always] been concerned to map the fault-lines of privacy and publicity, of interiority and exposure’ (p.1). Pynchon’s metaphors, too, often emphasise these fault-lines. The identification of ‘mapping’ as a structure underpinning Pynchon’s fiction is no coincidence; Ian Buchanan elucidates Jameson’s theory of cognitive mapping by suggesting that ‘[t]o even speak of the “world” is already to begin to produce a cognitive map because it is the articulation of a concrete “totality” [class consciousness] greater than what one can empirically verify.’²⁹ Pynchon’s works conjure and engage with ‘worlds’ that explore what it means to exhibit individual and collective consciousness, and ask how one might locate oneself in that world, particularly when elements or portions of that world remain outside of the realms of empirical verification. Buchanan also suggests that ‘[t]he very concept of the “world”, at its most mundane, amounts to the recognition and registration of a mysterious set of forces and effects that I cannot see, but nonetheless know have an influence over my existence’ (p.109). This resonates with the suggestion that Pynchon’s works engage with dichotomies of ‘privacy’ and ‘publicity’, as well as ‘interiority’ and ‘exposure’, since the respective quests of Pynchon’s

²⁹ Ian Buchanan, *Fredric Jameson: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2006), p.109.

protagonists are most often frustrated by the invisible forces that appear to operate most keenly upon them.

From his first novel *V.* (1963), to his most recent publications, Pynchon employs metaphorical structures to support the organisation of his narratives as well as structural metaphors to consciously reveal the literary frameworks he has put in place. In the context of Waugh's understanding of metafiction, Pynchon's employment of metaphorical structures and structural metaphors reveal the 'world' he invokes as one which is determined by its frame; the metafictional impulse of his works continually 'exposes' the frame, thereby emphasising what is implied beyond its margins.³⁰ While this further frustrates his protagonists' and his reader's quest to 'empirically verify' such a world, it is, nevertheless, a form of fiction that exhibits a highly structured world containing a highly structured quest. By self-consciously reflecting its own operative structures, Pynchon's work establishes an early preoccupation with the binary conditions of being 'inside' and 'outside' the fictional frameworks it exposes. What these metaphors achieve when they allude – directly or indirectly – to topographical, social, and philosophical divisions is a geographical imagining of 'knowing' versus 'being', not only enacting and complicating the development from the concerns of the modernist novel to the postmodernist novel, but generating in the reader a shared experience of disorientation with Pynchon's protagonists. I postulate that there are three key categories of metaphor Pynchon uses to illustrate how the intersection of knowledge and being/belonging indicates different approaches to navigating post-modernity: the self-reflexivity and intertextuality of visual and textual mediums; the cluster of images uniting new developments in technology and science; and the mechanical, the prosthetic, and the fetishistic, all of which impact upon the inside/outside dichotomy Pynchon's texts aim to explore through their engagement with Bakhtin's theory of Carnival.

The affective impact of the 'inside/outside' dichotomy that Pynchon's works examine in relationship to his historical interests brings us to one of the most crucial – and oft-overlooked – qualities of Pynchon's fiction. Steven Weisenburger suggests that '*Gravity's Rainbow* brushes

³⁰ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p.31.

American history against the grain, and it is – despite contrary claims by John Gardner and others – a profoundly *moral fiction*.³¹ By refusing to qualify our impressions or beliefs about a text based on reason or emotion alone, Pynchon's works ultimately encourage an ethical engagement with the ideas they propose. If we might characterise Pynchon's fiction as 'profoundly moral', what does this mean for suggestions that metafictional postmodernism 'goes with rather than counter to the energies of late capitalism', that it represents an 'attack on traditional spiritual and family values', exhibits an 'overeasy cynicism', and fails to appreciate the 'obduracy as well as the possibilities of what we usually suppose real'?³²

Representing Representation: The 'Visibility' of Visual and Textual Mediums

The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. Oedipa did not know where she was.³³

The function of a metaphor is to enhance the meaning or understanding of the object or idea it originally describes by disguising it as something else; by enhancing the meaning of the original object or idea, a metaphor is, then, a thrust at truth, but by disguising the original object or idea in another form it necessarily also becomes a lie. Thomas Pynchon's first novel, *V*, offers an early insight into his assimilation of this notion when metaphor is described as 'a masterful disguise'.³⁴ Although only a fraction of *V*'s length, *The Crying of Lot 49* affords a much more detailed exploration of this idea. In this novel, Pynchon asks a crucial question about metaphor's function: how can our relationship to metaphor help us to locate ourselves in the world that we inhabit?

Pynchon's central protagonist, Oedipa Maas, is on a journey of discovery. Named as the executrix of an ex-lover's estate, Oedipa proceeds in an effort to fulfil her task; she is, however,

³¹ Steven Weisenburger, 'Gravity's Rainbow', *Cambridge Companion*, 44-58 (p.45).

³² Tony Hilfer, *American Fiction Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1992), p.163.

³³ Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.98.

³⁴ Thomas Pynchon, *V*. (London: Vintage, 2000), p.436.

increasingly misdirected on a journey that eventually finds her embroiled in chaos, confusion, and conspiracy. Her attempts to understand the signs and symbols she encounters ultimately prove futile; they are operating inside of their own networks, emblems of private communities from which Oedipa is excluded. Oedipa's struggle arises from her inability to penetrate these networks. She is, in every sense of the understanding of metaphor propounded by the novel, 'outside' of these communities; once the safety of being located 'inside' of a network is snatched away, she loses all ability to locate herself: she 'did not know where she was' at all.

Oedipa's journey mimics the reader's experience of interpreting this novel: the signs and symbols that Oedipa encounters behave as self-reflexive metaphors – metaphors which demonstrate an awareness of their own structure, function, and artificiality – and self-consciously invoke the reader's responsibility of decoding the text. The novel acts out what happens when we are left only with individual components of metaphor, which, when isolated from one another, become suggestive of multiple meanings and interpretations, none of which allow the reader any closer to the truth of the mystery we are investigating. Instead of communicating a fixed message, these metaphors become fluid, posing a fractured world of multiple possibility, one in which investigation may not invite one definitive solution, and, perhaps more significantly, one in which we may lose ourselves.

If Pynchon's reader is only ever privy to the image of the metaphor and not the corresponding original object, the novel, too, only offers a partial view of the world it expresses; it conceals from us, as well as Oedipa, the true intent of Pierce Inverarity's estate, the real function of the Tristero, and the veiled objectives of the many groups and organisations that populate the novel. Pynchon's reader, like Oedipa, is aware that s/he can never occupy the heart of the text, since the heart of the text appears to lie outside of its margins. We are tasked with the quest of decoding a text that resists us at its very entry-point, and like the 'cry' evoked by the novel's own title, I would argue that the outside/inside dichotomy that this text establishes – and later complicates – has decidedly affective consequences.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed describes what she terms ‘the sociality of emotion’, a notion that also depends upon an awareness of the surfaces and the boundaries that determine interiority and exteriority:

If I was thinking about emotions, I would probably assume that I need to look inwards, asking myself, ‘How do I feel?’ Such a model of emotion as interiority is crucial to psychology. [...] Once what is inside has got out, when I have expressed my feelings in this way, then my feelings also become yours, and you may respond to them.³⁵

In Ahmed’s model of the sociality of emotion, the emotional world is not exclusively interior and the shared social experience of feeling depends upon expression of the interior world of emotion. In opposition to Jameson’s suggestion that postmodernism’s preoccupation with surface precludes affective response, Ahmed argues that ‘emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place’ (p.10). For Oedipa, the emotional response that she produces and expresses when she encounters other communities, other signs, and other mediums from which she feels excluded not only conditions but creates the barriers that separate her from them. While this appears to indicate its isolating influence, Ahmed points out that ‘it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the “I” and the “we” are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others’ (p.10). In her very expression of emotions attached to the experience of being ‘lost’, Oedipa actually finds contact, an idea we can trace through her adoption of various female roles and guises throughout the novel: she adopts the role of lover to Metzger, of granddaughter to the old man in the nursing home, and, later, of mother to the man with delirium tremens.³⁶

Ahmed notes that ‘the word “emotion” comes from the Latin, *emovere*, referring to “to move, to move out”. Of course, emotions are not only about movement, they are also about attachments or about what connects us’.³⁷ Oedipa believes her quest to be epistemological; she is searching for answers to Inverarity’s estate, to the Tristero, and, eventually, to new mysteries

³⁵ Ahmed, p.8.

³⁶ Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.28; p.68; p.98.

³⁷ Ahmed, p.11.

that overwhelm her, such as Driblette's suicide. Her emotional response to having her access to communities, ideas, even knowledge itself (in her failed encounter with Maxwell's demon) restricted, illustrates a shift from the epistemological conditions of her quest to the ontological conditions that simultaneously define her movement 'out' or away from the centre of her quest and her attachment or connection to those she shares the 'outside' with. Oedipa's ontological status in the text is not only primarily affective, therefore, but deeply rooted in her orientation to the world around her and to those in it.

While Ahmed's theory of the sociality of emotion long postdates Pynchon's writing, Amy J. Elias, in her reading of Pynchon's engagement with the historical, situates this quality of his work in the context of late capitalism, indicating that 'the primary hermeneutic arising from this economic formation is "cognitive mapping."' ³⁸ If this thesis aims to challenge Jameson's assertion that postmodernism exhibits a 'waning of affect', Jameson's theory of cognitive mapping proves central to an understanding of how the intersection of epistemology and ontology informs the boundaries of 'inside' and 'outside' in Pynchon's early works:

Understood as a global economic system, capitalism succeeds by disorienting us – keeping its CEOs hidden, separating us from one another [...]. [...] [T]he absent presence of global capitalism is the true, monocultural space beneath all appearances, and any art that attempts to make it visible will need to approach it necessarily through indirection. Any political art in the era of postmodernity will be able only to *gesture* toward this non-site-specific, always circulating, and centrally organizing principle of world culture (pp.125-6).

Oedipa appears to find herself caught between the disorienting influence of late capitalism (as represented by Pierce Inverarity's sprawling estate, and, more specifically, the employees of Yoyodyne, whose creative energies and efforts at union find themselves repeatedly stifled by invisible authorities) and the culturally subversive act of 'belonging' to a collective of resistance (as represented by the variety of organisations Oedipa is prohibited real access to, such as W.A.S.T.E., the Peter Pinguid Society, and Inamorati Anonymous). Outside of both, Oedipa represents the 'individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality [...] of society's structure as a whole' (p.126). Pynchon, too, enacts cognitive mapping as a form of

³⁸ Amy J. Elias, 'History', *Cambridge Companion*, 123-135 (p.125).

resistance in the novel's very structure. If 'the absent presence of global capitalism' can only be approached indirectly, via 'gesture', then expressing a partial view of the world it contains is the only way Pynchon might successfully utilise the novel itself as a form of resistance to late capitalism. The 'partial view' the text affords its reader belongs to Oedipa herself; if the 'organizing principle of world culture' is eternally 'circulating', then it will always remain, in its 'totality', 'unrepresentable'. If we, like Oedipa, cannot empirically verify what lies outside the boundaries of the text, the text tasks us – its reader – with the responsibility of attempting to organise the material that Pynchon's novel only gestures towards.

The affect most commonly attributed to Pynchon's works is, for this reason, paranoia. Sianne Ngai, in *Ugly Feelings* (2005), writes that '[t]he disposition to theorize [...] finds itself aligned with paranoia' which she defines as 'a species of fear based on the dysphoric apprehension of a holistic and all-encompassing system.'³⁹ The fear associated with the recognition of a system that is at once 'all-encompassing' and not fully visible might ordinarily engender existential stasis. Elias argues, however, that '[f]or Pynchon's characters, paranoia is [...] *creative*'; rather than overwhelming the individual subject with the impossibility of comprehending such a system, paranoia offers 'an open, polyvocal approach to the world that allows one to see connections, associations and creative difference.'⁴⁰

One of the passages in Pynchon's works which best illuminates this notion is Tchitcherine's drug trip in *Gravity's Rainbow*:

About the paranoia often noted under the drug, there is nothing remarkable. Like other sorts of paranoia, it is nothing less than the onset [...] of the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation, a secondary illumination – [...] and perhaps a route in for those like Tchitcherine who are held at the edge...⁴¹

The paranoia Tchitcherine experiences is not one which renders him impotent and static in the face of his revelation; instead, the discovery that '*everything is connected*' proves to offer 'a

³⁹ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.299.

⁴⁰ Elias, p.126.

⁴¹ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (London: Vintage, 2013), p.834.

route In'. Paranoia is not only a creative force in this context, it is a directional force, one which can acknowledge the prospective 'One-ness' of all that is connected while also accepting that, even if one were not 'held at the edge', one could never expect to empirically verify all that is connected in its totality. Even if one were to take 'the route In', one would be capable only of comparing what one finds on the inside with what one had experienced on the outside; it would not be possible to perceive both simultaneously.

Hayles imagines this process of journeying in and journeying out, connecting and reconnecting, represented in the relationship between narratological framing and reader participation in her study of the novel:

In *Gravity's Rainbow* we are always in the process of reconstructing, of piecing together the bits and pieces of what we hope will be a complete picture. Yet even to call it a "picture" is to frame it and thus to falsify the attempt to create a holistic vision. [...] [B]y placing the narrative within a frame, we view it as essentially separate and distinct from the cognitive faculty that brought it into being. Thus we have "framed" it in another sense [:] [...] what we assert of it, even though false, cannot be proven to be false because the falsity is contained in the very assumption that it is an object of discourse.⁴²

For Hayles, the third party responsible for the 'framing' of a narrative is not the writer, but the reader. She acknowledges that once a narrative is perceived within a 'frame', it becomes 'distinct from the cognitive faculty that brought it into being' and, thereby, entirely autonomous. Not only does this process separate text from writer, but it opens it up to 'falsity', despite the fact that 'what we assert of it [...] cannot be proven to be false'. The polyvocality Elias identifies in Pynchon's texts is inherently connected to the idea that nothing can 'be proven to be false' as long as the paranoid world Pynchon's novels invoke is expressed in such a way by the writer that allows it to be framed in such a way by the reader.

Throughout his oeuvre, Pynchon employs self-reflexive metaphorical structures to support the organisation of his narratives as well as 'open, polyvocal' structural metaphors to consciously reveal the literary frameworks he has put in place. Through the deliberately

⁴² Hayles, *The Cosmic Web*, pp.179-80.

marginal orientation of both reader and protagonist, Pynchon's expression of worlds defined by boundaries and surfaces is one which not only implies depth, but invites 'connections, associations and creative difference'. Ultimately, through its decidedly social approach to affect, Pynchon's work complicates the divisions between epistemology and ontology, between 'knowing' and 'being', by entertaining the Cartesian notion of 'thinking' as a determinant of the condition or status of an object's existence and orientation. The self-reflexive nature of Pynchon's metaphorical use of visual and literary mediums not only gives structure to the orientational uncertainty engendered by his fiction, but resists the dominant culture by gesturing to the 'hidden' forces of late capitalism.

One of the ways Pynchon uses metaphor to gesture most effectively to the 'hidden' forces of late capitalism is by envisioning metaphor not as an object, but as an action. Anne Carson traces the etymology of metaphor in her work, *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986):

The English word "symbol" is the Greek word *symbolon* which means, in the ancient world, one half of a knucklebone carried as a token of identity to someone who has the other half. Together the two halves compose one meaning. A metaphor is a species of symbol.⁴³

Not only is the complete meaning of a metaphor contingent upon the union of its two halves, but the 'act of metaphor', as Pynchon articulates it in *Lot 49*, can then not only be thought of solely in terms of the object and its figurative representation, but in terms of who – or what – is responsible for unifying them. A metaphor, then, is not something that exists independently: it needs to be made active in order for it to function, to be carried, transmitted, and united by a third party in order for its reader to be properly equipped to interpret its full meaning.

The Crying of Lot 49 is primarily concerned with the modes of communication by which the 'act' of metaphor is carried out – the people, objects, or concepts that are responsible for transmitting information from one place to another: postmen of the alleged underground snail-mail organisation 'The Tristero' carry physical messages from W.A.S.T.E. bins to their

⁴³ Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2015), p.75.

intended recipients; technological innovations such as the telephone, the radio, and the television are seen to transmit messages directly into the public consciousness by means of invading the private space of the home. Like metaphor – indeed, like the novel itself – these modes of communication are designed to transmit a message from one place to another, but Oedipa’s capacity to comprehend the layers and complexities of these messages is progressively weakened by an ever-increasing surplus of information. Hayles, for example, argues that when ‘Oedipa tries to pin things down’ in an effort to establish an ‘emerging pattern’, ‘her attempts to reduce complexity only result in more dispersion.’⁴⁴ This only accounts for Oedipa’s confusion, however, by considering her role as interpreter, and does not account for her relationship with who or what facilitates the initial communication of that information.

Hypothetical control or facilitation of communication lies not only with the characters and organisations contained within the fiction, but with Pynchon himself. In his first novel, *V.*, the modern poet is concerned with such artifice that masquerades under the guise of the dissemination of information as ‘truth’:

Living as he does much of the time in a world of metaphor, the poet is always acutely conscious that metaphor has no value apart from its function; that it is a device, an artifice. [...]

It is the “role” of the poet, this 20th Century. To lie.⁴⁵

The ‘value’ of metaphor here is contained in its ‘function’, without which its status as ‘a device, an artifice’ might not be realised at all. Pynchon’s emphasis on methods of communicating is not only crucial to an understanding of how metaphor functions in his novel; it also appears to anticipate Marshall McLuhan’s seminal work on communication theory, *The Medium is the*

⁴⁴ N. Katherine Hayles, “A Metaphor of God Knew How Many Parts”: The Engine that Drives *The Crying of Lot 49*, *New Essays on The Crying of Lot 49*, ed. Patrick O’Donnell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.108.

⁴⁵ Pynchon, *V.*, pp.325-6.

Massage: ‘Nothing can be further from the spirit of the new technology than “a place for everything in its place.” You can’t go home again.’⁴⁶

The opening of *The Crying of Lot 49* anticipates Oedipa’s egress from her hometown. Her displacement is explored through ontological metaphors: she relates to the world around her by experiencing the world and the things within it as objects that behave as containers. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson define this process in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980):

Each of us is a container, with a bounding surface and an in-out orientation. We project our own in-out orientation onto other physical objects that are bounded by surfaces. Thus we also view them as containers with an inside and an outside. Rooms and houses are obvious containers.⁴⁷

Oedipa attempts to make sense of Inverarity’s death through her recollection of ‘a hotel room in Mazatlán whose door had just been slammed, it seemed forever’.⁴⁸ She gives her relationship with Inverarity a bounded surface by imagining it as a container – a room – from which she is now exiled. This recollection at the opening of the novel dramatises the function of the metaphors that follow. When Oedipa is inside of the room, she understands both the room and herself in relation to it; when she is outside of the room, she becomes lost. Figuratively speaking, Oedipa is displaced from the moment she receives the letter: its faceless, disembodied message is detached from the unfamiliar legal firm who have sent it, just as Inverarity’s estate is detached from Oedipa’s now-deceased ex-lover. The metafictional significance of this incident is reflected in the way that it behaves as a displaced metaphor: a representation that is detached from the object it describes. Oedipa’s inability to once more penetrate the bounded surface of the room establishes her orientation at the very opening of the novel as ‘outside’ of the metaphor, able to perceive only individual components in isolation, and thus unable to

⁴⁶ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p.16.

⁴⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p.29.

⁴⁸ Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.1.

understand how to penetrate its network: 'She had never executed a will in her life, didn't know where to begin' (p.3).

The first chapter is thus dedicated to Oedipa's exploration of her own displacement in the light of the new information she has received (Inverarity's death). Her reification of the relationship with Inverarity in the form of a closed space leads her to recollect a time they spent as a couple in Mexico City, visiting a Remedios Varo exhibition at a local museum. This marks the first of several self-conscious references to visual or literary modes of representation in the novel which are used to reflect upon the status of both the protagonist and the reader. Cowart describes how fundamental 'processes of representation' are to literature of the sixties:

In the sixties, in particular, certain cultural phenomena [...] found their most effective representation in an art that problematized objectivity, foregrounded the processes of representation, and expressed the strange idea that reality was never a given, never something one could divorce from the language purporting to render it.⁴⁹

The notion that forecasts of reality could be contained within otherwise self-referential forms of literature is a helpful way of thinking about Pynchon's fiction; if writers achieve this through the foregrounding of 'processes of representation', then Pynchon's invocations of visual and literary mediums can be seen as features closely linked with the overall challenge presented by 'objectivity'. McHale argues that this highlights an ontological dimension of these texts:

The narrative world can be pluralized, and ontology foregrounded, not only by juxtaposing worlds but also by layering or stacking them [...]; or by describing an artwork (real or invented) belonging to a different medium – a painting, play, movie, etc. – thereby *remediating* it.⁵⁰

Apart from the uncanny similarity between the process of remediation and the name of Spanish-exile painter Remedios Varo, Oedipa's encounter with 'Bordando el Manto Terrestre' at the end of the first chapter is closely linked to her status of displacement at the opening of the novel. When Oedipa leaves Kinneret to execute the will, she realises that she has understood

⁴⁹ Cowart, *Dark Passages*, p.92.

⁵⁰ McHale, 'Pynchon's postmodernism', p.105.

herself as a ‘curious, Rapunzel-like [...] pensive girl somehow, magically, prisoner among the pines’, trapped inside of a tower.⁵¹ Where she had previously believed Inverarity to be the one who had liberated her, she now understands that ‘all that had gone on between them had really never escaped the confinement of that tower’, identifying the ‘buffeting and insulation’ that had preserved her sense of safety inside of the metaphor that she had crafted for herself (p.10).

This leads her to recall and contemplate Varo’s painting:

[I]n the central paintings of a triptych, [...] were a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. Oedipa, perverse, had stood in front of the painting and cried (p.10).

One of the many ‘cries’ that will punctuate this novel is in response to Varo’s painting. The ‘frail girls’ are framed by what appears to be the only exit from the room in which they are contained, the chasmic door or window that opens out into the vertiginous space above the fabric of the world they are weaving. The ‘heart-shaped faces’ of the frail girls are physically skeletal but wear expressions of apparent resignation. Their status as prisoners can only be inferred; the dark, sinister-looking central figure and the figure standing directly behind seem to be orchestrating the workload and there appears to be no accessible escape from the room that does not require its occupants to throw themselves from the top of the tower.

Oedipa’s reaction to this painting is strongly affective. Why? The ‘frail girls’ have their eyes downturned, but the central figure has its eyes turned directly towards the viewer. Although this is a painting organised by multiple framing mechanisms, as though to contain the world expressed within it, the central figure gestures to the world outside of it, the world that its viewer occupies. We, too, are implicated in the act of expressing the fabric world being woven by the ‘frail girls’. Oedipa asks herself ‘[w]hat did she so desire to escape from? Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture,

⁵¹ Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.10.

are like her ego only incidental' (p.11). If the height of the tower, the distinct lack of exit routes, and the containment of the frame are 'only incidental', then Oedipa wonders whether 'what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all' (p.11). It is as though the central figure in the painting performs the function of this magic, visiting on her 'from outside' simply by reaching its gaze beyond the frame of the painting in her direction. From the moment Oedipa is invited into the painting, she becomes a 'frail girl' herself, weaving a world from the threads she is given, never able to empirically verify how the threads weave themselves into the 'One-ness' of the world outside. Oedipa, like the reader, who is simultaneously tasked with organising the novella's disparate narrative threads, thus becomes a 'remediator'.

The Tristero is a central metaphor in the novel, one which connects ideas about expression and communication to ideas about spatial orientation. The Tristero, it seems, is an underground postal service intended to deliver secret messages between those who have deliberately spurned government-censored services. The content of these messages appears, for the most part, meaningless or mundane, if not entirely obscene (p.35). Oedipa, however, becomes increasingly fascinated by their methods of communication. McLuhan postulates that '[s]ocieties have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication' and it is this very predisposition, coupled with Oedipa's agitated efforts to find meaning where they may be none, that results in her frustrated conflation of 'content' and the means by which that content is communicated.⁵² This reinforces her belief that she has been exiled from the systems of communication she encounters throughout the novel. Oedipa's understanding of the Tristero behaves in the same way as an incomplete metaphor: the outside of the container's message expresses only part of the information needed to understand its complete meaning. She witnesses either the transmission of the messages (by following the postman from the W.A.S.T.E. bin around the suburban neighbourhoods of California), or she reads the content of the messages: 'Dear Mike, [...] how are you? Just thought I'd drop you a note. How's your book coming? Guess that's all

⁵² McLuhan and Fiore, p.8.

for now. See you at The Scope'.⁵³ However, she never witnesses both the process of communicating and the content of that communication simultaneously.

Carson emphasises the importance of uniting these two components when she suggests that 'metaphor understands the act of communication as an intimate collusion between writer and reader. They compose a meaning between them by matching two halves of a text. It is a meaning not accessible to others.'⁵⁴ Oedipa is neither the writer nor the intended recipient of the messages delivered by the Tristero, and thus, however effectively they appear to be carried from one place to another, her orientation as an outsider in this exchange prevents her from being able to comprehend any meaning in them. In this sense the function of the Tristero, as alleged underground postman, reflects the function of metaphor itself: metaphor requires not only collusion between object and representation, as well as reader and writer, but an apparently invisible third party to carry out the 'act' in order for its full meaning to be realised.

If the clarity of the Tristero metaphor is already compromised by its self-reflexivity, it becomes further complicated by Pynchon's dramatisation of the metaphor through Wharfinger's Jacobean play, *The Courier's Tragedy*. Kent T. Van den Berg suggests that '[t]he theatrical metaphor reverses the mimetic relationship and gives it a reflexive structure: the stage represents a world that resembles a stage'.⁵⁵ *The Courier's Tragedy* creates its own reflexive reality by self-consciously performing the history of the Tristero. What gives the play-within-the-novella its power is the character of Randolph Driblette, *The Courier's Tragedy's* director and star. When Oedipa quizzes Driblette about the mysterious allusion to the Tristero in the play's final couplet, he responds with what appears to be routine frustration:

'You don't understand,' getting mad. 'You guys, you're like Puritans are about the Bible. So hung up with words, words. You know where that play exists, not in that file cabinet, not in any paperback you're looking for, but' – a hand emerged from the veil of

⁵³ Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.36.

⁵⁴ Carson, p.99.

⁵⁵ Kent T. Van den Berg, *Playhouse and Cosmos: Shakespearean Theater as Metaphor* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), p.52.

shower-steam to indicate his suspended head – ‘in here. That’s what I’m for. To give the spirit flesh. The words, who cares? [...] You can put together clues, develop a thesis, or several [...]. Wharfinger supplied words and a yarn. I gave them life. That’s it.’⁵⁶

Much of the textual detail in this passage not only provides a self-conscious commentary on the status of Pynchon’s own novella as an example of the ‘words and a yarn’ to which Driblette refers, but evokes the affect of paranoia. Ngai indicates that ‘[t]he disposition to theorize [...] finds itself aligned with paranoia’ and the vocabulary Driblette employs expresses the futility of Oedipa’s efforts to ‘put together clues, develop a thesis, or several’. Driblette suggests that the plural possibilities signified by ‘words’ alone negate the existence of a single interpretation. What is perhaps more unsettling is that Oedipa is quickly made aware that she is not the only one seeking a single interpretation: with ‘you guys’, Driblette gestures to an entire community of people who appear to have come asking the same questions, a throwaway line which functions in part as a quip at the literary critic’s expense, ‘[s]o hung up with words, words.’

Driblette suggests that text with no definitive subtext functions much in the same way as the image evoked by metaphor without its corresponding object of origin. Both text and image, in this context, render *too many* possibilities. Pynchon expresses this notion through the comical miscommunications that take place throughout Oedipa’s conversation with Driblette. When Driblette suggests ‘Wharfinger was no Shakespeare’, Oedipa asks ‘[w]ho was he?’, to which Driblette replies ‘[w]ho was Shakespeare? It was a long time ago’ (p.56). The ambiguity of the ‘words’ used in their conversation enacts the very hypothesis Driblette attempts to communicate.

This hypothesis allows Driblette to imagine his role as he who creates the subtext that gives the text meaning, the object of origin to which the image can correspond. Malpas and Taylor argue that for Driblette, ‘speaking oracle-like from behind a “veil of shower-steam”, the “reality” of a work of literature is created not in the text, but at its destination – in the mind of the reader, whose interpretation “gives them life”.’⁵⁷ When Oedipa first arrives to discuss the

⁵⁶ Pynchon, *Lot 49*, pp.58-9.

⁵⁷ Malpas and Taylor, p.60.

play, Driblette discourages her by remarking '[i]t was written to entertain people. Like horror movies. It isn't literature, it doesn't mean anything.'⁵⁸ It is as though Driblette believes that with the right vision, the right person *can* elevate something originally intended purely to 'entertain' to the level of meaningful art. Malpas and Taylor effectively point out the individualistic ideology inherent in this claim:

[T]he evident solipsism and narcissism of the claim is only an exaggerated form of the central premise of the Copernican revolution of modern experience: where else could meaning reside but in the receiving-projecting mind of the subject whose perception also 'half creates'?⁵⁹

Since we might also ask whether the reader, arguably, constitutes one of the 'receiving-projecting' minds responsible for the co-creation of a given text, we must ask whether Pynchon intends to conflate Oedipa and Driblette, for all the ideological differences they appear to illustrate. Ultimately, like his reader, both Oedipa and Driblette attempt to weave meaning from 'words and a yarn', an image which resonates with the essence of Varo's 'Bordando el Manto Terrestre'.

Elsewhere in Pynchon's oeuvre, characters illustrate the same Driblettian impulse to position themselves as creators where instead they might ordinarily be seen as mediators or communicators. Gerhart von Göll, or 'Der Springer', German ex-film director of *Gravity's Rainbow*, elevates Driblette's solipsistic and narcissistic claim to an entirely paranoid one, which not only sees him as 'half-creator' of meaning, but a force of quasi-divine providence:

Since discovering that Schwarzkommando are really in the Zone, leading real, paracinematic lives that have nothing to do with him [...], Springer has been zooming around in a controlled ecstasy of megalomania. He is convinced that his film has somehow brought them into being.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.56.

⁵⁹ Malpas and Taylor, p.60.

⁶⁰ Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p.461.

For Springer, the act of creating a false or ‘phony’ cinematic reality has caused a shift to occur in ‘real, paracinematic lives’; creation in one realm has influenced creation in another. This theme can be traced throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*, with innumerable plot strands emerging out of the hyperreal, the supernatural, and the paranormal. However, film, in this case, is the visual medium through which Newtonian cause-and-effect appears impossibly reversed. The sense not only that life is imitating art, but life is *born* of art, has entitled Springer to ‘a controlled ecstasy of megalomania’, the delusion of power most often associated with disorders of paranoia or mania.

This is not *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s sole example of visual representation influencing world expression. Hayles analyses the influence of Springer’s darkly pornographic film ‘Alpdrucken’ starring Greta Erdmann:

How an interface might become a permeable membrane is suggested by the narrator’s treatment of film. When we think of an interface as a barrier, we imagine that on one side of a film are the screen images, [...] the illusion of life; on the other side, actors performing actions called for by the script. [...] [However,] these screen images sometimes have consequences in life beyond the script, as when the jackal men rape Greta Erdmann in *Alpdrucken* and father upon her a real child, Bianca, who will later die in the jackal ship *Anubis*.⁶¹

Life is, in a very literal sense, created from this film, in the form of Bianca, Greta’s daughter. Hayles indicates that by thinking of film as an interface, we most often think of it as a ‘barrier’, a division between two separate realms, one which is made up of that which constitutes the world of the viewer (the ‘actors performing actions’ etc.), and one which simply reflects that world (through ‘the complex play of light and shadow that creates the illusion of life’). The world of Newtonian cause-and-effect allows only for the ‘actors’ on one side to influence ‘the illusion of life’ on the other; where the interface might be thought of as a ‘permeable membrane’, however, this Newtonian logic begins to break down. Not only can the ‘actors’ influence the ‘illusion’, but the ‘illusion’ can influence life on the other side of the interface.

⁶¹ Hayles, *The Cosmic Web*, p.181.

The novel of Pynchon's that deals with this quality most explicitly is *Vineland* (1990). Part of this story's novelistic action concerns teenage Prairie's search for the mother who left when she was young. Frenesi, whose own name evokes the chaos of her life, was a member of a radical film collective during the 1960s; when Prairie goes looking for her in the 1980s, Frenesi's implied presence behind the camera is the primary means through which Prairie can attempt to establish identification. In this case, it is not the content of the film material Prairie views, but the role of her mother as re/mediator of that footage that contributes to the visual medium's self-reflexive dimension.

Thomas Hill Schaub argues that the 'mediating' power of 'tubal' culture is one of this novel's primary mechanisms for social critique, arguing that an abundance of new theoretical approaches in the 1970s and 1980s was largely responsible for bolstering the contemporaneity of Pynchon's representation of televisual and filmic mediums.⁶² Pynchon, however, appears just as interested in post-war European approaches to technological visual mediums; Pasolini's theory of free indirect discourse in relationship to cinema, for example, resonates poignantly with *Vineland*:

The problem can be conveyed by a return to the simple-minded film-theory distinction between the objective and the subjective shots, whose images are sometimes "objectively" ambiguous, so that we cannot decide whose viewpoint we are adopting—that of the character or that of the camera apparatus.⁶³

What might otherwise appear to be an 'objective' shot, owing to its apparently 'characterless' viewpoint, is made subjective for Prairie; although her mother is, for the most part, behind the camera – and, therefore, not visible on the screen – Prairie begins to see her mother as an extension of the 'camera apparatus' itself. This attributes a sense of agency to the film's 'mediator' that the determination of a viewpoint as 'objective' might otherwise discount or overlook.

⁶² Thomas Hill Schaub, 'The Crying of Lot 49 and other California novels', *Cambridge Companion*, 30-43 (p.35).

⁶³ Jameson, *Realism*, pp.177-8.

Indeed, Pynchon's novel ascribes such agency to the film's mediator, that the apparatus itself becomes a weapon in the hands of its operator. This is evidenced in the film collective 24fps's new slogan:

A camera is a gun. An image taken is a death performed. Images put together are the substructure of an afterlife and a Judgment. We will be architects of a just Hell for the fascist pig. Death to everything that oinks!⁶⁴

The notion of an otherwise inanimate piece of apparatus adopting animate status when it is taken in the hands of another, and the notion of a static image performing a function, not only invokes the socially didactic power of the mediation of film, but invoke, once again, the idea of metaphor as an 'act' as opposed to an 'image'. The effect is not produced by the content of the image, but as a consequence of the act of 'taking' the image; as Driblette sees himself as the one to 'give the spirit flesh', the members of 24fps see their role as that of 'architects', since the 'death' is performed in the image's construction.

Prairie appears to share the status of re/mediator with that of her mother. Both characters prefer to align their function with the frame as opposed to the image contained within it. When a teacher tells Prairie's class to write about a sports figure, for example, they are instructed not to write about which sports figure they most admire, but which sports figure 'they wished they could be': 'Most girls said something like Chris Evert. Prairie said Brent Musberger. Each time they got together, it suited her to be the one to frame and comment on Ché's roughhouse engagements with the world' (p.327). Prairie's identification with the role of the commentator in fact affords her a greater sense of agency than that of the tennis superstar. By mediating the commentary, by giving it shape, Prairie controls the narrative; commentary provides the narratological frame where camera-operating provides the visual frame.

This can be seen elsewhere in the novel. When Zoyd, for example, performs his annual 'defenestration' – a regularly-scheduled act of apparent momentary madness to ensure that he continues to receive his disability benefits – it attracts a significant amount of media attention.

⁶⁴ Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (London: Vintage, 2000), p.197.

After highlights of previous attempts, one news channel compiles ‘a panel including a physics professor, a psychiatrist, and a track-and-field coach live and remote from the Olympics down in L.A. discussing the evolution over the years of Zoyd’s technique’ (p.15). The acts of commentating and camera-operating perform the same function in this novel; both can be seen to organise and frame an image in a particular way so as to attribute meaning to something otherwise meaningless, or to diminish the sense in an image that otherwise offered meaningful subtext. In the context of this binary, where, therefore, might Pynchon situate the self-conscious mediation of his own fiction?

Modelling the World: Technology, Science, and Nature

It is impossible to discuss film and television as forms of self-conscious representation without considering the impact of technology on Pynchon’s fiction and the question of its mediation more broadly. Like visual art and ‘tubal culture’, Pynchon’s technological metaphors self-consciously invoke images of framing and frame-breaking in a way that allows for the re-distribution of power, the obfuscation of our expectations of agency, and the generation of paranoia.

Malpas and Taylor note how technology facilitates paranoia in Pynchon’s texts, harnessing the metaphor of the circuit board to indicate how the subject mind is forced to oscillate between the conviction that ‘connection’ of some kind can be made and that the limits of the ‘autonomous self’ will fundamentally preclude such connection:

The paranoid sensibility is at one moment convinced of the reality of connection, at another thrown into doubt and confusion. The ‘cybernetic on-off, us-them circuit board’ [...] produces what [Emily Apter] calls ‘discrete limits of an autonomous self, abolishing mechanisms of agency’.⁶⁵

Technology, in Pynchon’s works, is often closely linked with capitalism; the structures that support one can usually be found to support the other. This once again becomes a means

⁶⁵ Malpas and Taylor, p.5.

through which Pynchon can gesture at the invisible authorities upholding the structures contained within – and enacted by – these texts. It is ‘omnipresent global corporations, extensive structures of government surveillance and rapidly changing forms of information technology [that] all encourage the kinds of anxiety that paranoia fosters’ (p.5).

The self-reflexivity of metaphors of communication – whether analogue or digital – gives the unsettling impression in Pynchon’s texts that we can be brought into closer proximity with one another by an anonymous or invisible third party. If, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the snail-mail of the Tristero and the texture of the Jacobean performance create their own realities by existing as self-aware containers of meaning or expression, then technology is the metaphor that Pynchon recruits to emphasise the progressive destabilisation of communication in the modern age. McLuhan suggests that ‘[t]he medium, or process, of our time—electric technology—is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life.’⁶⁶ This notion is echoed by one of postmodernity’s foremost theorists, Jean Baudrillard, who remarks that ‘[c]ommunication seems to exhaust itself in the practical function of contact, and the content seems to retreat: the network, rather than the network’s protagonists, is given priority.’⁶⁷ This claim highlights the notion that the ‘medium’ takes precedence over the message, and, in doing so, entirely diminishes the agency of the ‘network’s protagonists’.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa repeatedly employs electrical or technological metaphors to emphasise her own social displacement as they invoke tightly-patterned impenetrable networks that appear to operate independently of any other influence. Unlike snail-mail, electrical circuitry does not require a third party to operate it once all its components are in place: it exists self-sufficiently and is directly suggestive of the nature of the communities that Oedipa struggles to penetrate. As she first begins driving towards San Narciso she uses a technological metaphor to describe the city:

⁶⁶ McLuhan and Fiore, p.8.

⁶⁷ Claude Thibaut, ‘On the New Technologies’, *Jean Baudrillard: From Hyperreality to Disappearance: Uncollected Interviews*, eds. Richard G. Smith and David B. Clarke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 109-112 (p.110).

[S]he thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had.⁶⁸

As she travels towards a new city for the first time, about to embark upon a task which she does not fully understand, she acknowledges 'a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate' (p.13). Although she feels as though she recognises their 'intent to communicate', she is also forced to confront their 'concealed meaning'. She is able to topographically penetrate the city, but she is not able to penetrate its network of communication. This echoes Pynchon's early short story 'The Small Rain' (1959), in which the protagonist, Levine, laments the circuitry of community that dictates individual and social experience:

"What are you, homesick or what," he said. Levine shook his head. "Not exactly. What I mean is something like a closed circuit. Everybody on the same frequency. And after a while you forget about the rest of the spectrum and start believing that this is the only frequency that counts or is real."⁶⁹

The circuitry self-reflexively invokes the function of both metaphor and the community it describes: circuitry commands its own 'bounded surface', to use Lakoff and Johnson's term, that dictates how things function inside and outside of it. Like Oedipa's anxiety about being contained within the tower, Levine wonders what might exist outside of it, yet he never seems to succeed in escaping the bounded surface of his community in the barracks. He remains a doomed component of this circuitry, while continuing to operate on a different 'frequency', an experience akin to Oedipa's, whose revelations become lost to her the further she travels from the tower, trembling 'just past the threshold of her understanding.'⁷⁰

While Oedipa uses technological metaphors to suggest her inability to figuratively penetrate the spaces commanded by new communities she encounters, technology *is* able to

⁶⁸ Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.13.

⁶⁹ Thomas Pynchon, *Slow Learner* (London: Vintage, 2000), p.42.

⁷⁰ Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.13.

invade the bounded surface of her private, domestic space. She recalls unwanted telephone calls from Inverarity and Dr Hilarius, her psychiatrist, ‘its announcing bell clear cardiac terror, so out of nothing did it come, the instrument one second inert, the next screaming’ (p.7). It is not the voice of Dr Hilarius that she associates with penetrating the privacy of her domestic space but the ‘instrument’ of the telephone, which appears to command its own voice, brought to life by its ‘screaming’. While the postmen of the Tristero are, for the most part, invisible, operating underground, technology as a transmitter of information is startlingly conspicuous. Where, before, the third party unifying the two halves of the metaphor or message played a relatively subtle role, in digital or technological communication the person, object, or concept responsible for communicating that message becomes more material than the message itself. In an action that appears to cause Oedipa’s domestic space to shrink, the figurative enlargement of the telephone as an instrument of communication engenders not only a sense of paranoia, but a sense of claustrophobia.

Technology possesses the ability to destabilise Oedipa’s physical orientation by making her private space public, corrupting her home with a barrage of meaningless information and miscommunication. This invasion extends to her mind, which becomes increasingly overloaded with television adverts, pop culture references, and distorted messages. She becomes progressively more suspicious of technology, subsequent to questioning the apparent coincidence of Metzger’s TV movie airing the same night that he arrived at her motel: ‘it’s all part of a plot, an elaborate, seduction, *plot*’ (p.18). McLuhan suggests that with both literacy and, later, the introduction of technology, ‘man could now inspire—and conspire.’⁷¹ The possibility of conspiracy penetrates Oedipa’s mind and the power that technology holds over her causes her entire identity to shift throughout the novel. When Mucho interviews her for his radio station following the nervous breakdown of Dr Hilarius, he calls her ‘Edna Mosh’: “‘Edna Mosh?’” Oedipa said. “‘It’ll come out the right way,” Mucho said. “I was allowing for the distortion [...]”⁷² The suggestion is that the message will change in transit, and that Oedipa will preserve her own name, and, thus, identity when that message is received. But Oedipa

⁷¹ McLuhan and Fiore, p.50.

⁷² Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.107.

allows herself to change in transit too. When she discusses Mucho's condition with his friend and colleague Funch, he addresses her as Mrs Maas, to which Oedipa replies 'call me Edna' (p. 107). The influence of media and technology has fully penetrated Oedipa's bounded surface and shifted not only her relationship to the world around her, but her relationship to herself. She has allowed herself to become someone else entirely.

Another central figure in the development of communication theory at this time, Norbert Wiener, identifies the problematic relationship between technology and communication in *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*: 'as efficient as communications' mechanisms become, they are still [...] subject to the overwhelming tendency for entropy to increase, for information to leak in transit, unless certain external agents are introduced to control it.'⁷³ Information entropy – one branch of entropic theory, of which another is thermodynamics – suggests that with lesser certainty in a situation, more information will be produced. When Wiener argues that entropy will increase as communications' mechanisms become more efficient, he indicates that the stability of communication, paradoxically, will become destabilised by information leaked in transit. Pynchon was directly influenced by Wiener's work in 'Entropy' (1960):

[H]e found in entropy or the measure of disorganization for a closed system an adequate metaphor to apply to certain phenomena in his own world. He [...] envisioned a heat-death for his culture in which ideas, like heat-energy, would no longer be transferred, since each point in it would ultimately have the same quantity of energy; and intellectual motion would, accordingly, cease.⁷⁴

This passage characterises an experience of the world possessing what appears to be a coherent bounded surface – a 'closed system' – in which disorder and chaos prevails and communication is no longer effective. The function of metaphor in Pynchon's novels extends to this definition of information entropy. Hayles, for example, suggests that if 'both parts of a metaphoric comparison were equally abstract, the metaphor would lose its anchor in immediate physical

⁷³ Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (London: Hachette UK, 1988), p.92.

⁷⁴ Pynchon, *Slow Learner*, pp.88-9.

reality and thus much of its force. If both parts were equally immediate, the metaphor would be redundant.⁷⁵ Just as Callisto suggests that intellectual motion would cease if each point maintained the same quantity of energy, Hayles identifies that a metaphor with two sides of equal force will not communicate.

In order to invoke the self-conscious construction of the metafictional text, Pynchon engages closely with the relationship between complex scientific ideas and the language of allusion. In 'Quantum Poetics', Samuel Matlack describes how science writers commonly lean on metaphor as a device by which they might better communicate the concepts at hand:

The question of whether and how physics can be rendered in ordinary speech is nowhere more important than in our assessment of writers who try to present a vision of the world that is wholly other than what our everyday experience would have us believe, a world that, many think, is more real. [...] There is something deeply paradoxical about this project. On the one hand, it is motivated by a desire to dispel everyday illusions about the physical world that contribute to our human-centeredness. [...] On the other hand, the only way to take a popular audience on this "journey out of our commonsense view of things" in writing is in commonsense language, which is intricately tied to our everyday experience of the world.⁷⁶

Matlack consults a variety of thinkers and philosophers who agree that 'parables and metaphors are useful for teaching people difficult concepts' (p.50). Metaphors, however, do not only help to give scientific ideas a comprehensible structure in Pynchon's works; scientific ideas also provide a comprehensible structure through which we might better understand the function of metaphor and, by extension, fiction. In other words, the exchange of information between a scientific idea and the metaphor used to communicate it is not unidirectional, but bi- or even multidirectional; information becomes fluid enough that a metaphor cannot only inform our understanding of science, but science can inform our understanding of metaphor. Matlack remarks upon this quality of fluidity by analysing the type of language most often used to convey scientific principles, that 'instead of nouns [...] we ought to try using verbs for building

⁷⁵ Hayles, "A Metaphor of God Knew How Many Parts", p.99.

⁷⁶ Samuel Matlack, 'Quantum Poetics', *The New Atlantis*, No. 53 (Summer/Fall 2017), 46-67 (pp.47-8).

complex ideas from simple, concrete experience. [...] This new mode of language [...] would reflect more accurately the truth that all is in flux' (p.63).

If the language of action might better convey the 'truth' of experience as opposed to the language of objects, Hayles also remarks in *The Cosmic Web* that the very notion 'flow' might best be communicated through images and metaphors that evoke a sense of movement. Here, Hayles analyses the shift in models used to explain scientific theory in her discussion of the 'Copernican revolution' in cultural thinking that brought the twentieth century to a close:

Characteristic metaphors are a "cosmic dance," a "network of events," and an "energy field." A dance, a network, a field—the phrases imply a reality that has no detachable parts, indeed no enduring, unchanging parts at all. Composed not of particles but of "events," it is in constant motion, rendered dynamic by interactions that are simultaneously affecting each other. As the "dance" metaphor implies, its harmonious, rhythmic patterns of motion include the observer as an integral participant.⁷⁷

If a quantum model of the universe can be constructively communicated via images of dance, network, and field, then metaphors that illustrate the 'constant motion' and 'dynamic interactions' between the 'events' that constitute the universe might also achieve the same effect. As Hayles points out, the 'observer' is an 'integral participant' in the 'patterns of motion', and, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa repeatedly attempts to diagnose the 'distinguishing characteristics' of the world around her based on her orientation in relationship to the 'events' that Hayles describes.

One of the best examples of this is when Oedipa knocks over a can of hairspray in the motel bathroom:

The can knew where it was going, she sensed, or something fast enough, God or a digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of its travel; but she wasn't fast enough, and knew only that it might hit them at any moment [...].⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Hayles, *The Cosmic Web*, p.15.

⁷⁸ Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.23.

The can's perpetual motion is thrown into relief not by its patterns of movement, but by Oedipa's orientation to the movement. It is only because '*she* wasn't fast enough' [my italics] that its motion appears to be chaotic and unpredictable. Otherwise, Oedipa remarks, it seems as though '[t]he can knew where it was going'; notably, it is only an omniscient presence or a 'digital machine' that might either inherently know or be able to compute the 'complex web of its travel'. When it comes to perceiving and retrospectively mapping these patterns of movement, this passage illustrates the fundamentally important claim of Hayles' that 'the observer as an integral participant' must be included in the metaphor used to describe the 'component interactions'.

Hayles writes that '[n]o matter where we stand we are within the kaleidoscope, turning with it, so that what we see depends on where we stand. To change positions does not solve the problem, because the patterns are constantly changing'.⁷⁹ Oedipa, as such, does not exist independently of the can's 'complex web of [...] travel', but is woven into it, becoming a part of the 'changing' patterns of motion. Hayles' suggestion functions neatly as a summation for the entire novel. Indeed, the apparently chaotic metaphor of the exploding hairspray can speaks to Oedipa's experience at large: her attempt to organise Inverarity's estate; her efforts to uncover the truth about the Tristero; her desire to penetrate the closed communities she comes into contact with.

Pynchon conveys Oedipa's increasing absorption in these mysteries through metaphors of accelerating motion that threaten her status as 'participant' in the action:

[T]hese follow-ups were no more disquieting than other revelations which now seemed to come crowding in exponentially, as if the more she collected the more would come to her, until everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero.⁸⁰

The exponential crowding that Oedipa experiences is a consequence of her role as the collector or curator of that information – a role which is reflected in the narratological demands Pynchon

⁷⁹ Hayles, *The Cosmic Web*, p.20.

⁸⁰ Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.60.

places on his own reader – and yet her autonomy is threatened by the excess of external and often unverifiable stimuli; if it is the case that ‘the more she collected the more would come to her’, then information is set to increase infinitely until neither Oedipa nor the reader can be located within its network of communication. Callisto’s description of entropy as the ‘measure of disorganization for a closed system’ is mimicked in Oedipa’s experience of the Tristero. The idea that revelations can come ‘crowding in’ demonstrates Oedipa’s perception of herself as occupant of a ‘closed system’ into which information might enter, but from which information cannot exit. For Callisto, a culture’s ‘heat-death’ occurs when ideas can ‘no longer be transferred’, because there is such a surplus of information existing within that closed system that no revelation means any more than another and, inevitably, contradicting revelations begin to emerge and co-exist.

Pynchon explores entropy metaphorically in terms of both communication and heat-engines, two fields that appear to be distinct, but in *The Crying of Lot 49* they connect ‘at one point: Maxwell’s Demon’ (p.79). Oedipa volunteers herself for an experiment to determine whether she is ‘sensitive’ enough to penetrate the system and communicate with the ‘demon’ responsible for the distribution of information contained within it. Nefastis, the experiment’s innovator, tells Oedipa that the ‘Demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true’ (p.79). Nefastis’ theory, therefore, suggests that the role of the Demon is central to what a metaphor communicates; two halves of a metaphor can exist independently, but they cannot be understood without something or somebody to connect them, to make them ‘true’. In this extended metaphor, the ‘sensitive’ is the one to whom the Demon ‘passes his data’ and who must ‘reply in kind’, which, on a metafictional level, invokes the responsibility of the reader in relationship to the novel itself (p.79). Oedipa gestures to the collusion between writer and reader when she muses to herself that the ‘true sensitive is the one that can share in the man’s hallucinations’, but after her frustrated attempt to connect with the Demon, she is forced to acknowledge that ‘nothing happened’ (p.81). The Demon, then, parallels the function of the to connect their source and their destination, they mean nothing at all.

The reason that Oedipa cannot stabilise her orientation, therefore, is not that she exists exclusively ‘outside’ of these networks, but that she exists inside and outside simultaneously. In the final pages of the novel, the narrator describes how she ‘stood between the public booth and the rented car [...], her isolation complete [...]. But she’d lost her bearings’ (p.137). She is entangled in a closed system in which there appear to be so many parts of metaphors that *could* be connected that she is forced to question whether everything might, in fact, be coincidence. As Oedipa’s grasp on the bounded surface of metaphor begins to disintegrate, so, too, does her own bounded surface. She imagines being ‘mocked by a phantom self’ in the same way as one may be haunted ‘by a phantom limb’, as though parts of her own body, like the information slipping through her fingers, are fading away (p.124). She mourns the ‘congruent’ American land that she once knew, one in which ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ represented an orientational dichotomy (p. 139).

Arnheim describes the kind of order ideated by Oedipa as one of geographical and cultural ‘congruence’ which constitutes a ‘necessary condition’ for understanding, explaining Oedipa’s reluctance to concede that the information she has collated over the course of the novel might not form a meaningful pattern after all:

Order is a necessary condition for anything the human mind is to understand. [...] When nothing superfluous is included and nothing indispensable left out, one can understand the interrelation of the whole and its parts, as well as the hierarchic scale of importance and power by which some structural features are dominant, others subordinate.⁸¹

The conditions necessary for achieving order – the preclusion of ‘superfluous’ information, and the inclusion of ‘indispensable’ information, so that one might be able to hierarchise information on a scale of ‘dominant’ to ‘subordinate’, – are conditions that *Lot 49* makes impossible to satisfy. Oedipa, along with Pynchon’s reader, is faced with an impossible struggle to ‘understand the interrelation of the whole and its parts’ because it is impossible to determine whether each piece of information introduced into the narrative is ‘superfluous’ or ‘indispensable’. The fact that none of the information can be verified, in no small part because

⁸¹ Arnheim, p.1.

the source communicator of that information is conspicuously absent from the narrative, means a 'hierarchical scale' cannot be established. Oedipa, however, resolves to impose a scale for herself. Her resistance to the notion of meaningless chaos lies in her acknowledgement of 'the scatter of business interests that had survived Inverarity. She would give them order, she would create constellations'.⁸² In this bold act, Oedipa projects her aspiration to transform paranoia both intra- and extra-textually, inviting the reader to collude in the act of meaningful creation.

The impulse to impose order upon chaos is a theme explored more fully in *Gravity's Rainbow*, a novel which demands even more of its reader's active participation. In a scene detailing various scientific tests performed upon Tyrone Slothrop (conducted in order to determine what may have taken place during his psychological 'conditioning' by a mysterious scientist as an infant), Rózsavölgyi, the Hungarian scientist collaborating with Ned Pointsman at the White Visitation, describes a 'new' approach to psychological analysis:

[W]e are now proposing, to give, Sloth-rop a *complete-ly dif-ferent* sort, of test. The most *famil-iar exam-ple* of the *type*, is the Rorschach *ink-blot*. The *ba-sic* theory, is, that when given an *unstruc-tured* stimulus, some shape-less *blob* of *exper-ience*, the subject, will seek to impose, *struct-ture on* it. How, he goes *a-bout struc-turing* this blob, will reflect his *needs*, his hopes – will provide, us with *clues*, to his dreams, *fan-tasies*, the deepest *re-gions* of his mind.⁸³

This 'different' sort of test relies precisely upon mankind's compulsion to impose structure on that which is otherwise shapeless. Because this 'inner order' supplied by the mind does not necessarily signify nor even correspond to the outer disorder it has been created to organise, it reveals the psychological subtext underlying the form that each individual subject has provided to frame the 'unstructured stimulus.' The idea that the form a subject imposes upon a shapeless stimulus can reveal 'dreams, fantasies, the deepest regions' of the mind is an unsettling one that once again connects paranoid affects with mankind's creative impulse; in the same way as Slothrop's organisation of unstructured stimuli might reflect something of his own needs, hopes, and dreams, the reader's impulse to impose order on the narratological chaos of Pynchon's

⁸² Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.68.

⁸³ Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p.96.

novel might simultaneously be generated by and incur paranoia. As Oedipa agonises over the possibility that the interiority of her mind might be exposed through her interaction with the communication technologies she comes into contact with, we, too, are invited to question what our perceptions of this novel's shape reveal about the deepest regions of our own minds.

Arnheim identifies the dangers associated with self-imposing a system of order onto an otherwise 'scattered' arrangement, since self-imposed systems of order constitute only inner order and bear no relation to the outer order that constitutes the world the subject occupies. Arnheim writes that a subsequent 'lack of correspondence between outer and inner order produces a clash of orders, which is to say that it introduces an element of disorder.'⁸⁴ If, in a subject's yearning for order, disorder can be generated, then we can see Pynchon's characters figuratively enacting the process of entropy in relation to the concept of metaphor. The Rorschach inkblot test, for example, depends upon *not* providing suggested answers or a multiple choice-style answer card, so that subjects might be allowed to supply freely associated interpretations in response to the images encountered. This might appear to be a useful mechanism for imposing order upon apparently unstructured visual data, but in supplying a form, the subject introduces additional information into the system. While appearing to unite 'outer and inner' orders, the lack of correspondence, in fact, remains; all that has been added is surplus data, increasing 'disorder' in a system which already lacks structure.

Oedipa seems sensitive to this idea in *Lot 49*; she anticipates the failure of her quest to identify the 'central truth', asking whether or not the 'truth' itself might be the single piece of information missing from the contents of a closed system with the potential for catalysing what Callisto describes as an irreversible 'heat-death for his culture in which ideas, like heat-energy, would no longer be transferred':

[S]he too might [...] be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own

⁸⁴ Arnheim, p.2.

message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back.⁸⁵

This 'central truth' is an iota of information which must necessarily destroy 'its own message'; Oedipa wonders, like Callisto, whether the truth might be the very thing that causes intellectual motion to 'cease'. In the downstairs apartment of 'Entropy', meanwhile, Saul renders this process syntactically in relationship to communication theory, complaining that language might not be thought of as a 'barrier', but as 'a kind of leakage':

No, ace, it is *not* a barrier. If it is anything it's a kind of leakage. Tell a girl: 'I love you.' No trouble with two-thirds of that, it's a closed circuit. Just you and she. But that nasty four-letter word in the middle, *that's* the one you have to look out for. Ambiguity. Redundance. Irrelevance, even. Leakage. All this is noise. Noise screws up your signal, makes for disorganization in the circuit.⁸⁶

The 'matter' of the clause 'I love you' – the 'I' and the 'you' – Saul says, constitutes a 'closed circuit', two units of language with clear corresponding signifieds, while the 'nasty four-letter word in the middle', introduces ambiguity into the system. In order to determine the truth of an abstract and plural value such as 'love', so much 'noise' would need to be introduced that the exchange of intellectual ideas would become meaningless; to return to Arnheim's original thesis, it would be impossible to determine the superfluous information from the indispensable information. As Saul remarks, '[n]oise screws up your signal', and language is often seen to create more 'noise' than anything else in Pynchon's works. Oedipa ultimately finds this, too, when she acknowledges that she is 'faced with a metaphor of God knew how many parts; more than two, anyway.'⁸⁷

Entropy is not the only scientific principle employed by Pynchon in order to illustrate the idea of a 'scattered' world in which chaos is found to exponentially multiply in the face of – and even, often, as a direct consequence of – efforts to control and organise it. In many of his works, and in *Gravity's Rainbow* in particular, Pynchon engages complex metaphors oriented

⁸⁵ Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.71.

⁸⁶ Pynchon, *Slow Learner*, pp.90-1.

⁸⁷ Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.82.

around quantum theory, astronomy, and black holes in order to illustrate a progressive cultural shift towards informational stasis. Hayles imagines this quality of Pynchon's work as enacted through the 'expanding model of the universe':

Another scientific model that is equally important to Pynchon's scheme [...] is the expanding model of the universe. [...] Like the fictional universe with which the characters in the narrative attempt to come to terms, it is invested by Pynchon with both a positive and negative valence, with the possibility that closure may be achieved and the possibility that it may not.⁸⁸

The image of the expanding model of the universe has interesting implications for our reading of orientational anxiety in Pynchon's fiction. In Pynchon's 'mythic Flight from Center', continual movement in the direction away from the centre is implied as the space between a subject and object grows; in this model, however, although *all* matter is in motion, the subject perceives only the movement of other objects, perceiving itself to be static (p.190). For Hayles, this affects the possibility of closure; if the subject remains eternally in motion, travelling away from the 'Center', able to perceive neither its own trajectory nor its own destination, then how can either epistemological or ontological certainty be achieved?

David Cowart takes a broader approach to this concern, by illustrating the divide between Pynchon's representations of the Newtonian model of the universe and the quantum model of the universe:

The older science, still seldom questioned, models a mechanistic universe that operates according to the laws of cause and effect. The new science, derived from the physics of Werner Heisenberg, Niels Bohr, and Max Planck, grapples with a universe in which physical phenomena can be plotted and predicted only in terms of uncertainty and probability.⁸⁹

Many structural features of Pynchon's prose lend themselves to the characteristics of 'new science': epistemological uncertainty; the simultaneity of contradictory information; the narrative resistance to closure. In a world where probability is the most convincing indicator of

⁸⁸ Hayles, *The Cosmic Web*, pp.189-90.

⁸⁹ Cowart, *Dark Passages*, pp.11-2.

any particular outcome, it is easy to see how, in Hayles' words, we might be left only with the possibility of closure.

Just one of the specific scientific images that Cowart draws on to illustrate the existential anxiety of the quantum world invoked by Pynchon's fiction is that of the black hole, 'a gravitational pull so powerful as to preclude the escape of light is yet another metaphor that pronounces on the Enlightenment pretension to knowledge' (p.142). The black hole information paradox was made famous by Stephen Hawking in the 1970s; it was American physicist David Finkelstein, however, who used a combination of the principles of general relativity and quantum mechanics to determine the qualities of a black hole's event horizon. In 1958, Finkelstein determined that black holes behave as 'unidirectional membranes', since whatever passes beyond the event horizon of a black hole cannot retrace its direction of travel. The irreversibility of this process of information relay echoes that of entropy; once information is set in motion (in the case of a black hole, in a particular direction), it cannot return to its starting point.

For this reason, information is only quantifiable when it can be measured *outside* of a black hole's event horizon; once information is absorbed, or 'swallowed', by the 'gravitational pull' of the black hole, it bears no relation to what was originally fed into the system. While Pynchon's engagement with theories of entropy helps us to understand how information exchange is set in motion along a unidirectional bearing within a closed system, the image of the black hole can illuminate how information is fed into a closed system and quantified by those who exist outside of its margins. It is Oedipa, for example, who discovers that 'terror' exists only for those who dwell outside of these closed systems when she imagines that for those she encounters '[t]he night was empty of all terror [...], they had inside their circles an imaginary fire, and needed nothing but their own unpenetrated sense of community.'⁹⁰ It is only once her own orientational status as an outsider is realised, and the impossibility of verifying the information within is shattered, that she realises 'she'd lost her bearings. [...] San Narciso [...]

⁹⁰ Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.90.

became a name again, was assumed back into the American community of crust and mantle' (p. 137).

The 'crust and mantle' of 'American community' implies a geographically natural dimension to an otherwise social, manmade phenomenon, emphasising physical orientation as a key component of collective experience. Using matter as a framework through which to understand that which is abstract points directly to the function of scientific metaphor in Pynchon's work. Inger H. Dalsgaard explains how his fiction brings the Newtonian and the quantum into dialogue with one another:

Quantum physicists have proven that there are other worlds than the Newtonian, [...] that the observer does not occupy a privileged, godlike position outside and separate from the "world" he or she observes. [...] [Q]uantum mechanics can properly be said to have supplemented rather than supplanted classical and relative physics.⁹¹

Dalsgaard makes two significant observations here: firstly, that the quantum model of the universe destabilises the assumption that the subject constitutes a central axis around which the rest of the world is oriented; and secondly, that this doesn't pose a direct challenge to classical physics, but suggests an enhancement of it. Dalsgaard conjects that the complementarity of Newtonian and quantum models in Pynchon's works equally reflects the complementarity of 'postmodernist, modernist, and realist approaches' to aesthetic form, an idea which in turn informs the diversity of metaphorical structures Pynchon employs to highlight fiction as a formal contrivance (p.157). In fact, what Pynchon borrows from realist and modernist traditions – the destabilisation of the subject in relation to the object, the attention to the 'surface' of a work in order to imply depth, the blend of high and low culture – often enhances the characteristic self-conscious postmodernism of his novels and stories.

Gravity's Rainbow most effectively explores the simultaneous complementarity and disparity of Newtonian and quantum models, in terms that directly affect the orientation of characters in response to their quests and, in turn, the reader in response to the text. Wimpe, a

⁹¹ Inger H. Dalsgaard, 'Science and technology', *Cambridge Companion*, 156-167 (p. 157).

German drug salesman, observes that '[w]e seem up against a dilemma built into Nature, much like the Heisenberg situation.'⁹² Referring to Heisenberg's 'Uncertainty Principle', Wimpe's statement automatically invokes the natural condition of mankind as one of orientational anxiety: one can measure one's own position or one's own velocity at a single point in time, but not both. This condition characterises the experience of the majority of Pynchon's protagonists; they are either able to orient themselves at the expense of understanding fully the speed and direction of their travel, or are able to understand the trajectory along which they travel at the expense of being able to accurately orient themselves. Indeed, our own compulsion to identify with Pynchon's 'lost' protagonists incurs narratological disorientation on the part of his reader.

Oberst Enzian, leader of the Schwarzkommando, holds the key to understanding the entire novel in the context of this observation. Not only does Enzian identify the elusive Rocket (for which a number of the novel's key characters search at one point or another) as the central axis in relation to which all seekers find themselves destabilised, but Enzian draws a revealing parallel between 'Rocket' and 'text', which implicates the reader within the same system conditioning the experience of its characters. Enzian explains how he had mistaken the 'Rocket' for a kind of 'holy Text' which, when 'picked to pieces, annotated, explicated' might both reveal one's 'real Destiny' at the same time as allowing one to achieve it (p.616). However, Enzian describes how the qualities of the object – 'its symmetries, its latencies, the *cuteness* of it' – caused them to be both 'enchanted and seduced', falsely revering the object 'Rocket' as the central axis of epistemological and ontological experience, while the 'real Text persisted, somewhere else' (p.616). Enzian acknowledges that once this abstract 'Text' is realised outside of the realm of their own experience, they find themselves in 'darkness', representing at once epistemological uncertainty and ontological anxiety: they neither know where they are nor in what direction they are to travel to find what they are looking for. As a consequence of this uncertainty, Enzian develops the paranoid suspicion that he might be 'riding through it, the Real Text, right now', as though bearing witness to the transformation of the Text from object to landscape (p.616). Enzian describes 'the bombing' as an 'industrial process of conversion',

⁹² Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p.414.

indicating that an exchange or transfer of energy might be the only way that one might be engage in the 'coding, recoding, redecoding' of the Text (p.617).

Enzian's paranoid visualisation of the 'Text' as a landscape through which one is forced to blindly travel effectively evokes the experience of reading this novel; like Tyrone Slothrop, and others who find themselves in pursuit of their own answers, the Rocket becomes a kind of elusive fetish-object to which the promise of epistemological certainty is attached. Yet, in a quantum universe 'in which physical phenomena can be plotted and predicted only in terms of uncertainty and probability', Hayles' conjecture that closure remains only a 'possibility' threatens the status of the Rocket both as an object existing in space and as an answer-key to the problems of the text. As the text threatens the hopes pinned upon the object-Rocket, it threatens, too, the status of the subject. Slothrop's self-image begins to disintegrate as the failure of his quest looms ever larger on the horizon, and so, too, does Pynchon's reader begin to relate increasingly to Enzian's experience of riding blindly through the dark landscape of the text in search of something that produces a meaningful pattern once decoded.

The reader's own struggle to orient him/herself in relation to the epistemological quest of textual decoding serves to establish an Us-Them dichotomy which at once orients the reader outside of the margins of textual meaning and finds the reader trapped within the 'darkness' of the textual landscape such that neither answer nor exit might present itself. By establishing such a dialogue between himself and his reader, Pynchon contrives a situation wherein the reader's experience of 'decoding' the novel mimics his characters' experiences of searching for their own answers. In one of the novel's labyrinthine 'Kenosha Kid' passages, the text itself seems to devolve into existential crisis, able only to ask questions and stripped of the capacity to answer them:

What if there is no Vacuum? Or if there is – what if They're *using* it on you? What if They find it convenient to preach an island of life surrounded by a void? Not just the Earth in space, but your own individual life in time? What if it's *in Their interest* to have you believing that? (p.826).

The unverifiable 'They' haunts *Gravity's Rainbow*, threatening not only the characters with the invisible presence of the authoritarian forces operating on their lives, but the reader with the invisible presence of the authorial force orchestrating the novelistic action and structure.

Although affective investment typically relies upon the suspension of disbelief – the impulse to align oneself with the intentions of the text, rather than to stand apart from it – the separation between 'Us' and 'Them' does not preclude affective investment altogether.

Pynchon's novels typically resist closure by consciously alerting his reader to the omnipresent yet eternally elusive 'They' operating from outside the margins of the text, but they also invite his reader to invest in the experience of the communal 'Us'. As long as 'They' withhold crucial information that suspends the possibility of an exhaustive decoding of the novel from the text's characters and readers, those same characters and readers are forced to share in their experience of paranoid speculation. If, as Ngai suggests, the experiences of paranoia and the quest for knowledge are inherently linked, then paranoia is engendered in Pynchon's texts by the fact that all clues within them point extra-textually. Where the text itself provides no answers and offers no closure, all we are left to do is postulate about the agenda of the 'They' controlling the narrative from an extra-textual vantage point beyond the 'closed system' of the novel.

While *Gravity's Rainbow* is perhaps best illustrative of this shared sense of epistemological paranoia, *Vineland* is the novel which metaphorically enacts this concept most accurately. Since Prairie can only experience her mother by imagining her behind the camera, Frenesi becomes a kind of narrative stand-in for the role of the writer, and Prairie that of the reader. The simultaneity of Prairie's present and Frenesi's past appears to both promise and preclude the possibility of reunion between mother and daughter:

At some point Prairie understood that the person behind the camera most of the time really was her mother, and that if she kept her mind empty she could absorb, conditionally become, Frenesi, share her eyes, feel, when the frame shook with fatigue or fear or nausea, Frenesi's whole body there, as much as her mind choosing the frame, her will to go out there, load the roll, get the shot. Prairie floated, [...] as if Frenesi were dead but in a special way, [...] where limited visits, mediated by projector and screen,

were possible. As if somehow, next reel or the one after, the girl would find a way, some way, to speak to her...⁹³

It is both on account of Frenesi's implied presence and physical absence from the frame that Prairie is able not only to identify with her, but to 'conditionally become' her. This implies an affective dimension of the text that is dependent as much upon the relationship between reader and writer as between reader and character. What appears in some contexts to be an 'Us' reader-character alliance versus an extra-textual 'They' authoritarian system, in this context invites the reader to identify with the writer, standing with him outside of the margins of the text, witnessing the alienation of the characters contained within the frame as though from a distance. Prairie feels as if 'Frenesi were dead', implying the activity of co-creation on her part at the point at which she, too, finds herself on one side of the projector and screen's 'mediating' presence. Through film, it is as though narrative were in motion, complicating the relationship between past and present, between reader, writer, and character, and between ontological and epistemological status.

Freer remarks that Pynchon was inspired by the Beat writers' emphasis on the idea of 'motion, energy, and spontaneity'.⁹⁴ She further indicates how 'questing or wandering is necessitated by the emptiness of modern, Western society. Meaning seems to require movement, while stasis is aligned with the void' (p.19). In his own works, Pynchon continues the tradition of situating the idea of 'motion, energy, and spontaneity' in a politico-cultural context. While the 'void' might appear to offer nothing but 'stasis', this experience incites an affective response of its own. Ahmed identifies this, by etymologically linking passivity and feeling:

It is significant that the word 'passion' and the word 'passive' share the same root in the Latin word for 'suffering' (*passio*). To be passive is to be enacted upon, as a negation that is already felt as suffering. The fear of passivity is tied to the fear of emotionality, in which weakness is defined in terms of a tendency to be shaped by others. Softness is narrated as a proneness to injury. The association between passion and passivity is instructive. It works as a reminder of how 'emotion' has been viewed as 'beneath' the

⁹³ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p.199.

⁹⁴ Freer, p.15.

faculties of thought and reason. To be emotional is to have one's judgement affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous.⁹⁵

Being enacted upon by the dominant culture, therefore, produces a very specific affective experience: the 'suffering' associated with the idea of being 'enacted upon'; the 'fear of passivity' and its connection with the 'fear of emotionality'; the 'weakness' and 'softness' implied by the 'tendency to be shaped by others'. What is so significant about Ahmed's claim is that the relationship between 'passion and passivity' reminds us that 'thought and reason' are more often positioned above 'emotion' within the hierarchy of human faculties. Ahmed notes that to be 'emotional' is often to be considered base, primal, dependent, as opposed to 'autonomous' because it means 'to have one's judgement affected'. Despite the postmodern novel's reputation for its resistance to emotionality, for its inward-looking, self-referential, and clinical style of reasoning (or, perhaps, unreasoning), there is a clear parallel to be drawn between the postmodern conditions of stasis and emptiness, and the affective conditions of passivity and reactivity. How can the postmodern novel appear to be simultaneously intellectually detached and emotionally invested? An answer to this question relies upon a reading of the individual in the context of the collective, and an orientational understanding of the sociality of 'inside' and 'outside', concerns of Pynchon's which can be illuminated through a consideration of the carnivalesque.

A Carnival of the Contemporary: the Mechanical, the Prosthetic, and the Fetishistic

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of Carnival provides a central framework for reading the binary conditions of being 'inside' and 'outside' in Pynchon's fiction. In Karen Bettez Halnon's reading of Bakhtin and the culture of heavy metal music, the carnival is a space of communal experience, mutual understanding, and social networking when experienced from within its

⁹⁵ Ahmed, pp.2-3.

boundaries, but represents the grotesque when perceived from an external vantage point.⁹⁶

Pynchon engages strongly with this idea through fantasies of closed communities, experiences of fetish, and the hybridisation of the organic and the mechanical, particularly where the female body is found to be the site of such synthesis. Pynchon's engagement with the carnivalesque can similarly be seen to emphasise the conditions of social belonging; if what is perceived as grotesque from the outside can, from the inside, be experienced as a social collective of shared meaning, then community can be seen to impact upon both epistemological and ontological dimensions of experience. Pynchon deliberately generates a narrative sense of the carnivalesque by structuring his texts in such a way that the reader faces difficulty orienting him/herself politically, ideologically, and affectively in relationship to the themes with which s/he engages in his stories and novels. Pynchon's texts invite his readers to sympathise with and be repulsed by, identify with and feel alienated from, the experiences of his characters. In a self-consciously embodied way, Pynchon uses these ideas to enact the experience of the everyman in relationship to the mechanisation of contemporary culture, an experience his reader shares with protagonists such as V., Oedipa, Slothrop, and Frenesi.

A key question that emerges from this consideration is whether it is possible to retain a sense of individuality once one has been initiated into a social collective. Time and again in Pynchon's novels and stories, both his protagonists' and his readers' experiences of information, knowledge, and social experience are shaped by what it means to belong and what it means to share a sense of meaning. The individual at once finds him/herself socially isolated from the experience of an in-group and affectively collectivised in relationship to the communal or fictional framework from which s/he is figuratively exiled. Jeff Baker proposes a reading of Oedipa's social orientation which illuminates this idea:

Oedipa becomes a "satire" of rugged individualism whose hard-fought journey ends, nonetheless, in indeterminacy. Yet it is also true that this journey through America's waste, and her persistent need to continually re-orient herself within it, allows Oedipa to escape her solipsism and empathically connect [with other characters]. [...] Her dawning awareness [...] resembles philosopher George Kateb's Emersonianism,

⁹⁶ Karen Bettez Halnon, 'Heavy Metal Carnival and Dis-alienation: The Politics of Grotesque Realism', *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Winter 2006), 33-48.

wherein “the development of individuality leads, not to egoism, but to a sense of connectedness.”⁹⁷

For Baker, Oedipa’s individuality is what grants her access to an experience of empathetic connectedness. Her conscious awareness of herself as an individual, often on the margins of the social collectives she encounters, fosters a need in her to continually ‘re-orient’ herself within the ‘waste’, out of a desire, drive, or compulsion to better understand others and the world around her, rather than to simply understand herself. For Pynchon, individualism can thus become an important component of meaningful shared experience, only when it resists the temptation to devolve into exceptionalism. Pynchon’s examination of individualism and social belonging reveals that one does not need to understand another’s pain or pleasure to foster a sense of connection, one only needs to be open to accepting it, an experience which is self-consciously embodied in that of his reader.

Is alienation, therefore, a contingent condition of collective affect? There is an apparent contradiction in terms here; yet, for Ahmed, emotions are connected to miscommunication as often as, if not more often than, mutual communication:

Emotions in their very intensity involve miscommunication, such that even when we feel we have the same feeling, we don’t necessarily have the same relationship to the feeling. [...] [I]t is the objects of emotion that circulate, rather than emotion as such. [...] [E]motions can move through the movement or circulation of objects. Such objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension.⁹⁸

Ahmed suggests that feeling cannot be shared in the context of a social collective without an object to absorb the ‘affect’, or what appears to be the ‘feeling-in-common’. If it is not feelings, but the ‘objects of emotion that circulate’, then Baker’s suggestion that Oedipa’s individuality leads ‘to a sense of connectedness’ can be verified by understanding that this connection might be achieved through her shared relations to objects that have become – or are in the process of becoming – ‘sites of personal and social tension’. Ahmed argues that through this process

⁹⁷ Jeff Baker, ‘Politics’, *Cambridge Companion*, 136-145 (p.137).

⁹⁸ Ahmed, pp.10-11.

“‘feelings’ become ‘fetishes’, qualities that seem to reside in objects, only through an erasure of the history of their production and circulation’ (p.11).

The relationship Baker identifies between Oedipa’s individuality and her sense of connectedness is, in fact, central to understanding the collective experience of Pynchon’s protagonists, as well as the collective experience of Pynchon’s readers. If, as Ahmed suggests, we can – at a certain point – equate ‘feelings’ and ‘fetishes’, then this provides the foundation for an argument regarding the affective properties of the mechanisation and prosthetisation of capitalist culture. Jameson, in his reading of Hegel, writes that ‘humans objectify their projects and their desires, thereby enriching them: life is itself then a series of reifications’.⁹⁹ If it is inherent in human nature to ‘objectify’ one’s projects and desires, then capitalist culture’s emphasis on material acquisition provides fertile ground for an assessment of this claim, and the novel – as cultural artefact or object – becomes a prime vehicle through which the relationship between reification and collective affective experience might be both metafictionally dramatised and reflected upon.

While the relationship between capitalism and fetishisation illustrates the contemporaneity of this claim, the compulsion to ‘objectify’ one’s projects and desires is as universal as it is timeless. Another lens through which we might examine this quality of human nature, therefore, is through the longstanding tradition of carnival. Clement B. G. London writes that ‘it is the nature of Carnival to be a sort of momentary escape from order and reason, as well as from reality.’¹⁰⁰ If reification and fetishisation are closely linked to the idea of making material abstract desire, then carnival, as a ‘momentary escape from order and reason’ gives context to this compulsion, facilitating the creation of a culturally-acceptable space within which human desires are allowed to take precedence over human reason. It would be remiss to overlook the relationship between carnival’s abandonment of ‘order and reason’ and Ahmed’s theory of ‘emotionality’. Where “‘emotion” has [typically] been viewed as “beneath” the

⁹⁹ Jameson, *Realism*, p.30.

¹⁰⁰ Clement B. G. London, ‘Carnival: A Religious Rite of Passage’, *Negro History Bulletin*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (1979), 4-6 (p.5).

faculties of thought and reason', carnival contextualises the inversion of this hierarchy.¹⁰¹ Crucially, for Ahmed, 'emotions become attributes of collectives, which get constructed as "being" through "feeling"' (p.2). London, too, notes that 'Arnold Van Gennep (1960) has defined [the] "rites of passage" [commonly associated with carnival] as devices which incorporate an individual into a new status or group'.¹⁰² Carnival, therefore, might not only be the vehicle through which the relationship between capitalism and fetishisation is best explored, but the vehicle through which we might understand the relationship between individual emotionality and the experience of the social collective.

Halnon reads Bakhtin's theory of carnival through the heavy metal music festival, allowing her to explain 'heavy metal carnival as a politics of "grotesque realism."' ¹⁰³ This, she argues, not only helpfully orients a reading of individual emotionality in relationship to the experience of a social collective, but demonstrates how these experiences are governed by the navigation of spaces determined by inner and outer boundaries:

For outsiders, grotesque realism, or rebelling against potentially everything that is moral, sacred, decent, or civilized, is a certain mark of alienation. Understood from the inside as carnival, however, metal is a dis-alienating, liminal utopia of human freedom, creativity, and egalitarianism (p.35).

A single space, therefore, might be simultaneously associated with the conditions of alienation and disalienation, might be both uncivilised and egalitarian, since these conditions are determined by one's orientation to the space itself. The suggestion that 'outsiders' might find something 'grotesque' that is perceived by insiders as a kind of creative utopia, illuminates Elias' contention that paranoia, in Pynchon's works, is, in fact, a creative force, while to outsiders it might appear to be a force engendering fear-based paralysis.

Furthermore, Halnon notes Bakhtin's suggestion that 'the carnival-grotesque' offers to 'suspend all conventions and established truths, to realize the relative nature of all that exists,

¹⁰¹ Ahmed, p.3.

¹⁰² London, p.5.

¹⁰³ Halnon, p.35.

and to enter a completely new order of things' (pp.36-7). In doing so, Halnon argues, 'carnival [...] grates against a society that places primacy on autonomy, self-interest, and individualism' (p.40). Pynchon's creative paranoia, like Bakhtin's carnival-grotesque, emphasises the relativity of existence, and, as Elias suggests, allows his characters – and, subsequently, his readers – to perceive 'connections, associations and creative difference.'¹⁰⁴ Might Pynchon's texts, therefore, operate in the manner of the carnival-grotesque, representing a kind of 'liminal utopia' within which the individual might not only experience 'human freedom', but a sense of 'connectedness' and disalienation? And, if it 'grates against' capitalist society's pillars of 'autonomy, self-interest, and individualism', might we also read Pynchon's works as a critique of mid-century cultural values?

Hayles indicates this possibility when she writes that '[w]e tend to experience meaning in [Pynchon's] text as a paranoid, or someone dropping acid, or a religious visionary who believes in Providential design might experience it'.¹⁰⁵ In her view, '[t]hese very different ways of organizing experience are isomorphic in the sense that they all presuppose the pervasiveness of pattern—that is to say, they all suppose a field view of reality' (p.175). While the 'view' Pynchon's texts commonly adopt might highlight the creative potential of paranoia through its emphasis on relativity, that is not to say that all readers experience the same response to his narratives. Hayles notes that readers 'tend to be divided between those who find the novel a chaotic mass of unconnected detail, and those who see its patterning as pervasive', arguing that this perspectival disparity arises because 'either one sees the whole design, or one doesn't see it at all':

For those who do, the technique forges a bridge between the emerging sense of a field view and the experience of reading. The very fact that we can see the connections means that we are participating in the mode of vision being described (p.175).

Hayles' reading of the structural relativity of *Gravity's Rainbow* resonates with Halnon's reading of heavy metal carnival. If heavy metal carnival can at once be perceived as grotesque

¹⁰⁴ Elias, p.126.

¹⁰⁵ Hayles, *The Cosmic Web*, p.175.

by outsiders and as utopian by insiders, then, by the same logic, Pynchon's novel can be perceived at once as a 'chaotic mass of unconnected detail' by some, and by others who 'see its patterning as pervasive'. For Hayles, this returns Pynchon's reader to the relationship between orientation and visibility, to the relationship between the individual and the collective. Either 'one sees the whole design', thereby becoming a textual 'insider', 'or one doesn't see it at all'. This quality of the novel reflects, too, on Waugh's theory of metafictional framing and frame-breaking. If, in order to become a textual insider, you must see 'the whole design', a holistic comprehension of the text depends upon being both inside *and* outside of it – upon being able to perceive the framework holding the novel's contents in place. Conversely, those who cannot 'see it at all' are not only those relegated to the novel's extra-textual margins, but those who are blind to its framework from *any* vantage point. This experience of textual banishment is akin to Jameson's conjecture that the postmodern cultural artefact no longer 'organizes even a minimal place for the viewer'; a viewer's inability to perceive the 'whole design' of the text thus precludes the affective investment more often associated with traditional realism.¹⁰⁶ The conspicuity of a novel's framework, therefore, dramatises the affective multidimensionality of the carnivalesque reading experience far more effectively than either total immersion in, or total exile from the text.

The relationship between carnival and the relativity of experience in Pynchon's works also serves to illuminate the function of the fetish, both on the level of objects represented within the text and on the level of the text-object itself. For Ahmed, 'feelings' become 'fetishes' at the point at which they become attached to objects, which they must necessarily do in a social context in order for the illusion of collective emotionality or 'shared feeling' to be preserved. William Pietz describes fetish as 'something intensely personal, whose truth is experienced as a substantial movement from "inside" the self [...] into the self-limited morphology of a material object situated in space "outside."' ¹⁰⁷ In an effort to emphasise the 'intensely personal' qualities attached to otherwise impersonal fetish objects, Pietz argues that '[w]orks of art are true fetishes

¹⁰⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.8.

¹⁰⁷ William Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, I', *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 9 (Spring 1985), 5-17 (pp.11-2).

only if they are material objects at least as intensely personal as the water of tears' (p.12).

Through this analogy, Pietz highlights how something extra-corporeally inanimate can be perceived by individuals, ultimately, as extensions of their own body; fetish objects thus become material expressions of emotionality. Terry Eagleton condemns 'the postmodernist artefact' for its 'thorough *integration* into an economic system where such autonomy, in the form of the commodity fetish, is the order of the day.'¹⁰⁸ Pynchon, however, refuses to have his novels simply perform this function, and uses them, instead, to lay bare the affective politics underlying this impulse. His works do not reductively enact 'the commodity fetish' through their collective status as postmodern artefacts; they ask in what social and political context might fetish as a cultural hallmark be observed and how does fetish not only affect individual self-image, but the dynamics of alienation and collective feeling?

Fetish is explored via a number of guises in Pynchon's works – most notably, through images of the mechanical and the prosthetic – but one of the best examples to illustrate the relationship between fetish and carnival can be found in Pynchon's first novel, *V.*, in which Mélanie, the young ballerina, is fetishised by the text's titular character:

"Do you know what a fetish is? Something of a woman which gives pleasure but is not a woman. A shoe, a locket... une jarretière. You are the same, not real but an object of pleasure. [...] What are you like unclothed? A chaos of flesh. But as Su Feng, lit by hydrogen, oxygen, a cylinder of lime, moving doll-like in the confines of your costume... You will drive Paris mad."¹⁰⁹

Both Mélanie's autonomy and agency are undermined by her characterisation as 'not real, but an object of pleasure.' Her status as fetish object is aligned with sartorial objects such as 'shoe', 'locket', and 'jarretière' (or stocking), inanimate extensions of the human body designed to alter or to emphasise one's form. Her function, therefore, is *not* to function, but to provide agency to those who attach themselves to her; her ability to animate her audience – '[y]ou will drive Paris mad' – indicates, too, her capacity to elicit an affective response. While Mélanie is an

¹⁰⁸ Terry Eagleton, 'From *Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism*', *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Pat Waugh (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), pp.152-3.

¹⁰⁹ Pynchon, *V.*, p.404.

affectively generative fetish object, however, she remains inanimate. V. asks “[d]o you only lie passive then, like an object? Of course you do. It is what you are. Une fétiche.” (p.406).

Mélanie, a dancer, is at once active and passive, performer and spectacle, the tensions between which we might argue are also inherent in the text-object. What Mélanie represents as an object in her own right is less significant than the effect she has on her audience. Mélanie’s fetishisation enacts the very concept of the Affective Fallacy, which threatens the erasure of the status of the original text-object by awarding priority to the psychological effect it creates. Pynchon’s textual representation of fetish, therefore, illustrates its affective range, while the novel’s textual enactment of fetish demonstrates the threat that the act of fetishisation poses to the fetishised object, therefore resisting the culture of the commodity fetish that Eagleton aligns so closely with the ‘postmodernist artefact’.

Pynchon uses Mélanie’s death to highlight the disparity between the ontological status of the fetish object and the affective status of the fetishiser, by indicating that the ‘climax’ of her performance ‘depended on Su Feng [the name of the ballet’s protagonist] continuing her dance while impaled, all movement restricted to one point in space, an elevated point, a focus, a climax’ (p.414). Mélanie is focalised at the point at which she is penetrated, her status as autonomous object thus violated, by a large pole which ultimately highlights her passivity by restricting her movement to a single ‘point in space’; the degree to which she has allowed her self-image to become corrupted by the fantasies of others is exhibited in the corruption of her physical body, during which moment her body itself commands the most attention:

The pole was now erect, the music four bars from the end. A terrible hush fell over the audience, gendarmes and combatants all turned as if magnetized to watch the stage. [...] Porcépic’s music was now almost defeating: all tonal location had been lost, notes screamed out simultaneous and random like fragments of a bomb: winds, strings, brass and percussion were indistinguishable as blood ran down the pole, the impaled girl went limp, the last chord blasted out, filled the theater, echoed, hung, subsided. Someone cut all the stage lights, someone else ran to close the curtain. (p.414)

The magnetic quality of the spectacle is affected by the agency of the pole – its erectness lending a quality of personification to its otherwise mechanical nature – and by the ‘limpness’ of

Mélanie's own body. Her status as fetish object is most powerful when Mélanie herself is at her most passive. The effect that this spectacle has on the rest of the performance is tangible; the music, for example, lost its 'tonal location', each timbre, note, and instrument could only be perceived as the 'fragments of a bomb', randomly organised and screaming, as though the affective value of the visual display might not only have extended to the audience, but animated the collective emotionality of the orchestra. It is only when all life has exited Mélanie's body, when 'the impaled girl went limp' altogether, that the audience reclaims its own agency, acting to 'cut all the stage lights' and 'close the curtain'. The fetish object must be most passive in order for the fetishiser to be most active.

It is not always the case that the human body is fetishised, however; in some cases, Pynchon examines the fetishisation of mechanical objects and prosthetic additions or alterations to the human body in order to illustrate how the subsequent shift in self-image impacts upon the individual's relationship to collective experience. In addition to Mélanie, *V.* is rife with characters who become gradually absorbed into the mechanical world through their fetishisation of mechanical objects: Fergus, who drops 'below a certain level of awareness' in order to become 'an extension of the TV set'; Bongo-Shaftsbury, who recurs across Pynchon's works, is a kind of human-mechanical hybrid terrorising people with the 'miniature electric switch' woven into his flesh, and the 'silver wires [which] ran from its terminals up the arm, disappearing under the sleeve'; SHROUD and SHOCK, the 'synthetic human' robots, who warn Profane that they are 'what you and everybody will be someday' (p.56; p.80; p.286).

Pietz considers the relationship between the organic material of the human body and the mechanical material of the objects that it comes into contact with:

The fourth theme found in the idea of the fetish is, then, that of the subjection of the human body (as the material locus of action and desire) to the influence of certain significant material objects that, although cut off from the body, function as its controlling organs at certain moments.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Pietz, p.10.

This feature of the fetish not only illuminates the dynamics of passivity and activity dictating the relationship between Mélanie and her audience, but provides the groundwork for an understanding of how capitalism's emphasis on material acquisition, industrial expansion, and social and professional mechanisation, might not only incur a culture of 'commodity fetish', but threaten the 'human body' by surrendering its agency to extra-corporeal 'objects'. Jean Baudrillard, in conversation with Nathan Gardels, situates the idea of the mechanical fetish object in the context of American postmodernity:

America is beyond aesthetics. It is transaesthetical, like a desert. Culture exists in a wild state where all aesthetics are sacrificed in a process of literal transcription of dreams into reality. In the car ads, for example, there is no difference between the car and happiness. In the mind of the consumer, the material reality of the car and the metaphysical concept of happiness and contentment are identical. A car is happiness.¹¹¹

For Baudrillard, a lack of aesthetics is born of a lack of abstraction; as Ahmed describes, 'emotionality', in the context of capitalism, must be ascribed to a physical object in order to fulfil the 'process of literal transcription of dreams into reality.' The object Baudrillard uses to illustrate this point – the car – is a poignant example because it not only highlights the increasing mechanisation of fetish objects in the contemporary age, but points directly to the insidious influence of capitalist advertising in a culture demonstrating an increasing incapacity to attach meaningful emotion to anything abstract of monetary value.

Benny Profane, of *V.*, is often focalised in the novel for his relationship to material objects. Not only does Profane find that he cannot live in comfortable co-existence with 'inanimate' objects, but he also finds himself repelled by his peers' compulsion to fetishise the mechanical and the prosthetic. For example, the prized MG of Profane's ex-lover, Rachel Owlglass, initially appears as the site of their romantic union, since '[t]hey talked in the car always'; where pop culture cliché conditions us to expect the car to bear passive witness to a scene of love-making, however, Profane instead finds that he passes into a state of incomprehension, as Rachel speaks 'nothing but MG-words, inanimate-words he couldn't really

¹¹¹ Nathan Gardels, 'After Utopia: The Primitive Society of the Future', *Jean Baudrillard: From Hyperreality to Disappearance: Uncollected Interviews*, eds. Richard G. Smith and David B. Clarke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 24-28 (p.25).

talk back at.¹¹² Not only do Rachel's mannerisms adopt the same inanimate quality of the machine she so reveres, but her physical body begins to become one with the car, as Profane describes how he tried 'to find the key to her own ignition behind the hooded eyes' (p.27).

Rachel's fetishisation of the MG causes Profane affective discomfort, not only because the close affinity between Rachel and the car exceeds the affinity between Rachel and himself, but because of the sociality of emotion implied in her 'public displays of sentiment':

It occurred to Profane that he might vomit. Public displays of sentiment often affected him this way. She had climbed in the car and now lay back in the driver's seat, her throat open to the summer constellations. He was about to approach her when he saw her left hand snake out all pale to fondle the gearshift (p.29).

It is internal emotion made external that most bothers Profane about the scene he witnesses. The sensuality Profane reads into the 'snaking' quality of her hand's movement, and the 'fondling' action she performs, causes him to produce his own affective response to the object; his compulsion to 'vomit' indicates how Rachel's interaction with the car has caused the object to become more highly charged with Profane's disgust. As Rachel's own body becomes one with that of the object she fetishises, Profane's body is driven to purge something of itself. While both characters produce entirely different affective responses to a single inanimate object, they both surrender some aspect of their corporeal autonomy in the process.

Profane is by no means the only character in Pynchon's works to react with disgust to the fetishisation of the inanimate. Mucho Maas, of *The Crying of Lot 49*, laments how the car industry has caused both self-image and the sociality of emotion to experience a profound shift, expressing regret in vocabulary reminiscent of Baudrillard's:

Yet at least he had believed in the cars. Maybe to excess: how could he not, seeing people poorer than him come in, [...] bringing the most godawful of trade-ins: motorized, metal extensions of themselves, of their families and what their whole lives must be like, out there so naked for anybody, a stranger like himself, to look at, frame cockeyed, rusty underneath [...]. [H]e could still never accept the way each owner, each

¹¹² Pynchon, V., p.27.

shadow, filed in only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else's life.¹¹³

Mucho, however, goes further than Baudrillard. A car is not just happiness; it is not even an extension of the self: one's car *is* one's self. In Mucho's eyes, the owners of these inanimate machines become simply 'shadows', trading in 'versions' of themselves so that these 'automotive projections' might become more convincingly indicative of the ontological status of their owner than the image of the owner him/herself. In becoming 'shadows', the owners of these vehicles are stripped of their own corporeal materiality, which not only threatens the autonomy of the individual, but his/her social context. The car itself is so 'intensely personal' that entire lives are stripped 'naked' for strangers like Mucho 'to look at'; Mucho thus illustrates how an object can become saturated with the shame of the private being publicly exposed by the object in which it is contained. The exhibition of the 'frame cockeyed, rusty underneath' does not necessarily invoke a shame response in the owner, but in the 'stranger' forced to regard the oft-concealed underside of the life it represents. The condition of the stranger is curiously redolent of the reader him/herself, poised extra-textually in relationship to the postmodern novel, and, thus, vulnerable to the shame of witnessing the indecorous by-products of the age of late capitalism, or what Jameson describes as its 'offensive features', 'from obscurity and sexually explicit material to psychological squalor and overt expressions of social and political defiance'.¹¹⁴

The affective experience of the reader is further evoked in examples of the encroachment of mechanical matter on the organic object; Stencil notes of V., for example, 'an obsession with bodily incorporating little bits of inert matter' until she appears to be more mechanical than human.¹¹⁵ As illustrated previously in the example of Mélanie, the female body proves to be a crucial site of synthesis between the mechanical and the organic; the female body as both organism and mechanism is ultimately illustrative of the quality of making the private public, or turning the inside out, which so disturbs Profane and Mucho about the relationship

¹¹³ Pynchon, *Lot 49*, pp.4-5.

¹¹⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.4.

¹¹⁵ Pynchon, *V.*, p.488.

between owners and their vehicles. Pynchon even goes so far as to equate the mechanical form of the car with the female form in later novels, such as *Against The Day*, in which a particularly buxom female dancer is attributed the name 'Chevrolette', a feminine pun on the American car manufacturer, Chevrolet. In 'Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture and Counter-Culture', Renate Lachmann, Raoul Eshelman and Marc Davis link the exposure of the female body to the context of carnival:

Bakhtin's main concern is to show the ambivalence between life and death as it is concentrated in one point, in one act, in one place: namely in the female body [...]. The main principle of the official semiotics of the body is the concealedness of the body's insides. By contrast, carnival semiotics allows the inner realm to enter eccentrically into the outside world and vice versa: it stages the penetration of the outside into the bodily insides as a spectacle. The boundary marking the division between the body's insides and outside is suspended through the two movements of protruding and penetrating. The body that censorship has caused to disappear reappears, and this reappearance, which occurs in the form of gigantic, hypertrophied forms and in the grotesque doubling through nose and phallus, "exposes" both the body and official culture.¹¹⁶

In essence, the surface of the female body implies depth in the same manner that the surface of the textual object as 'postmodernist artefact' implies affective resonance. Lachmann, Eshelman, and Davis argue that carnival both 'stages the penetration of the outside into the bodily insides as a spectacle' and exhibits the 'boundary marking the division between the body's insides and outsides' via its suspension between 'the two movements of protruding and penetrating.' In this context, the 'concealedness of the body's insides' is indirectly alluded to by the relationship between its surface, or 'boundary', and what it comes into contact with from the outside. Equally, therefore, we might argue that what emerges from 'the body's insides' not only 'enters eccentrically into the outside world', but further highlights the surface of the body itself as a 'boundary' separating the outside world from what is ordinarily concealed within. Halnon writes that when '[i]nterpreted from within this frame of reference, bodily excretions, innards and orifices, and the ludic violence of exposing them are ritual celebrations of dis-alienating human equality.'¹¹⁷ When what is inside finds its way out, it not only alerts attention to the surface of

¹¹⁶ Renate Lachmann, Raoul Eshelman and Marc Davis, 'Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture', *Cultural Critique*, No. 11 (Winter 1988-1989), 115-152 (pp.149-51).

¹¹⁷ Halnon, p.38.

the body, but creates a sociality of emotion, a 'dis-alienating' sense of 'equality' and shared experience.

This, too, highlights Lachmann, Eshelman, and Davis' argument when they suggest that this staged 'reappearance' of the body's surface and subsequent implication of the body's insides in the context of carnival exposes 'both the body and official culture'. Carnival, therefore, not only stages the 'concealedness of the body's insides', but stages a political relationship between the viewer and the spectacle, through its implication of the 'official culture'. If, as Halnon argues, carnival's exposure of 'the body's insides' achieves dis-alienation, then it illustrates how the female body might not only be thought of as a fetish object that demonstrates the 'inside/outside' dichotomy Pynchon is so interested in, but might represent the site that best illuminates the sociopolitical stakes of attending to the surfaces and boundaries which separate inside from outside.

The context of carnival, therefore, illustrates an affective politics shared between the surface of the female body and the surface of the textual object. Pynchon introduces this idea through the character of Esther, whose sense of self-image both depends upon and is threatened by her obsession with prosthetically altering the surface of her body. The relationship between Esther's body and Shoenmaker (literally, 'beauty-maker'), her plastic surgeon, indirectly evokes the relationship between text and writer, by exploring how shaping the surface – or textual framework – can not only affect how it is perceived from the outside, but what is felt on the inside. In a scene detailing her rhinoplasty, Lachmann, Eshelman, and Davis's 'grotesque doubling' is evoked in images of both penetration and protrusion:

"Okay. Cover her eyes."

"Maybe she wants to look," Trench said.

"You want to look, Esther? See what we're going to do to you?" [...]

"Now," gently, like a lover, "I'm going to saw off your hump." Esther watched his eyes as best she could, looking for something human there. Never had she felt so helpless. Later she would say, "It was almost a mystic experience. What religion is it—one of the Eastern ones—where the highest condition we can attain is that of an object—a rock. It

was like that; I felt myself drifting down, this delicious loss of Estherhood, becoming more and more a blob, with no worries, traumas, nothing: only Being....”¹¹⁸

In a scene detailing a plastic surgery procedure, an industry which is primarily concerned with what the ‘surface’ of a container communicates to the outside world, Pynchon succeeds in exploring how alteration of the surface affects the depths it implies, not only recalling Esther’s organic materiality to his reader, but evoking the novel itself as a kind of autonomous, feeling organism. Lachmann, Eshelman, and Davis explore the ‘grotesque doubling’ of the image of nose and phallus, and, in this scene, both the protrusion and penetration of Esther’s nose are established, ‘movements’ which anticipate how Esther’s body is penetrated by the protrusion of Shoenmaker’s phallus later in the novel. This alteration to her surface, Esther later says, strips her of ‘worries’ and ‘traumas’, strips her of all ‘Estherhood’ until she attains the condition ‘of an object’ such as ‘a rock’. Esther bears witness to the alteration to her surface, stripping her of all sense of herself as felt from the inside, so that all that remains for her is to ‘Be’, and to allow others to saturate her with a depth of their own.

Esther, therefore, becomes a kind of text subject to the Affective Fallacy; her ‘Being’ is determined primarily by the affective relationship her surface conditions between herself and those she is ‘penetrated’ by. Esther, like the text whose own status is erased by the glare of the reader’s psychological and emotional response to it, is left ‘helpless’, ‘more and more a blob’. If, in this context, Shoenmaker enacts the role of the reader as effectively as he enacts the role of the writer, then Pynchon can be seen to directly alert his own reader to the dangers of undermining the textual organism by projecting his own desires onto it: ‘You are beautiful,’ Shoenmaker says to Esther, ‘[p]erhaps not as you are. But as I see you’ (p.294).

Pynchon’s texts become increasingly concerned with what happens to the boundary separating outside from inside when the world finds itself progressively dominated by artificial extensions of and alterations to the human. The problems posed by this are further explored in the more explicitly ontological of Pynchon’s works, such as *Gravity’s Rainbow*. On the opening page of the novel, Pynchon introduces one of its most memorable metaphors, which highlights

¹¹⁸ Pynchon, *V.*, pp.105-6.

the dynamics of the dual movements of ‘penetrating’ and ‘protruding’ in relationship to inside and outside spaces:

They have begun to move. They pass in line, out of the main station, out of downtown, and begin pushing into older and more desolate parts of the city. Is this the way out? Faces turn to the windows, but no one dares ask, not out loud. Rain comes down. No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into* [...].¹¹⁹

The opening sequence of Pynchon’s novel details an evacuation from the centre of London during the Second World War, during which citizens of the city are herded in the direction of ‘safe’ spaces, the order implied by the movement of passing ‘in line’ complicated by the chaos implied by the movement of ‘knotting into.’ Furthermore, the tensions inherent in the direction of movement described here resonate with the tensions between ‘penetrating’ and ‘protruding’: ‘[t]hey’ are, at once, ‘pushing into’ parts of the city in order to find ‘the way out’; in an effort to ‘disentangle’ oneself from the chaos, one finds that s/he is becoming progressively knotted in. In this metaphor, the city behaves like a surface in the same manner as the female body, a boundary whose insides and outsides are determined by those who orient themselves in relationship to it, wherein one directive action involves another kind of directive reaction.

The Newtonian premise of action and reaction carries the weight of individual and collective experiences of being ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ a boundary, a community, or an ideology in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In an early scene detailing the first of what will be many séances interspersed throughout the novel, the medium delivers Selena a message about the illusion of ‘control’:

Putting the control inside was ratifying what de facto had happened – that you had dispensed with God. But you had taken on a greater, and more harmful, illusion. The illusion of control. That A could do B. But that was false. Completely. No one can *do*. Things only happen, A and B are unreal, are names for parts that ought to be inseparable... (pp.35-6).

In this image, the idea that ‘A could do B’ – that all actions incur a statistically probable reaction – represents the premise that creates the ‘illusion of control’. This illusion, the medium

¹¹⁹ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, p.3.

describes, is a 'more harmful' illusion, since it is not only 'false', it indicates that 'you [have] dispensed with God.' By preserving the illusion of control, one is preserving the illusion that 'one can *do*', a notion, the medium suggests, which is misguided since '[t]hings only happen, A and B are unreal'. The Newtonian worldview, therefore, allows for the illusion of control because of its predictability, and the labelling of active components contributing to this model establishes a sense of agency on behalf of humankind, by supplying the fantasy of a godlike foresight. But in a world where things 'happen' of their own accord, regardless of their predictability, labels like 'A' and 'B' lose their currency, and the inseparability of a world of many parts more convincingly represents the 'progressive knotting into' mapped in the novel's opening sequence.

The machine of many 'parts' becomes a central image in *Gravity's Rainbow* that produces a resonant echo with the metaphor of many 'parts' that best illustrates the self-reflexivity of *The Crying of Lot 49*. In a passage that feels as though it is from the mind of Roger Mexico, the 'War' is personified as an abstract yet autonomous concept, capable of illustrating desire; this personification of war becomes a similarly useful vehicle through which Pynchon illustrates the metafictional self-consciousness of his novel's framework:

The War does not appear to want a folk-consciousness, not even of the sort the Germans have engineered, ein Volk ein Führer – it wants a machine of many separate parts, not oneness, but a complexity... Yet who can presume to say *what* the War wants, so vast and aloof is it... so *absentee*. Perhaps the War isn't even an awareness – not a life at all, really. There may only be some cruel, accidental resemblance to life (pp.154-5).

It might also be said that the postmodern novel either bears only a 'cruel' or 'accidental resemblance to life', or demonstrates an attitude of wanting 'a machine of separate parts', a system of 'complexity'. Yet, this image reflects the role of the reader just as adequately as it reflects the nature of the postmodern artefact. In the frustrated, ironic tone of a writer fatigued with his reader's Fallacy-inspired approaches to his text, this passage might just as well ask who can presume to say what 'the Reader' wants, so 'vast and aloof' is the concept? If there is some resonance between the image of the War and the role of the reader in this passage, then the personification of War contributes to the dehumanisation of the 'Reader': a War that bears only

‘some cruel, accidental resemblance to life’ still exercises agency through its ability to deceive those affected by it; a ‘Reader’ that bears only ‘some cruel, accidental resemblance to life’, however, is reduced to an entirely abstract concept, stripped of agency and all power to influence the textual object. His/her own ‘wants’ are undermined by the impossibility to quantify them in any meaningful, collectively material context.

What is most discomforting about this revelation is the notion that it both exiles the reader to the spaces beyond the margins of the textual object and collectivises and homogenises the reader by situating him/her in the context of all others who interact in any way with the textual artefact. In a capitalist context, self-image and social orientation are determined primarily by individualism – by one’s relationship with one’s own private property – and not by a sense of collective identity, as carnival instructs. As fellow readers, our capitalist compulsion to individuate ourselves is undermined by the text and contextualised by Kevin Spectro’s mapping of ‘Outside’ and ‘Inside’:

Kevin Spectro did not differentiate as much as he between Outside and Inside. He saw the cortex as an interface organ, mediating between the two, but *part of them both*. “When you’ve looked at how it really is,” he asked once, “how can we, any of us, be separate?” (p.168).

If *Gravity’s Rainbow* attempts to undermine its reader’s sense of individual identity and challenge its reader to embrace the collective equality of the carnivalesque, it does so by behaving in the same manner as ‘the cortex’ in this passage. An ‘interface organ’, the text mediates between its internal cast of characters and its externalised reader, becoming ‘*part of them both*’, resisting the reader’s desire for a textual system of ‘separate parts’. Instead, the text implicates its own reader in the very question, ‘how can we, any of us, be separate?’

Another metaphor Pynchon employs in *Gravity’s Rainbow* to illustrate and problematise the mediation between Outside and Inside is that of the Zone. The Zone references both the geographically stateless wastes of Europe in the immediate aftermath of the War as well as the psychological condition of statelessness and anarchy. Weisenburger describes the disparity between Romantic and Ironic approaches to the Zone as providing the key to an unveiling of the

novel's double-coding, representing a space that both offers unlimited freedom and promises impending danger:

In the Romantic's view of it the Zone blooms with inchoate potentials – fences down, boundaries gone. There everything seems “a free, unhierarchical, anarchic space without cultural – symbolic and imaginary – inscriptions.” [...] The Romantic Zone's counterpart is a dark *topos*, an Ironic Zone [...]. In the Ironic Zone we realize the blunt force of philosopher Thomas Hobbes's recognition [...] that the masses of mankind live in “continual feare and danger of violent death” while their daily existence is “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short” [...].¹²⁰

If the removal of fences and the desecration of boundaries incurs both freedom and fear, it provides a key to understanding not only the stakes of the shift in sociopolitical emphasis from individual to collective identity, but the affective possibilities of the text. Indeed, Slothrop believes that ‘[s]igns will find him here in the Zone, and ancestors will reassert themselves. [...] [H]e feels his own, stronger now as borders fall away and the Zone envelops him’.¹²¹ As the ‘Zone envelops him’, Slothrop loses all sense of individual identity; as the ‘borders fall away’, the Zone conditions a reconfiguration of Slothrop's self-image by emphasising his status in relationship to that of his ‘ancestors’. This is a space which allows ancestors to ‘reassert themselves’, within which individuals might rediscover a sense of collective identity.

Pirate Prentice considers the impact of paranoia on collective identity, by refiguring the metaphor of the They-system and the We-system that recurs throughout the novel:

Of course a well-developed They-system is necessary – but it's only half the story. For every They there ought to be a We. In our case there is. Creative paranoia means developing at least as thorough a We-system as a They-system (pp.755-6).

Where, previously, the configuration of a ‘They-system’ has indicated the destabilisation of both individual and collective orientation, Prentice presents a solution here, one which is born of ‘paranoia’ rather than inhibited by it. If it allows for the creation of a ‘We-system’ at least as thorough as a ‘They-system’, then it not only secures a sense of collective safety and identity,

¹²⁰ Weisenburger, pp.51-2.

¹²¹ Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, pp.335-6.

but cements paranoia as a creative force as opposed to a paralysing one. This model gives power not to 'the reader' as an individual, but to readers as a collective. To what might the 'We-system' refer in this context, however? Might it refer to readers as united against the 'They-system' contained within the text, or to the readers united with the self-dictating logic of the text?

This question indicates the dilemma faced by the paranoid reader: one might choose to comply with the text, or resist the text; or, to borrow the words of Hayles, one might see the novel's 'patterning as pervasive' or see the novel as a 'chaotic mass of unconnected detail'.¹²² This idea is illustrated in *Vineland* through the character of Justin:

The smartest kid Justin ever met, back in kindergarten, had told him to pretend his parents were characters in a television sitcom. "Pretend there's a frame around 'em like the Tube, pretend they're a show you're watching. You can go into it if you want, or you can just watch, and *not* go into it."¹²³

Like Justin, watching his parents argue or debate from a suitable distance, the reader, too, might choose to 'go into' or to 'just watch, and *not* go into' the text. When his friend tells Justin to pretend 'there's a frame around' his parents, it alerts the reader's own attention to the contrivance of the novel's textual framework, a boundary which not only establishes a divide between 'inside' and 'outside', but complicates it by inviting the reader both to acknowledge and to violate that boundary. In the act of alerting the reader to the frame, the text makes an interesting proposition: how successfully might one orient oneself 'inside' a text that has already alerted one not only to its own mechanics, but to one's orientation 'outside' of it? In realist novels which mimic the world we recognise, a suspension of disbelief is paramount in order to secure a reader's affective investment in the text's content; suspension of disbelief is often achieved by preserving the illusion of a reader's participation in the world of the text, by making that world appear familiar, not by establishing a textual frame which consciously separates a reader from the world of the text, thereby making that world appear alien. Justin's friend seems to imply that by choosing *not* to 'go into it', Justin might be able to preclude his own affective attachment to the outcome of his parents' arguments, but with a reader in

¹²² Hayles, *The Cosmic Web*, p.175.

¹²³ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p.351.

relationship to a postmodern artefact, what we see instead is a complication of the familiarity of the world ‘inside’ with the sense of alienation conditioned by our felt separation from that world on that ‘outside’. As Bakhtin’s theory of carnival suggests, being ‘outside’ of the carnival does not necessarily preclude an affective response to it, but shapes that response as one more likely to be conditioned by fear, disgust, and a false sense of social hierarchy.

Pynchon’s metaphors routinely and self-consciously expose themselves to this effect: the self-reflexivity of metaphors of representation reflect on the act of textual representation; the metaphorical models we use to support our understanding of the universe in turn reflect the models we use to support our understanding of fiction; and the metaphors of the mechanisation, the prosthetisation, and the fetishisation of the human body recall the ways in which the fictional body can be made to appear both familiar and alien, as well as to animate the reader who interacts with it. These metafictional metaphors at once alert the reader to his/her extra-textual orientation to Pynchon’s novels and stories by emphasising the artifice of their construction, and absorb the reader into the epistemological task of uniting these images with their source objects in the manner described earlier by Anne Carson. We are at once invited to inhabit the world purported by the fiction and relegated to its margins; ultimately, our affective response to Pynchon’s fiction is not determined by the fiction itself, but by our ability to wilfully cross the boundary established by the framework Pynchon contrives to support it.

David K. Danow models this suggestion by considering Bakhtin’s perspective of the ‘main differences’ between the Renaissance grotesque and the Romantic grotesque:

On the one hand, “the medieval and Renaissance folk culture was familiar with the element of terror only as represented by comic monsters, who were defeated by laughter. Terror was turned into something gay and comic.” [...] [L]aughter, according to this vision, could always be called upon to defeat fear. On the other hand, “the world of Romantic grotesque is to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man. All that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile. Our own world becomes an alien world” [...]. That image of an alien world—in whose unrelenting grip we find ourselves fearfully caught—characterized by terror, hostility, and the loss of meaning, is, in its

most extreme expression, perhaps nowhere more forcefully formulated than in the literature of the Holocaust.¹²⁴

The consequences of Justin's decision to go into or not go into the world contained within the metaphor of the tubal framework are modelled in these differences between Renaissance and Romantic conceptions of the grotesque. It is not necessarily the case that to go into the picture involves feeling, while *not* to go into the picture precludes feeling. Instead, we might imagine that going into the picture – requiring the suspension of disbelief that conditions a reader's affective investment in a text – is something akin to the Romantic grotesque, wherein the 'alien' is made real to us, and the 'terrifying' reality of this world is made to feel 'hostile' in a way that incites 'terror' in the reader. Meanwhile, we might imagine that *not* going into the picture – requiring preservation of the frame and conscious awareness of the novel's textual contrivance – is something akin to the Renaissance grotesque, wherein terror is 'turned into something gay and comic', a world within which the 'element of terror' might always be 'defeated by laughter'.

Although the Romantic grotesque relies on inciting terror through its exploration and examination of alien terrain, its success depends upon making that 'alien world' realistic and, thus, *familiar* enough to a reader that its veracity might not, at any point, be challenged. Ironically, therefore, it is the Renaissance grotesque – and its reliance on 'comic monsters' – that must make a convincing world appear alien enough that the reader is reminded of the artificiality of its expression. In consciously establishing a framework in orientation to which a reader might choose to 'go into' or '*not* go into it', the model of the Renaissance grotesque presents us with a world that both invites us to feel the typically Romantic sense of 'terror' should we choose to invest in its reality, and introduces a note of levity, a humorous 'escape-hatch' into which we might abscond at the point that the threat of becoming trapped inside the structural framework of the text becomes too 'terrifying'.

¹²⁴ David K. Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magic Realism and the Grotesque* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), pp.39-40.

Danow argues that ‘the literature of the Holocaust’ is perhaps the most powerful example of the reflection of an ‘alien world’, characterised by ‘terror, hostility, and the loss of meaning’ and this is certainly true of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, a novel which evokes hostility through the darkness and unnavigable terrain of the ‘Zone’ and the violence of the nomadic characters who populate it. However, it would also be true to say that *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a text which allows many of its ‘monsters’ to be defeated by laughter; the comic effect of the novel’s many slapstick and bathetic moments – Slothrop’s ejaculatory anticipation of V2 landings, the surreal fight between Slothrop and a giant octopus named Grigori, and the hot air balloon-based battle for the skies in which pies are used as weapons, to name just a few – provide moments that, in part, free us from the grip of that terror. Whether you in fact choose to ‘go into’ or ‘*not* go into’ this novel does not only determine whether, in Hayles’ words, you see its ‘patterning as pervasive’ or fail to ‘see it at all’, but whether your affective experience of the novel is one defined by the gravity of the ‘terror’ and ‘hostility’ of this believably alien world, or by the levity of the ‘comic’ moments in which that world is revealed to be a contrivance.¹²⁵ In each outcome, Pynchon’s novels prove that there is, in fact, as much room for ‘anxiety and alienation’ in postmodernism as there is room for the disalienating ritual of laughter.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Hayles, *The Cosmic Web*, p.175.

¹²⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.14.

Conclusion

Nietzsche's anti-Platonism suggests that 'X' is inaccessible and that authenticity lies in acknowledging, from the start, the fictitious nature of our intellectual constructs.¹

This research study set out to reclaim the origins of postmodernism, offering a reappraisal of American literature of the mid-twentieth century and beyond in order to refute subsequent claims about literary postmodernism's depthlessness, self-referentiality, and inauthenticity. As Patricia Waugh claims, however, the philosophy underpinning metafiction's self-conscious emphasis on the artificiality of fictional construction does not restrict its commentary to contemporaneous capitalist developments, tubal culture, or the devaluation of subjecthood in an age of materialism and mechanical reproduction. By focalising Nietzsche's claim that 'authenticity' can only be achieved via the full and conscious acknowledgement of 'the fictitious nature of our intellectual constructs', Waugh promotes metafictional framing and frame-breaking as contributions to a wider counter-Enlightenment agenda. In opposition to Jameson's suggestion that the postmodern artefact no longer 'organizes even a minimal place for the viewer', this project has sought to indicate how metafiction's structures of feeling in fact reorganise the viewer's orientation to the cultural artefact; by locating us on the margins of the narrative frameworks we might once have sought to absorb ourselves in, the metafictional novel not only suggests a broader range of affective possibilities attributed to the reading experience, but actively politicises that range.²

¹ Patricia Waugh, 'Introduction', *Revolutions of the Word: Intellectual Contexts for the Study of Modern Literature*, ed. Patricia Waugh (London: Arnold, 1997), 1-9 (p.5).

² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p.8.

Waugh argues that postmodernism has been ‘given an ethical turn by writers such as Jean-François Lyotard who interpret totalitarian and fascist politics as the attempt to force onto the social, degenerate aesthetic or intellectual myths of wholeness.’³ Scholarship’s existing model of postmodern critique typically emphasises what Waugh describes as ‘the idea of knowledge or art for its own sake’, a tendency which ‘has produced blindness to the specific practices of some writers or a skewing of their work to fit contemporary cultural or political preoccupations’ (p.4). This study aligns with Waugh’s own efforts to redress the balance between ‘intellectual’ and ‘cultural’ history in relationship to postmodernism, having aimed not only to challenge Jameson’s contention that postmodernism exhibits a ‘waning of affect’, but to shine a light on the ‘specific practices’ of writers of this period that are most commonly overlooked; doing so enables an illustration of how the affects produced by the experience of reading the metafictional novel have important political implications.⁴

Some of these political implications can be helpfully mapped through an analysis of the finer distinctions between Jacques Derrida’s and Michel Foucault’s approaches to history, a theme which unites the fictional works considered in this study. Mark Currie writes that while both philosophers ‘saw history as a value-laden, artificial and textual structure,’ ‘Foucault’s work, more than Derrida’s, offered a way of returning to historical writing as a strategic opposition to the values of traditional history.’⁵ Currie proposes that Foucault’s ‘revised historicism’ represents an effort to ‘subvert the traditional authoritarian commitment to trace a line, a causal sequence or a tradition through a disparate past’ by emphasising ‘the histories of the forgotten areas of human thought, [...] [and] the people excluded by traditional histories’ (pp.12-3). Metafiction can, too, be reconceptualised in the light of Foucault’s approach to history: what was once thought a self-defeatingly relativistic approach to Enlightenment’s ‘authoritarian’ objectivity can be re-established in this context as counter-culturally expansive in its efforts to account for the marginalised and the forgotten. Waugh writes that

³ Waugh, ‘Introduction’, p.5.

⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.10.

⁵ Mark Currie, ‘Introduction’, *Metafiction*, ed. Mark Currie (London: Longman, 1995), 1-18 (p.12).

to attempt to offer a rational account of human experience through Enlightenment universal categories is to 'totalise'. The first lesson of Postmodernism is that it is impossible to step outside that which one contests, that one is always implicated in the values one chooses to challenge.⁶

The orientational quality of Waugh's metaphor not only highlights the political stakes of postmodernism, but illustrates the degree to which the reader is implicated in the value-system of the metafictional novel; if 'it is impossible to step outside that which one contests', then being relegated to the extra-textual margins of a frame-breaking narrative does not preclude political and, often, affective engagement with it. One may be consciously positioned 'outside' the text, as such, but – to borrow the terminology of N. Katherine Hayles – the reader must constitute an element or active component of the 'dance', the 'network', or the 'field' that is necessarily generated by a narrative resistant to the linearity of the realist tradition.⁷

There is a further orientational quality to the oft-cited assertion that 'postmodernism is supposed to have exiled depth.'⁸ A characteristic of the postmodern cultural artefact frequently propounded by Jameson, the notion of postmodern depthlessness implies that there is no dimensionality to our experience of postmodernism that exists independently of its surface. Waugh, however, indicates that 'many late twentieth-century writers continue to seek in art the possibility of some transfiguration of the commonplace or some sense of innate correspondence' (p.23). This study has sought to indicate just some of the ways that the metafictional narrative gestures to depth via its attention to surface, in a way which does not exile the reader, but instead invites him/her to engage with the innate correspondence that the self-consciousness of the text invites.

⁶ Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1993), p.33.

⁷ N. Katherine Hayles, *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.15.

⁸ Patricia Waugh, 'Language or the Revolution of the Word', *Revolutions of the Word*, 10-32 (p.23)

What I have loosely referred to as textual self-consciousness in this project is now being expanded and investigated in new ways, both in critical and creative contexts; our evolving relationships with narrative and technology are changing the way that both theorists and storytellers think about self-consciousness, affect, cognition, and knowledge. In *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (2017), for example, Hayles delineates between ‘the traditional view’ of knowledge, which ‘remains almost entirely within the purview of awareness and certainly within the brain’, and a newer approach, inspired by ‘cognitive biology’, which suggests that knowledge is ‘acquired through interactions with the environment and embodied in the organism’s structures and repertoire of behaviors.’⁹ Furthermore, Hayles indicates that cognition is ‘a much broader capacity’ than consciousness, a notion that might help extend our thinking about what constitutes knowledge and affective experience beyond the purely organic to ‘other life forms’ and ‘complex technical systems’ (p.9). If scientists are beginning to interrogate the cognitive processes of non-organic lifeforms and technical systems, it provides a new context within which literary theorists might return to the question of textual self-consciousness. Indeed, Hayles asks of modern technology

[w]hat criteria for ethical responsibility are appropriate, for example, when lethal force is executed by a drone or robot warrior acting autonomously? Should it focus on the technical device, the human(s) who set it in motion, or the manufacturer? (p.14).

These very same questions are illustrative of just some of those that set this research study in motion. If we might change the terms of these questions, they might just as easily enquire after the ethical responsibility of the postmodern cultural artefact and who or what is responsible for its apparent autonomy: the text itself, the reader who sets it in motion, or the writer?

The political stakes of frame-breaking are just as high now as they were at the time that William Gaddis, William H. Gass, and Thomas Pynchon were writing. The question of the relationship between democracy and the aesthetics of postmodernism is one with prevailing significance in the climate of what we might now call post-postmodern culture. Waugh, for

⁹ N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p.16.

example, argues that if ‘postmodernist aestheticism carries the logic of Wordsworth’s “man talking to men” further than Wordsworth ever intended, it does not contradict that logic.’¹⁰ Waugh argues that for some critics this constitutes the ““commodification” of art’ or ‘a dangerous displacement of the cognitive and the moral by the aesthetic’; this study, however, advances Waugh’s claim that this quality of postmodernism represents ‘an extension and democratisation of the aesthetic’, an effort which sees it as a bridge between life and art which can not only realise imagination and empathy, but ‘can widen our human sympathies and help more diverse groups of people than those traditionally addressed by “bourgeois” art to shape a more humane world’ (p.18).

The purpose of this short concluding chapter is, in part, to measure the value of this claim against the changing face of self-conscious and frame-breaking art and narrative in our own contemporary moment. A full investigation of metafictionality in the context of post-postmodern, metamodern, transpostmodern etc. culture would require a subsequent study (or several), and to exhaustively determine these new cultural artefacts’ political and social value might require even more; however, I wanted to leave some space at the end of this project to gesture to and lightly evaluate just some of the current examples of frame-breaking that indicate the legacy of narratives such as those propagated by Gaddis, Gass, and Pynchon.

More and more often, contemporary frameworks for storytelling advance challenges to the authoritarian grand narratives of Enlightenment reason. Currie, for example, acknowledges an increasing cultural awareness of the outward-looking properties of self-consciousness in relationship to contemporary media:

John Updike recently described self-consciousness, in another context, as a ‘mode of interestedness which ultimately turns outwards’. [...] If narrative self-consciousness found its first extended expression in the so-called high culture of literary modernism, it soon flowed outwards into the more demotic realms of film, television, comic strips and advertising.¹¹

¹⁰ Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism*, p.18.

¹¹ Currie, ‘Introduction’, p.2.

In today's culture, it is certainly the case that narrative expressions of self-consciousness can be located more often in film and television than in literature. In the context of comedy, British TV sitcoms such as *Miranda* (BBC, 2009-2015) and *Fleabag* (BBC, 2016-2019) acknowledge both the voyeurism and complicity that narratives require of their viewers by addressing them directly with stolen glances to the camera. This frame-breaking technique asks its viewer to both collude with and stand separately from its protagonist. In the case of *Fleabag*'s protagonist, for example, the show's narrative framework invites us to recognise her moral failures and to identify with them, framing her as both the narrative's hero and anti-hero; this quality encourages a much richer and more complex range of affective responses in its viewer, an affective spectrum which loosely resonates with the disgust and sympathetic identification that Gass's William Frederick Kohler inspires in his reader. A similar impulse can be found increasingly in the context of reality television; in Episode 9, 'Bucket List Goals', of the first season of *The Kardashians* (Hulu, 2022-), Kourtney Kardashian's complaints about the show producers' selective portrayal of her engagement to Travis Barker in Episode 4 are built into the show's narrative.¹² This bold acknowledgement of the controls exercised over narratives otherwise masquerading as 'fly-on-the-wall', 'access-all-areas' insights into celebrities' lives illustrates how even 'reality' television might exert a restrictively authoritarian influence over objectivity.

However, the democratisation of narrative represented by these explicit challenges to narrative framework presents its own challenges. We now live in a world anticipated by Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism*, one which is characterised by fake news and unfiltered internet opinion. One particularly crucial example of this involves Donald Trump's attempts to 'undermine the validity of the vote' following the presidential election of November 2020 by making claims about voting irregularities and electoral fraud.¹³ Has postmodernism's challenge to the Enlightenment concept of grand narrative led us down a path whereby the verifiability of

¹² 'Bucket List Goals', *The Kardashians*, Hulu, 9 June 2022.

¹³ Alex Hern, 'Trump's vote fraud claims go viral on social media despite curbs', *The Guardian* (2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/10/trumps-vote-claims-go-viral-on-social-media-despite-curbs>> [accessed 29 September 2022].

any claim no longer reflects anything of objective substance? Are we now within our constitutional rights to cry ‘fake news’ when what might constitute ‘truth’ is not reconcilable with our own understanding of reality, or to cry ‘freedom of speech’ when views of our own do not reconcile with the realities of others?

Without room to comprehensively defend it here, I would suggest that postmodernism is not, alone, responsible for this cultural direction. Part of what frame-breaking facilitates is a context within which we can both acknowledge and challenge the dangers of an increasingly relativistic universe, something this project has attempted to illustrate in its selection of mid-century literature. The extra-marginal orientation of the reader/viewer continues to be a characteristic of frame-breaking exploited by contemporary narratives which seek to alert their audiences to the artificiality of their constructions. Indeed, Waugh reminds her reader in *Revolutions of the Word* that ‘familiarity may actually pose an insuperable obstacle to some ways of knowing’.¹⁴ With this in mind, we might consider that ‘[t]o offer critique can only be to challenge from within through rhetorical or narrative disruption.’¹⁵ The critically acclaimed adaptation of science fiction film *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-), for example, foregrounds a self-conscious awareness of a narrative’s demands on its audience, emphasising the role of affective investment in securing both a personally and politically-charged response. When the park’s co-founder Robert Frost discusses the implications of narrative, we are reminded of the narrative’s own contrivance, prevented from becoming fully absorbed within it by being routinely alerted to its fictionality and, thus, reminded of the narrative’s extra-marginal reality:

It’s not about giving the guests what you think they want. No, that’s simple. The titillation, horror, elation... They’re parlor tricks. The guests don’t return for the obvious things we do, the garish things. They come back because of the subtleties, the details. They come back because they discover something they imagine no one had ever noticed before, something they’ve fallen in love with. They’re not looking for a story that tells them who they are. They already know who they are. They’re here because they want a glimpse of who they could be.¹⁶

¹⁴ Waugh, ‘Language or the Revolution of the Word’, p.13.

¹⁵ Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism*, p.33.

¹⁶ ‘Chestnut’, *Westworld*, HBO, 9 October 2016.

When we are so explicitly and repeatedly alerted to the ‘parlor tricks’ of fiction, we are recalled to ourselves, to our own participation as co-creators of narrative from a vantage point that lies beyond it. When, for example, we witness the uncanny spectacle of Evan Rachel Wood’s character Dolores being violently raped on the show, we are reminded of fiction’s affective agency in the real world, given the recent allegations of abuse she made against her ex-partner Brian Warner (Marilyn Manson).¹⁷ Frame-breaking, far from isolating the self-referentiality of the narrative, requires us to acknowledge that what we might find momentarily horrific or titillating in the context of fiction might have devastating personal or political consequences in reality. What compels us, then, to seek these experiences in fiction?

If, as Frost indicates, what we’re looking for is a story that gives us a ‘glimpse of who [we] could be’, metafictional narratives in contemporary culture continue to demand that we interrogate what that person looks like, and why we are attracted to that vision. Indeed, the most pressing demand of metafiction is that we remain cognisant enough of the dangers of the suspension of disbelief that we learn not only to resist narratological ‘parlor tricks’, but to remain attentive to narratives’ efforts to co-opt our desire to discover, our propensity to fall in love, and our yearning to become something more than what we currently are. For only through ‘rhetorical and narrative disruption’ can we hope to challenge both the dominant powers that now seek to exploit the relativistic laws of contemporary culture and our own vulnerability to the force of their messages.

¹⁷ Maureen Ryan, ‘He “Horribly Abused Me for Years”: Evan Rachel Wood and Other Women Make Allegations of Abuse Against Marilyn Manson’, *Vanity Fair* (2021) <<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2021/02/he-horribly-abused-me-for-years-evan-rachel-wood-and-other-women-make-allegations-of-abuse-against-marilyn-manson>> [accessed 29 September 2022].

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