

***Postmodernism and
Historicity: Narrative Forms
in the Contemporary Novel***

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ABSTRACT

This study proposes that modernity is constitutively based upon a synchronic temporality which perpetuates the present of the ego. Within this matrix, history is subject to the processes of subjectivization and the ‘otherness’ of the past disappears. Postmodernism, it is argued, designates the attempt to disinter a properly historical thinking, or historicity, from the recursive temporality of the modern. This attempt is predicated upon the retroactive temporality of the future perfect which, whilst also a synchrony, arises from a productive tension between the past, the present and the future. The self-divisive time of the future perfect expedites the discomfiture of the ego and its concomitant subjectivization of the past and, by so doing, registers the historicity of that past. The relation between the modern and the postmodern forms of temporality is expressed by the Lacanian distinction between the imaginary and symbolic orders. It is argued, moreover, that this distinction is manifest in the narrative forms of the contemporary novel. Whilst the modern form of the contemporary novel replicates the structures of an egocentric repletion of synchrony, the postmodern novel displaces this imaginary problematic to the symbolic. By employing a variety of techniques founded upon retroactivity, postmodern novels are thereby shown to foster a disclosure of the structure of historicity. Within this rubric five novels are given extended consideration: William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* and John Banville’s *Doctor Copernicus*.

Introduction – Time Out of Mind: Modernity, Postmodernity and the Future Perfect¹

1: At One Time

Why is it that only the modern could have produced the postmodern? More specifically, what were the conditions of possibility which fostered the production of such a concept and how are these conditions inscribed within it? In order to answer this question, we must start backwards, as it were, by defining exactly what it is that the modern produced, that is, by defining the postmodern. This, of course, is a task of unusually daunting proportions, not only because of the sheer volume of material devoted to the subject, but also because it is the inconstancy of the ‘postmodern’ (in whatever form, ‘-ity’, ‘-ist’, or ‘-ism’) which is generally held up as its primary characteristic. Hans Bertens, for example, finds that it ‘is several things at once’ and that, furthermore, ‘the term [has been] deeply problematical almost right from the start’.² Equally, David Harvey damns the term as ‘a mine-field of conflicting notions’³, while Terry Eagleton declares that it ‘is such a portmanteau phenomenon that anything you assert of

¹ A condensed version of this chapter was initially presented as a paper to ‘Lacan and Postmodernity: A “*Che Vuoi?*” One Day Conference’, University of Stirling, 28 November 1998. I am grateful for the comments made by all the participants, particularly Vance Adair, Malcolm Bowie, John Drakakis and Maggie Nolan.

² Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p.3.

one piece of it is almost bound to be untrue of another'.⁴ Openly declaring his agitation with the problem, Alex Callinicos opines the slipperiness of leading definitions of the postmodern, definitions which he condemns as 'mutually inconsistent, internally contradictory and/or hopelessly vague'.⁵ Adding to this list of unhappy epithets, Walter Truett Anderson bemoans the fact that it is 'a puzzling, uppity term'.⁶ Perhaps with such assertions in mind, Linda Hutcheon notes that '[f]ew words are more used and abused', but then adds as a caveat that 'this is an appropriate condition for... a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory'.⁷ Suitably wary of the pitfalls of this mode, Fredric Jameson tentatively ventures the claim that '[i]t is *safest* to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place'.⁸ With a surety of nerve that Jameson must envy, Thomas Docherty admits only of a secret knowledge when he observes that 'it is a term which has often been used with a great deal of imprecision'.⁹ For Edmund Smyth, however, '[i]t is evident that no consensus exists regarding either the parameters of postmodernism or the precise meaning of the term'.¹⁰ In the light of such bewilderment, it falls to Brian McHale, finally, to propose that while '[n]o doubt there is no such "thing" as postmodernism', it

³ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p.viii.

⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.viii.

⁵ Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press and Basil Blackwell, 1989), p.2.

⁶ Walter Truett Anderson, ed., *The Fontana Postmodernism Reader* (London: Fontana, 1996), p.3.

⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p.1.

⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p.ix (my italics).

⁹ Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p.xiii.

does, at least, ‘exist discursively in the discourses we produce *about* it and *using* it’.¹¹

What, then, is the source of all this confusion? We might begin to trace it back to a series of subtle and interrelated conflations between subject and object. At the level of definition itself, Patricia Waugh advances a useful gambit when she argues that ‘Postmodernism tends to be used in three broad senses: as a term to designate the cultural epoch through which we are living and largely viewed in apocalyptic terms; as an aesthetic practice which is seen variously as co-extensive with the commodified surfaces of this culture or as a disruption of its assumptions from within through a “micropolitics” or “politics of desire”; and as a development in thought which represents a thorough-going critique of the assumptions of Enlightenment or the discourses of modernity and their foundation in notions of universal reason’.¹² Whilst most commentators accept one or all of these definitions, there remains a certain difficulty in disentangling each from the other. For example, how is it possible to distinguish postmodernism as an ‘*aesthetic practice*’ from postmodernism as a ‘*cultural epoch*’, or postmodernism as a ‘politics of *desire*’ from postmodernism as a critique of ‘universal *reason*’? Faced with the impossible task of decoagulation, Waugh’s solution to this problematic is to comprehend postmodernism as a structure of feeling which privileges the aesthetic.

¹⁰ Edmund Smyth, ed., *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1991), p.9.

¹¹ Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p.1.

¹² Patricia Waugh, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), p.3.

It is the incontinence of this aesthetic and its concomitant theorization that leads Steven Connor to remark that '[i]ncreasingly disciplinary areas have sought to define their own postmodernist regimes in relation to those prevailing elsewhere, rather than by reference to their own histories'.¹³ These transgeneric definitions inevitably take the form of distilling a common theoretical essence from the different disciplines, with the result that we now suffer from what Connor terms a 'bulging *overcoherence* of the concept of the postmodern'.¹⁴ In turn, the labours of theory come to exert their own conflationary pressures. Specifically, we may note, again with Connor, that an increasing theoretical self-consciousness has led to the disclosure of theory's situatedness within that which it seeks to explicate, such that 'we are forced to use modes of understanding that derive from the periods and concepts that we might wish to stand clear of'.¹⁵ Experience and our knowledge of it thus come to forge an indissoluble intimacy which, for Waugh, condemns much of postmodernism to "bootstrapping" self-contradictions where it discovers itself forever implicated in that which it seeks to proclaim as inauthentic and exhausted'.¹⁶

¹³ Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, 1989), p.viii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.ix.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.5.

¹⁶ *Postmodernism: A Reader*, p.4. At the level of fiction, this tendency is indexed by the growing number of narratives to feature not only their own theorizations, but also their own theorists. Thus, for example, Toby Litt's excellent short story 'When I Met Michel Foucault' lists the eponymous theorist amongst its characters and quotes from his works. Toby Litt, 'When I Met Michel Foucault' in *Adventures in Capitalism* (London: Minerva, 1997, 1996), pp.189-228. In an even more self-conscious theorization, Alain De Botton finds room to mention everyone from Roland Barthes to Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Essays in Love: A Novel* to the point where it is surprising that the book does not contain an index of proper names. Alain De Botton, *Essays in Love: A Novel* (London: Picador, 1994, 1993). Finally, Patricia Duncker's *Hallucinating Foucault* not only depicts Foucault as one of its characters, but also points to its own

In this respect, perhaps the most disturbing of all the circularities produced by the conflationary whirl of the postmodern is that of history itself. The autoreferentiality involved here is at least twofold. Firstly, as Jameson insists, there is a sense in which whatever position we adopt towards an historical object, especially the postmodern, it will 'not [be] an empirically justifiable or philosophically arguable one, since it is itself the inaugural narrative act that grounds the perception and interpretation of the events to be narrated'.¹⁷ Secondly, and following on from this, these 'narrative acts', or processes of emplotment, are necessarily of their time and will find that contemporaneity inscribed within their structures and effects. The problem with this, of course, is that if we are so thoroughly nailed to the "now", and thereby compelled to deploy contemporary conceptualizations, how can we tear ourselves free of the present and render, even approximately, the stories and experiences of the past? It is a problem coeval, we might say, with the very fact of representation itself. This is a point noted by Bill Readings when he argues that,

Writing and reading cannot be understood as merely contingent or secondary in their effects upon the History to which they happen. On the contrary, they structure History in ways that upset the understanding of it as a procession of moments independent of acts of inscription.¹⁸

contemporary theoretical matrix when noting, for example, that '[m]y memories of those first days in Paris are like a sequence of postmodern photographs'. Patricia Duncker, *Hallucinating Foucault* (London: Picador, 1997, 1996), p.53.

¹⁷ *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.xiii.

¹⁸ Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p.58.

At one extreme, then history is nothing but the record of its own inscription, a record that, of course, then succumbs to its own inscription, and so on in a vertiginous thrall to the present. Summing up (and in many ways advancing) this subjectivist logic, Barry Hindness and Paul Hirst argue that '[h]istory's object, the hitherto existing, does not exist except in the modality of its current existence, as representations'.¹⁹ This is an argument that has achieved widespread currency over the past two decades and it is one that is symptomatic of the problematic at issue here.²⁰ For without the other of the past we have nothing against which to define the now. We are thus besieged by a "nowness" for which we can prescribe no limits. Indeed, for Jameson, it is 'as though our utter forgetfulness of the past exhausted itself in the vacant but mesmerised contemplation of a schizophrenic present that is incomparable virtually by definition'.²¹ In the light of this we may initially venture that the definitional confusions of postmodernism index an inability to render the other.

There is, of course, something of this confusion in the word 'history' itself, as it denotes both what has happened and the record of that happening. Tracing the history of the term itself, we may note that in German, for example,

¹⁹ Barry Hindness and Paul Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p.309.

²⁰ Perhaps the most notorious examples of this are Jean Baudrillard's three articles written about the Gulf War: 'The Gulf War Will Not Happen', 'The Gulf War: Is It Really Taking Place', and 'The Gulf War Did Not Take Place' collected in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. By Paul Patton (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995, 1991). If Baudrillard's titles are somewhat more hyperbolic than the texts they head, they have still occasioned a vitriolic response. Christopher Norris is typical when he intones, 'How far wrong can a thinker go and still lay claim to serious attention?' Christopher Norris, *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1992), p.11.

Geschichte was used to designate an incident, while *Historie* designated is report, but, from the late 18th century onwards, the former term came to displace the latter *qua* the designation for both, as Reinhart Koselleck notes:

The peculiar meaning of history, such that it is at the same time knowledge of itself, can be understood as a general formulation of an anthropologically given arc linking an d relating historical experience with knowledge of such experience. [...] the concept “history pure and simple” laid the foundation for a historical philosophy within which the transcendental meaning of history as space of consciousness became contaminated with history as space of action.²²

Such ‘contamination’ is concomitant with what Raymond Williams argues is ‘the sense of history as human self-development which is evident from [the early 18th century] in Vico and in the new kinds of Universal histories’.²³ Indeed, within this ‘anthropologically given arc’, history becomes less a putatively disinterested account of the past, than a project of concatenation which yokes together the past, present and future in a seamless flow leading to some form of enlightenment.²⁴ Whether from the point of view of the ‘moment’ of enlightenment or that of the present itself, then, history so conceived becomes a variety of hysteron proteron,

²¹ *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.xii.

²² Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. by Keith Tribe (Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1985, 1979), p.92. Also on this conflation, see Michel De Certeau’s point that ‘[h]istoriography (that is “history” and “writing”) bears within its name the paradox – almost an oxymoron – of a relationship established between two antinomic terms, between the real and discourse.’ Michel De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. by Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 1975), p.xxvii.

²³ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 2nd edn. (London: Fontana, 1983, 1976), p.146.

²⁴ Referring to our earlier example, Williams notes that ‘[i]n German there is a verbal distinction which makes this clearer: *Historie* refers mainly to the past, while *Geschichte* (and the associated *Geschichtsphilosophie*) can refer to a process including past, present and future’. *Ibid.*, p.147.

ceaselessly maladaptating the other to itself and finding only that which it is able to impute in the first place.

What is disclosed by all these ever broadening categories of conflation is the privileging of synchrony over diachrony, even where, as with history, the object of analysis is seemingly diachrony itself. There is, in other words, a specific temporality underwriting the assimilation of experience to its theorization, and ultimately, object to subject. This temporality may be designated as a relation of tautology, for what it denotes is the coincidence of time with itself. Such a tautological temporality, however, is a historical phenomenon, as Koselleck proposes:

From the second half of the eighteenth century on... [t]ime is no longer simply the medium in which all histories take place; it gains a historical quality. Consequently, history no longer occurs in, but through, time. Time becomes a dynamic and historical force in its own right.²⁵

Paradoxically, then, at the point of time's historicization time ceases to be historical. For, in becoming less the medium of history and more a historical medium, time is subject to the split of self-reflexivity. Thus, in rounding upon itself, as it were, time privileges synchrony over diachrony, the loop of history over its linear counterpart. This substantial mutation in one of the paradigmatic

Hence, for example, the phrase *etwas geschichtlich betrachten*, meaning 'to consider something from the historical point of view'.

²⁵ *Futures Past*, p.246.

co-ordinates of existence finds its registration in the very term 'modernity', for what is articulated in that term is precisely a temporal self-reflexivity.

This self-reflexivity manifests itself first of all in the fact that modernity announces its own moment of epochal succession as just that, a moment of succession. In attributing to itself this difference from previous epochs, it also foregrounds the very notion of epochal self-consciousness by becoming the age which renders such distinctions for the first time. Which is to say that, following Peter Osborne's excellent study *The Politics of Time*, we may attribute to modernity the distinctive characteristic of being the only epoch whose major experiential quality is a temporal self-reflexivity:

For there *is* something decidedly new about modernity as a category of historical periodization: namely, that unlike other forms of epochal periodization (mythic, Christian or dynastic, for example), it is defined solely in terms of temporal determinants, and temporal determinants of a very specific kind. As Adorno put it: 'Modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological, category.'²⁶

There are two points to be noted about the 'temporal determinants' here. The first is that modernity does not designate itself as a mere succession in a linear chronology to the epoch that preceded it, but rather as a qualitative transcendence of all epochs. It is a break from the past, rather than a mutation in its lineage. As Leo Bersani comments, '[w]e are modern because our modernity makes absolute the notion of discontinuity implicit in all discourses on modernity, reformulates

discontinuity as a loss of aptitude for continuities'.²⁷ This qualitative self-consciousness is, secondly, registered in terms of a temporal abstraction, i.e., 'modernity', *der Moderne*, *les temps modernes*, and *Neuzeit*. These designations all refer, as the last example literally suggests, to 'new time', a temporality that differentiates itself in a consciousness of temporality that differentiates itself. In contrast, as Koselleck proposes, '[t]he vast majority of epochal doctrines do not... draw on temporal determinants, but rather assume their specificity as given epochs on the basis of substantial, material, or personal determinants'.²⁸

The temporal paradoxes of such self-classification are clear enough. They are summed up, to recall Jacques Lacan, by 'the double aporia of a true survival that is abolished by knowledge of itself, and by a discourse in which it is death that sustains existence'.²⁹ For if the defining characteristic of modernity is its temporal novelty, then, in order to perpetuate itself as an epoch, it must renew and keep renewing its 'newness'. By so doing, however, novelty is subject to a repetition that renders it old and therefore no longer new. Furthermore, within the ambit of the repetition of newness, the old merely persists as yesterday's

²⁶ Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995), pp.8-9.

²⁷ Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p.47.

²⁸ *Futures Past*, p.234. Koselleck also notes of *Neuzeit* that '[t]he expression itself refers only to time, characterising it as new, without, however, providing any indication of the historical content of this time or even its nature as a period'. *Ibid.*, p.233.

²⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Routledge, 1997, 1977), p.300. If Lacan is primarily talking about 'how *I* as subject comes on the scene' here, its relevance still persists because, as Margreta De Grazia notes in her analysis of Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 'consciousness... and continuous periods are bound together'. Margreta De Grazia, 'Soliloquies and Wages in the Age of Emergent Consciousness', in *Textual Practice*, 9:1, (1995), 67-92, (p.72). Obversely, then, it is not surprising that Lacan's critique of the *cogito* should be bound up with the temporal problematics of modernity.

newness, and therefore the 'oldness' of previous epochs, against which modernity measures its newness, disappears. In such a situation modernity can no longer index its qualitative transcendence of all other epochs. It is little wonder, then, that in the midst of such a paradox, Theodor Adorno is boldly able to pronounce that '[t]he modern has really become unmodern'.³⁰ Again, returning to historical semantics, we may note that something of this temporal sleight-of-hand, in which modernity attempts to efface its own conditions of (im)possibility, is expressed by Raymond Williams when he observes that, sometime 'between, say, 1890 and 1940... "modern" shifts its reference from "now" to "just now" or even "then", and for some time has been a designation always going into the past with which "contemporary" may be contrasted for its presentness'.³¹ Modernity, on this reading, is perpetually ill at ease with itself, signifying a self-consciousness of a synchronicity that is non-synchronous, which is, in other words, diachronic. It is analogous, we might say, to that crepuscular reflexiveness that dimly glimmers in the gap between the subject of the statement and the subject of enunciation, which, once recognized, announces a rupture so grievous that it can never be breached. Indeed, Henri Meschonnic argues that this analogy 'may well be what best accounts for what the term *modern* or *modernity* does'.³² Which is to say that, like the subject of the enunciation, '[t]he term has no referent. No fixed,

³⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1996, 1951), p.218.

³¹ Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. by Tony Pinkney (London: Verso, 1996, 1989), p.32. Compare this with the distinction offered by *The Collins English Dictionary*: 'Contemporary is most acceptable when used to mean of the same period.... The word is, however, often used to mean modern or up-to-date.... The second use should be avoided where ambiguity is likely to arise....' Patrick Hanks, ed., *The Collins English Dictionary*, 2nd edn. (Glasgow: Collins, 1986, 1979).

objective referent. *It has only a subject*, of which it is full. It is the *signifiant* [signifying] of a subject.³³ In other words, by tearing itself free from the tradition of history and ascribing to the temporality of the new, modernity is doomed to itself: it can never be anything but the temporal transcendence which it already is. In this, it is of a piece with the history it underwrites, forever repeating itself, as we have already noted, in the mirror of inscription at the expense of the obliteration of its object.³⁴

Turning now to Lacanian psychoanalysis, we can, perhaps, find a name and an exposition for this problematic in the mode of the imaginary. The imaginary is one order (with the symbolic and the real) of the tripartite schema which forms the centrepiece of Lacan's psychoanalytic theories. It refers, at one level, to the gestatory process of the ego, but also, more ambitiously, it denotes a type of relationship between the subject and its world, as Malcolm Bowie comments:

The Imaginary is the order of mirror-images, identifications and reciprocities. It is the dimension of experience in which the individual seeks not simply to placate the Other but to dissolve his otherness by becoming his counterpart. By way of the Imaginary, the original identificatory procedures which brought the ego into being are repeated and reinforced by the individual in his relationship with the external world of people and things.³⁵

³² Henri Meschonnic, 'Modernity, Modernity', in *New Literary History*, 23:2, (1992), 401-430, (p.419).

³³ *Ibid.*, p.419.

³⁴ Indeed, Koselleck proposes that 'the experience of modernity is opened up only with the discovery of a history in itself, which is at once its own subject and object'. *Futures Past*, pp.92-93.

³⁵ Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London: Fontana, 1991), p.92.

The ‘original identificatory procedures’ which give birth to the ego are based on the infant’s lack of physical volition which Lacan identifies as being the result of the ‘*specific prematurity of birth in man*’.³⁶ This prematuration manifests itself in the infant’s inability to co-ordinate its movements, an inability that is only overcome by identifying with the rather more felicitous *Gestalt* of its own image in a mirror (of whatever kind). Faced with this apparently more capable collocation of its limbs, the infant finds that ‘in relation to the still very profound lack of co-ordination of his own motility, it represents an ideal unity, a salutary *imago*’.³⁷ This sober picture of itself therefore anticipates the child’s future development and affords it a pleasing sense of coherency, or, in other words, an ego. Whilst seeming a stabilizing fiction, this process of identification actually inheres within the seat of the subject as a desperately capricious force, constantly undermining the rectitude it seeks to impart with a kind of invertebral fitfulness. This is because, formed from an identification that precedes itself, the ego is thus constitutionally sundered, forever trying to reconcile the other to its same.

In its wider application, then, the imaginary designates a restless seeking after self, a process of amalgamating more and more instances of replication and resemblance in order to bolster up the fable of its unity. As such, the imaginary denotes a condition in which, as Terry Eagleton notes, ‘what “self” we have

³⁶ *Écrits*, p.4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.19.

seems to pass into objects, and objects into it, in a ceaseless closed exchange'.³⁸ The boundaries between the inner and outer world are thus devoid of saliency, each object seamlessly accruing within the aggregation of the subject in a kind of projective empire of the self. Under such conditions, time becomes the servant of space, for, as Bowie laments, 'the "I" is tirelessly intent upon freezing a subjective process that cannot be frozen, introducing stagnation into the mobile field of human desire'.³⁹ Just as with the abstractive cynosure of the "new", the operations of the ego repress duration by recasting everything within the formal rubric of what Lacan terms 'the statue in which man projects himself'.⁴⁰ The mirror stage *qua* genealogy thus becomes the mirror stage *qua* cosmology, a place of self rather than a passage of rites.⁴¹ In this sense, then, the imaginary specifies a narcissistic relation with the world, an intrasubjective, as opposed to an intersubjective, condition, and it is thus of a piece with modernity, which, to recall Meschonnic, '*has only a subject, of which it is full*'.⁴²

Indeed, the imaginary is, in one sense, a thoroughly historicized concept. We owe this insight particularly to the work of Teresa Brennan who argues that with it 'Lacan is describing a specific era in history – that of the ego. But the era he is describing is one that curtails historical thinking'.⁴³ This, of course, finds

³⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p.164.

³⁹ Lacan, p.25.

⁴⁰ *Écrits*, p.2.

⁴¹ This is what John Muller and William Richardson describe as the 'square of identification' in which 'things are treated narcissistically as reflections of the ego'. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, *Lacan and Language: A Reader's Guide to 'Écrits'* (New York; International Universities Press, 1982), p.34.

⁴² 'Modernity Modernity', p.419.

⁴³ Teresa Brennan, *History After Lacan* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.28.

echoes in what we have already identified as the problematic of modernity, the splendid isolation of which abnegates the possibility of a historical referent and forces it into a kind of subjective irredentism. What is interesting is that various aspects of this imaginary problematic form the point of departure for many analyses not just of the modern, but of the postmodern too. Ihab Hassan, for example, identifies 'immanence' as one of the two major tendencies of postmodernism, by which he means 'to designate the capacity of the mind to generalize itself in symbols, intervene more and more into nature, act upon itself through its own abstractions and so become, increasingly, im-mediate, its own environment'.⁴⁴ 'Consciousness,' he maintains, 'becomes all.'⁴⁵ With a rather less sanguine view of this state of affairs, Christopher Lasch argues that we are currently doomed to a 'culture of narcissism' in which an older, entrepreneurial individualism has given way in its dotage to one in which the individual is '[a]cquisitive in the sense that his cravings have no limits, he does not accumulate goods and provisions against the future, in the manner of the acquisitive individualist of nineteenth-century political economy, but demands immediate gratification and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire'.⁴⁶ This empty bolstering of the self is, in turn, expedited by what he terms the 'mirror effect' which, in a familiar formulation, 'makes the subject an object; at the same

⁴⁴ Ihab Hassan, 'Desire and Dissent in the Postmodern Age', in *Kenyon Review*, 5, (1983), 1-18, (p.10). The other major tendency is 'indeterminacy' which, although he does not say so, persists as a necessary corollary of immanence.

⁴⁵ Ihab Hassan, 'The New Gnosticism: Speculations on an Aspect of the Postmodern Mind', in *boundary 2*, 1:3, (1973), 547-569, (p.548).

⁴⁶ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (London: Abacus, 1979), p.xvi.

time, it makes the world of objects an extension or projection of the self'.⁴⁷ What these examples seem to suggest, in their delineation of an imaginary rubric in the postmodern that is fully of a piece with the imaginary rubric of the modern, is that the latter persists, in some manner, within the former. There remains, in other words, and, indeed, as the term suggests, an element of modernity at work within postmodernity. This element, it may be proposed, is manifest in various formations of the mode of the imaginary.

In order to pursue this notion further, we may turn to another equally influential diagnosis of the postmodern – Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*. In Debord's analysis, the term 'spectacle', although never credited as such, operates as a synonym of the imaginary. Thus, for example, we find that the constitutive bifurcation of the ego is mirrored in the form of the spectacle:

Like modern society itself, the spectacle is at once united and divided. In both, unity is grounded in a split. As it emerges in the spectacle, however, this contradiction is itself contradicted by virtue of a reversal of its meaning: division is presented as unity, and unity as division.⁴⁸

Furthermore, we find that in the ever more desperate attempts to stabilize and elide this contradictory structure, '[t]he self-movement of the spectacle consists in this: it arrogates to itself everything that in human activity exists in a fluid state so

⁴⁷ Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self* (London: Picador, 1984), p.30.

⁴⁸ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 194, 1967), p.36.

as to possess it in a congealed form'.⁴⁹ The imaginary museum of form, in other words, stores diachrony and displays it as synchrony, that is, as the coagulated temporality of the ego. The value of Debord's analysis, however, proceeds not just from the delineation of an imaginary *polis* but also in the elaboration of its conditions of possibility. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the opening sentence of *The Society of the Spectacle* and its reprise of Marx's gambit in *Capital*: 'The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*'.⁵⁰ Marx's introductory statement, it will be recalled, claims that '[t]he wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an "immense collection of commodities"'.⁵¹ Indeed, it is the logic of the commodity form and its penetration throughout all spheres of the *Lebenswelt* that perhaps accounts for the increasing prevalence of an imaginary rubric, for, like the latter, the commodity restlessly seeks to replicate itself at the level of form, divesting its contraries of all particular content until they too are matched in the dynamics of exchange. It is an analogy that Marx himself makes when noting that 'the physical body of commodity B becomes a mirror for the value of commodity A':

In a certain sense, a man is in the same situation as a commodity. As he neither enters into the world in possession of a mirror, nor as a Fichtean philosopher who can say "I am I", a man first sees and recognizes himself as a man through his relation to another man, Paul, in whom he recognizes his likeness. With this,

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.26.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁵¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin/New Left review, 1990, 1976), p.125.

however, Paul also becomes from head to toe, in his physical form as Paul, the form of appearance of the species man for Peter.⁵²

In the light of this, we may venture that, in the weakest formulation, there exists a striking correspondence between the currently prevailing formations and effects of the commodity and the imaginary which betokens more than a chance resemblance between the two. In the strongest formulation of this correspondence, it can be argued that the dominance of the logic of the imaginary is the psychic realization of the ego's colonization by the formalizing rubric of the commodity. At the very least we may say, then, that their respective histories are bound to each other at every stage.⁵³

Following on from this, it may be proposed that, at one level, the modernity we commonly identify as persisting in postmodernity is the experience of capitalism itself, an experience that, in the tradition of Raymond Williams, we may term an imaginary 'structure of feeling'.⁵⁴ If, therefore, as Osborne maintains, 'modernity may be understood as a general term for the experience of capitalism', and if, as Jameson proposes, postmodernism represents 'a purer and more homogenous expression of classical capitalism, from which many of the

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.144. Compare this to Lacan's comments on 'the statement, "I'm a man", which at most can mean no more than, "I'm like he whom I recognize to be a man, and so recognize myself as being such"'. *Écrits*, p.23.

⁵³ Indeed, Lacan claims that we are beset by 'the antidialectical mentality of a culture which, in order to be dominated by objectifying ends, tends to reduce all subjective activity to the being of the ego'. *Écrits*, p.23.

⁵⁴ '[S]tructures of feeling can be defined as social experiences in *solution*, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available.' Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp.133-134.

hitherto surviving enclaves of socio-economic difference have been effaced (by way of their colonization and absorption by the commodity form)', then it is not surprising that the order of the imaginary (as well as its theoretical elaboration) should have assumed the provenance it has over so many registers of experience.⁵⁵ Indeed, neatly summarizing this point for us, Harvey argues that '[w]herever capitalism goes, its illusory apparatus, its fetishisms, and its system of mirrors come not far behind'.⁵⁶

In the light of this we can return to the problematic of modernity and the temporality of the new. For, with the effacement of all residual forms of difference, the new can no longer be countenanced as new, that is as a qualitative contrast. Rather, it is transformed into quantity because, as Jameson laments,

⁵⁵ *The Politics of Time*, p.194 and *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.405 respectively.

⁵⁶ *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p.344. In a now classic exposition, Harvey contends that postmodernity is characterized by a new round of time-space compression that is fuelled by a crisis in capitalist accumulation. Its resemblance to modernity is thus one of matrix, for the latter was also a reaction to such a crisis; its difference, however, proceeds from its intensity. What is particularly interesting about Harvey's analysis is how he delineates the effects of capital's flows in terms of the imaginary dialectic of homogeneity and heterogeneity. Thus, for example, he notes 'that the more unified the space, the more important the qualities of the fragmentations become for social identity and action.' *Ibid.*, p.271. It is a point elaborated by Eric Hobsbawm, when he proposes that '[a]s the transnational economy established its grip over the world, it undermined a major, and since 1945, virtually universal, institution: the territorial nation-state'. Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century – 1914-1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), p.424. Hobsbawm identifies three major reactions to this spatial homogenization. The first is the resistance of existing nations to the attenuation of their identity in the erection of both cultural and economic barriers. The second reaction is manifest as a kind of regionalism in what Hobsbawm suggestively terms 'the collective egoism of wealth' whereby rich areas, either supra- or intra-national, like the European Union and Lombard League, attempt to fence themselves off from poor areas. *Ibid.*, p.427. Thirdly, Hobsbawm points to the rise in identity politics wherein individuals declare allegiance to imaginary communities predicated on a single characteristic. All three of these reactions are emblemized in, and named by, the concept of 'Balkanization'. What is important to recognize here is the interrelatedness of the drives towards universalism and particularism, for, as Harvey argues, '[t]hey should be regarded... as two currents of sensibility that flow [...] along side by side, often within the same person, even when one or the other sensibility be[comes] dominant in a particular place and time'. *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p.275.

‘[n]ow everything is new... the very category of the new... loses its meaning and becomes itself something of a modernist survival’.⁵⁷ The corollary of this, of course, is that the old too loses its meaning, and with it the past as well, as we have seen. Postmodernity, on this reading, then, represents the logical terminus of modernity; it is, as Jameson contends, ‘*more* modern than modernism itself’.⁵⁸ Indeed, it is precisely this interminable cycle to which the postmodern pays its grim and tautologous testament. For, at its simplest, to succeed modernity, as the ‘post’ of ‘postmodernity’ would suggest, is merely to repeat modernity as a qualitative transcendence. This is because to be modern is to be new, original or different, and, therefore, for modernity to continue, as the ‘modernity’ of ‘postmodernity’ suggests, even at the level of sublation, means that it must repeat itself and preserve its self-reflexivity self-reflexively. Postmodernity, in such an account, would then be, as Osborne avers, a return of modernity:

[I]f the primary, root sense of ‘modernity’, prior to its theoretical elaboration or the attribution to it of any particular historical content, is ‘the quality or character of being modern’; and if the modern, in its primary sense, is simply that ‘pertaining to the present and recent times’, or originating in the current age or period’, then, paradoxically, ‘postmodernity’ must be the name for a new modernity.⁵⁹

‘Postmodernity’, therefore, signals an identity with, and a difference from, ‘modernity’: it is new but also the same, or, as Meschonnic memorably writes, it

⁵⁷ *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.311.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.310.

⁵⁹ *The Politics of Time*, p.4.

is '[a] word on a leash'.⁶⁰ Its identity lies in its acknowledged debt to modernity's self-reflexive break with tradition, its self-proclamation as distinctive from what preceded it historically. Its difference is, ironically, precisely its disavowal of modernity as a new epoch, its disclosure of an antiquity in the new, which postmodernity then, self-reflexively, re-assigns to itself.

In this sense, postmodernity signals, at one time, both the birth pangs and the funeral rites of the novel and the new. It is, as Connor acknowledges in a discussion of Charles Jencks, 'a very tricky paradox' to negotiate:

In order to be genuinely "new" (and not "old" like Late Modernism), postmodernism must eschew modernism's commitment to the new, restoring or sustaining connections with the past. In order to be truly new, then, postmodernism must be old. And yet, as Jencks insists, it cannot be confused with a straight revivalism, either. Postmodernism is defined, therefore, in that difficult space between the old new and the new old.⁶¹

Postmodernity, in other words, designates a point of tension in the modern, that friction occasioned by the project of novelty and its perpetuation as the same. For, in submitting to the imperative to make it new, that is qualitatively different, modernity transmogrifies the new into an invariant, that is, a quantity – the always-already new, '[e]ndlessly beginning again', as Meschonnic comments.⁶² Postmodernity earns its dialectical spurs precisely at the point where it acknowledges quality as quantity, the always-already new as old, and diachrony

⁶⁰ 'Modernity Modernity', p.421.

⁶¹ *Postmodernist Culture*, p.85.

as synchrony. In tandem with Osborne, then, we may accept that ‘if current uses of “postmodern” and its cognates paradoxically remain within the framework of “modernity”, they do more than just repeat its existing forms’.⁶³ What they do instead is foreground the tautological rubric of modernity and elaborate it precisely as a problematic. This necessitates shifting from the order of the imaginary to the order of the symbolic, and it is with this transition in mind that we must turn now to the work of Jean-François Lyotard.

2: What Does Postmodernism Want?

Postmodernism begins in intemperance. Wilfully scorning the solace of good forms, it is seemingly calculated to exceed, conjuring up an immoderation that knows no trim. With it, as we have seen in attempts to define it, all sober measurements are cast aside in favour of excess – the superfluity of concept over case and the surplus of idea over imagination. This represents, of course, the action of the sublime and, glorying in its superabundance whilst less mindful of its power to impoverish, Jean-François Lyotard has been foremost amongst those keen to advance it as a defining characteristic of postmodernism. He is, however, careful to distinguish between the authentic sublimity of postmodernism and its ersatz modernist counterpart:

⁶² ‘Modernity Modernity’, p.401.

⁶³ *The Politics of Time*, p.4.

[M]odern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure. Yet these sentiments do not constitute the real sublime sentiment, which is in an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept.⁶⁴

Postmodernism, then, is characterized by the 'proper' sublimity in whose stead modernism can only offer a tawdry nostalgia for the 'real' thing. If nostalgia can please you with its beauty, it is a pastel pleasure that appears all the poorer for it in comparison with the exquisite pains of the authentic sublime, where the success of reason is indexed by the baleful failure of the imagination.

Lyotard's point of reference for this conception of the sublime is, of course, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*.⁶⁵ He cites approvingly Kant's own example of the commandment 'Thou shalt not make graven images' as a kind of archetypal postmodern injunction.⁶⁶ This is instructive, in the double

⁶⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, 1979), p.81.

⁶⁵ It is worth pointing out that Lyotard's use of the Kantian sublime has not gone unchallenged. Chief among his critics is Christopher Norris, who argues that 'this version of the Kantian sublime is one that thoroughly mystifies issues of social and ethico-political judgement by treating them, in effect, as modalities of *aesthetic* understanding'. *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War*, p.94. Whilst admitting that Lyotard's is 'a particular reading of the Kantian sublime', Patricia Waugh, however, is perhaps more sensitive to the Lyotardian idiom when she notes that 'he prefers to revert to a notion of the value of the aesthetic as a form of non-utilitarian autonomy, a mode which is resistant to any form of conceptualisation and is therefore unrepresentable'. Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1993, 1992), p.30. Lyotard is, on this reading, attempting to negotiate what Terry Eagleton argues is 'the contradictory nature of an aesthetic which on the one hand offers a fruitful ideological model of the human subject for bourgeois society, and on the other hand holds out a vision of human capacities by which that society can be measured and found gravely wanting'. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p.118.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.78.

sense, insofar as it admits of the conception of the Absolute at the same time that it denies its presentation, apart from in the form of a negation. However, such a negative theology is of interest not for what it enjoins us to do or not do, but precisely in what it does not instruct us to do at all. This void of, and prohibition on, instruction opens up the space of the desire of the Other, the terrible anxiety of the question ‘What does the Other want?’, or, as Lacanian psychoanalysis phrases it, ‘*Che vuoi?*’. If the most compelling response to such inscrutability is the construction of a fantasy scenario which might serve as an answer to fill out the void of the question, even that is forbidden here, as Slavoj Žižek points out:

[I]s not the Jewish god the purest embodiment of this ‘*Che vuoi?*’, of the desire of the Other in its terrifying abyss, with the formal prohibition to ‘make an image of God’ – to fill out the gap of the Other’s desire with a positive fantasy-scenario? Even when, as in the case of Abraham, this God pronounces a concrete demand (ordering Abraham to slaughter his own son), it remains quite open what he really wants with it: to say that with this horrible act Abraham must attest to his infinite trust and devotion to God is already an inadmissible simplification. The basic position of a Jewish believer is, then, that of Job: not so much lamentation as incomprehension, perplexity, even horror at what the Other (god) wants with the series of calamities that are being inflicted upon him.⁶⁷

For Žižek, the enigma or sublimity of God only acquires meaning in its differential relation with what we may profitably term the beautiful death of Christ. ‘[T]his fantasy scenario,’ he argues, is ‘the final proof that God-Father loves us with an all-embracing infinite love, thereby delivering us from the anxiety of ‘*Che vuoi?*’.’⁶⁸ In Lyotardian terms, Christ is the ‘good form’ that

⁶⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p.115.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.116.

domesticates the 'formlessness' of God.⁶⁹ What we may take from this juxtaposition of texts is a reformulation of Lyotard's point of departure for his discussion of the sublime, i.e., 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?'. For, on his own terms, Lyotard can only answer with another question: 'What Does Postmodernism Want?'.

What is of interest in this reformulation is how it enables us to understand the postmodern condition as one that is analogous to a relation of transference. For what is at stake in our hailing or interpellation by the sublime is a supposition of knowledge; that is, an imputation of knowledge to the sublimity of the Other. In order to illustrate this we may stay with the archetypal example of the sublimity of God and concur with Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen when he observes that

[t]o believe that there is a subject of knowledge is to believe in god, but it is also a "mistake" that psychoanalysis permits, if not to be thwarted (it is, Lacan says, "essential"), at least to be recognized. The psychoanalyst, precisely because his patients ordinarily invest him with such omniscience, knows very well for his part that no subject contains this knowledge... unless it is the improbable "subject" of the unconscious, who (dis)appears in the "*mistake* of the subject supposed to know" – in the patient's *transference*, in other words, and, more generally, in all the symptoms, slips of the tongue, lapses, and bungled actions that inscribe themselves in such transference to the analyst (or the teacher).⁷⁰

As with the detective who is able to conjure order from chaos, the solution from the mystery, just by hi/her very presence, so '[a]s soon as the subject who is

⁶⁹ Indeed, for Waugh this differential relation informs much of Lyotard's critique in 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', as 'not only is there an overt identification of authentic Postmodernism with an aesthetic of the sublime, there is... a similar but covert identification of political conformism, realism in literature, the conventional in art, the aesthetic in Habermas, with Kant's concept of the beautiful'. *Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism*, p.31.

⁷⁰ Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, trans. by Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p.5.

supposed to know exists somewhere... there is transference'.⁷¹ Notwithstanding the fact that, as Lacan states, the psychoanalyst 'does not present himself as a god, he is not God for his patient, his structural position within the relation of transference operates to that effect insofar as he is the guarantor of meaning'.⁷² In other words, the imputation of knowledge to the Other functions as the *sine qua non* of meaning production. As Žižek comments, '[t]his knowledge is of course an illusion, but it is a necessary one: in the end only through this supposition of knowledge, can some real knowledge be produced'.⁷³

For Lacan, the 'pivotal point' of this fiduciary bond is what he terms '*the desire of the psycho-analyst*'.⁷⁴ This desire is, again, an attribution of desire to the analyst on the part of the analysand; it is the analysand's answer to the enigmatic *Che vuoi?* of the analyst in his/her capacity as the placeholder of the Other, as Žižek argues:

The enigma that pertains to the very status of the subject of desire is the famous "*Che vuoi?*" – what does the Other want of me, what does he see in me that causes his desire, which is that X, the object-treasure which makes me an object of the Other's desire? The only way to get out of this impasse is to offer myself to the Other as the object of his desire: as Lacan puts it, in love, the subject "gives what he does not possess," *objet petit a*, the hidden treasure which is what is "in him more than himself." In this way, I simultaneously "return my love" to the Other, i.e., I determine my desire as the desire *for* the Other: I make him into the *object* of my desire in order to be able to avoid the abyss of *his* desire. This, of course, is precisely

⁷¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. By Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1994, 1977, 1973), p.232.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.230.

⁷³ *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p.185.

⁷⁴ *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.231.

what the psychoanalyst by definition must not do: his is to maintain open the abyss of “*Che vuoi?*” at any price, he must never return the (transferential) love to the analysand.⁷⁵

In other words, transference depends upon the analyst maintaining the enigma of *Che vuoi?*: the analysand will keep ‘answering’ with fantasy-scenarios until, hopefully, as Dylan Evans suggests, ‘the subject’s fundamental fantasy emerges’.⁷⁶ Having patiently reconstructed the analysand’s fundamental fantasy, however, there is yet a further, crucial stage to complete before the end of the psychoanalytic process, and that is what Lacan terms “traversing the fantasy”.⁷⁷ This entails a recognition of the function of fantasy as concealing the abyssal contingency of the symbolic order. The symbolic order, simply defined, is as Bowie points out, ‘the realm of language, the unconscious and an otherness that remains other’.⁷⁸ The agency of the symbolic is, then, the signifier and it is in this regard that we may note that whilst an imaginary relation designates binarism and fixity, a symbolic relation is differential and fluid. Unlike the former relation, then, all relations in the symbolic are mediated by a third, that is, by the impersonal Other. ‘[T]he Other is,’ as Lacan tirelessly restates, ‘the locus of that memory that [Freud] discovered and called the unconscious’; it is, therefore, why

⁷⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p.191.

⁷⁶ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p.39.

⁷⁷ Lacan talks, for example, of ‘a subject who has traversed the radical phantasy’. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.273.

⁷⁸ *Lacan*, p.92. This ‘otherness that remains other’ Lacan designates as the ‘Other’ in order to distinguish it from the ‘other’ of the imaginary which is, as we have seen, constantly subsumed in the self.

‘all history is by definition symbolic’.⁷⁹ Hence, as Lacan argues, what analysts ‘teach the subject to recognize as his unconscious is his history – that is to say, we help him to perfect the present historicization of the facts that have already determined a certain number of the historical “turning points” in his existence’.⁸⁰ Such a process involves, as we are seeing, an unmasking of the veil of fantasy. It is a point supported by Žižek when he comments that,

[f]antasy is basically a scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void. [...] As such, fantasy is not to be interpreted, only ‘traversed’; all we have to do is experience how there is nothing ‘behind’ it, and how fantasy masks precisely this nothing.⁸¹

‘This nothing’ is the constitutive lack in the symbolic, the excess of the real that persists as a structural effect of the signifying chain. It is a necessary insufficiency because without it representation would be completely coextensive with what is represented, thereby abnegating the function of mediation as such and the subject in particular. If, then, the *Che vuoi?* of the analysand indexes the abyss of the analyst’s desire *qua* the absence in the symbolic, the analysand’s production of fantasies can be understood as attempts to paper over this hole. As such, fantasy may be designated an imaginary construct insofar as, for Malcolm Bowie, ‘[w]ithin the conditions of “absolute non-reciprocity” that govern subjectivity, ...phantasy creates for us a dream of identity, symmetry and

⁷⁹ *Écrits*, p.215, and, Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan – Book VII 1959-1960*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), p.13 respectively.

⁸⁰ *Écrits*, p.52.

reversibility'.⁸² We might say, in this context, therefore, that fantasy represents the operation of the beautiful, whereas traversing the fantasy is, rather, a modality of the sublime; for what the latter designates is the renunciation of any attempt to fill the lack in the Other, or cover up the constitutive void in the symbolic. The unswerving perpetuation of the *Che vuoi?* by the analyst thus not only works to compel the creation of ever more desperate fantasy-scenarios as a response to it, but ultimately serves to dispel their imaginary hold over the analysand at all.

What is striking here, is that by attending to the mechanism of transference as it has been delineated so far, we can begin to understand it as an expository analogy of the mechanism at work in Lyotard's sublime postmodernist work of art. Specifically, we are able to comprehend the latter as implicitly acknowledging the contingency of the symbolic order by virtue of its displacement of the rules of conventional form:

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*.⁸³

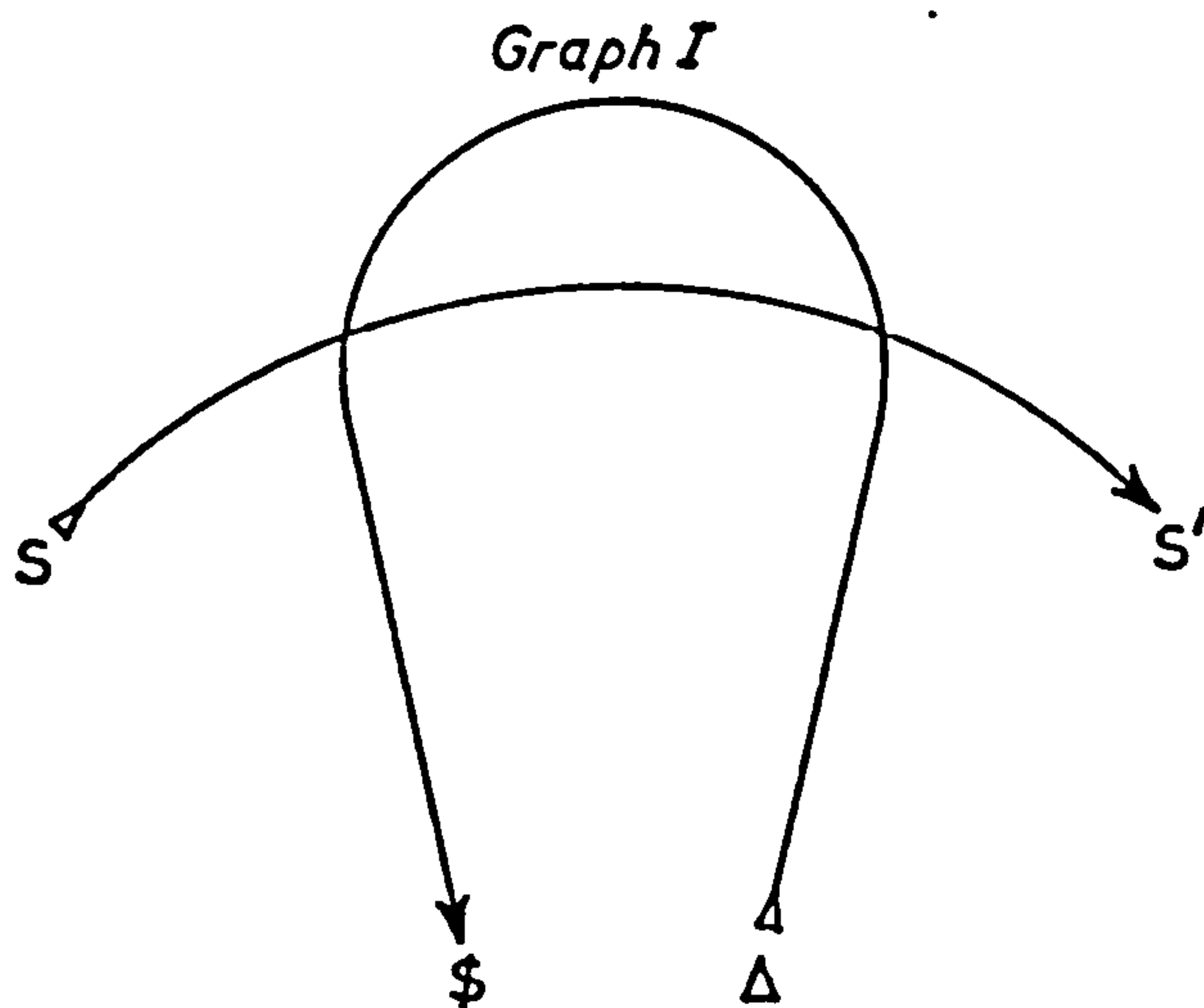
⁸¹ *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p.126.

⁸² *Lacan*, p.178.

⁸³ *The Postmodern Condition*, p.81.

Within this context we may say, therefore, that postmodern artists are working in the abyss of the *Che vuoi?*, although without resorting to the imaginary machinations of filling in that void, but, instead, accepting it as a condition of possibility for, as Lyotard asserts, ‘new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable’.⁸⁴ What is intriguing about the postmodern project as Lyotard describes it, however, is its temporal character, which is that of the future perfect – the ‘what *will have been done*’.

We can, perhaps, begin to see the relevance of this retroaction by referring again to the process of transference, for which the future perfect provides the underlying dynamic. Nowhere is this more readily discernible than in Lacan’s first graph of desire.⁸⁵



⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.81.

⁸⁵ *Écrits.*, p.303.

Here the vector of the signifying chain (S-S') is twice intersected by the vector of subjective intention in such a way that the second intersection is at a point preceding the first one. This retroactive traversal of the signifying chain is essentially the action of *capitonnage* or quilting. It is, as Lacan notes, 'a retroversion effect by which the subject becomes at each stage what he was before and announces himself – he will have been – only in the future perfect tense'.⁸⁶ Which is to say that the slippage of signification is provisionally halted, or, 'buttoned down', only when it is intersected by a master signifier, or intention, that confers meaning upon what preceded it. For example, 'freedom' signifies different things according to the master signifier, or *point de capiton*, which retroactively coheres its field of meaning. If the *point de capiton* is 'Marxism', then the 'freedom' of the free market is an illusory one which masks constitutive inequalities; whereas if the master signifier is 'bourgeois liberalism', then 'freedom' consists precisely in the equivalency of opportunity afforded by the free market.⁸⁷

What is crucial here is the relation of this retroversion to transference. For what is at stake in transference is the occlusion of the appearance of the retroactive production of meaning, thereby facilitating a misrecognition of the

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.306.

⁸⁷ It is in the light of this that we may understand Lyotard's famous contention that '[t]he grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses'. *The Postmodern*

merely contingent as a transcendental schema. Thus, '[w]e are,' declares Žižek, "“in transference” when it appears to us that real freedom is “in its very nature” opposed to bourgeois freedom, that the state is “in its very nature” only a tool of class domination, and so on’.⁸⁸ It is from this misrecognition, this ‘*being mistaken*’ as Lacan terms it, that the psychoanalyst comes to be designated the subject supposed to know: ‘[e]ven the psychoanalyst put in question is credited at some point with a certain infallibility, which means that certain intentions, betrayed perhaps, by some chance gesture, will sometimes be attributed even to the analyst put in question, *You did that to test me!*’⁸⁹ To return to our earlier example, there is, for Žižek, a similar dynamic at work in the traditional detective story:

[T]he detective’s “omniscience” is strictly homologous to that of the psychoanalyst, who is taken by the patient as the “subject supposed to know” – supposed to know what? The true meaning of our act, the meaning visible in the very falseness of the appearance. *...the detective, solely by means of his presence, guarantees that all these details will retroactively acquire meaning.* In other words, his “omniscience” is an effect of *transference*....⁹⁰

Whilst this is the detective story in its ‘pure’ form, Roland Barthes has delineated its chronotope in similar terms (in the guise of the ‘hermeneutic code’), when he notes that most of the dilatory devices employed in novels work ‘to *arrest* the enigma, to keep it open’, just as the analyst works to maintain the sublimity of the

Condition, p.37. Indeed, the only ‘mode of unification’ that is finally possible is the unattainable unity of the real itself.

⁸⁸ *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p.102.

⁸⁹ *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.234.

Che vuoi?.⁹¹ Again, as with the desire of the psychoanalyst, Barthes maintains that '[e]xpectation becomes the basic condition for truth'.⁹²

This exposition of transference should, then, contribute to our understanding of Lyotard's apparently most scandalous claim that '[p]ostmodernism... is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant'.⁹³ To understand postmodernism as modernism 'in the nascent state' necessitates subverting the logic of linear chronology in favour of a retroactive temporality. If psychoanalysis signifies its concern with the latter in the very etymology of the term 'analysis' (from *ana*, meaning 'going back' or 'again', and *luen*, meaning 'loosening' or 'dissolving'), then Lyotard himself also makes the connection in a typically cryptic letter to Jessaymn Blau on the meaning of the prefix 'Post-':

I mean that for a proper understanding of the work of modern painters... we would have to compare their work with *anamnesis*, in the sense of psychoanalytic therapy. Just as patients try to elaborate their current problems by freely associating apparently inconsequential details with past situations – allowing them to uncover hidden meanings in their lives and their behaviour – so we can think of the work of Cézanne, Picasso, Delauney, Kandinsky, Klee, Mondrian, Malevich, and finally Duchamp as a working through [*durcharbeiten*] performed by modernity on its own meaning.

You can see that when it is understood in this way, the 'post-' of 'postmodern' does not signify a movement of *comeback*, *flashback*, or *feedback* – that is, not a movement of repetition but a

⁹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: MIT Press, 1992), pp.57-58.

⁹¹ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974, 1970), p.76.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.76. The temporality of the detective story chronotope is elaborated upon at greater length in Chapter Two of this thesis.

⁹³ *The Postmodern Condition*, p.79.

procedure in 'ana': a procedure of analysis, anamnesis, anagogy, and anamorphosis that elaborates an 'initial forgetting'.⁹⁴

Lyotard's assertions about the complex temporality of postmodernism, then, proceed by analogy with Freud's concept of *durcharbeiten* or 'working through'. As J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis declare, this is not the clearest of Freudian categories, but they take it to mean 'a sort of psychical work which allows the subject to accept repressed elements and to free himself from the grip of mechanisms of repetition'.⁹⁵ This 'acceptance' of what has been repressed is thus a kind of remembering of what was initially forgotten, but it is to be distinguished from the simple recall of a memory which 'remembering' implies if only because, as Freud notes, 'something is "remembered" which could never have been "forgotten" because it was never at any time noticed – was never conscious'.⁹⁶ Indeed, Lyotard claims that '[r]emembering, one still *wants* too much', whereas 'working through would be defined as a work without end and therefore without will'.⁹⁷ Thus it is that, as Laplanche and Pontalis explain, 'working through is expedited by interpretations from the analyst which consist chiefly in showing how the meanings in question may be recognised in different contexts'.⁹⁸ The

⁹⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, 'Note on the Meaning of 'Post-''', in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. by Thomas Docherty (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1993), pp.47-50 (pp.49-50).

⁹⁵ J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: H. Karnac Books, 1988, 1973, 1967), p.488. Laplanche and Pontalis comment that we are left 'in considerable doubt as to what Freud meant exactly by working-through'. *Ibid.*, p.488.

⁹⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-analysis II)', (1914), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, Volume 12 (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), pp.145-156 (p.149).

⁹⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, 1988), p.29 and p.30 respectively.

⁹⁸ *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, p.488.

event subject to the 'initial forgetting' is, therefore, not so much *remembered as it was*, but, rather, restructured through its inscription within another field of meaning, and *remembered as it is*. By working-through a memory, then, an event becomes a repetition that happens for the first time: simply, it will have been.⁹⁹

Lyotard's name for such an immemorialization is, in fact, the event. This is a happening that refuses integration within the symbolic network until the symbolic network has itself been refashioned. For Lyotard, simply put, 'something happens which is not tautological with what has happened'.¹⁰⁰ However, as Bill Readings explains, an event is not a novelty of history but, rather, a novel history:

The event is the radically singular happening which cannot be represented within a general history without the loss of its singularity, its reduction to a moment. The time of the event is postmodern in that the event cannot be understood *at the time*, as it happens, because its singularity is alien to the language or structure of understanding to which it occurs.¹⁰¹

There is, of course, a sense here in which writing the event is always doomed to fail. Firstly, we must accept that singularity only persists as an effect of negativity: something *is* by virtue of what it is not. In this sense singularity can

⁹⁹ This is to distinguish it from that other kind of repetition which is a compulsion and about which Freud declares 'the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it.' 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-analysis II)', p.150.

¹⁰⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by G. Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, 1983), p.79.

¹⁰¹ *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, p.57.

only be conceived within a context and therefore must lose its designation as singular. From this perspective the event may therefore be considered sublime, for its designation as a singular happening exceeds the capacity to present it in its singularity. Secondly, and following on from this, singularity even as an effect of negativity is only possible within the order of representation – that is, within the order of the symbolic. This is because, as John Forrester declares, ‘[t]here are no holes in reality – there is no “real” absence.’¹⁰² Singularity, in other words, is impossible in the real, it can only exist in the symbolic which, paradoxically, is therefore the register of the real. By which is meant that we can attest to the singularity of an event only at the point of our failure to present that singularity. This point is precisely the boundary between the symbolic and the real and it is only with the failure of symbolization, that is with the sublimity of the event, that the real is disclosed.

The significance of the disclosure of the relationship between the real and the symbolic, what Geoffrey Bennington terms the “tensivity” between the orders, lies in its eschewal of a subjective historiography.¹⁰³ Which is to say that the event *qua* history is produced in the friction between the symbolic and the real and it is therefore neither fully subjective nor fully objective but, rather, the result of their differential relation. As Bennington expounds, ‘we can no longer simply accept the traditional view that the event “comes first” in an

¹⁰² John Forrester, *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan and Derrida* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.176.

¹⁰³ Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p.108.

unquestionable “real” world, nor, in the simple reversal-model, that it is purely “produced” by the narrating agency’.¹⁰⁴ History, on this model, is neither a set of pristine facts awaiting reclamation, nor is it, for Readings, ‘nothing other than “what is said about it now”’; instead it is the sum of their difference and this difference is always contingent.¹⁰⁵

The postmodern represents, in other words, the attempt to disinter a properly historical thinking from the imaginary present of the modern. Like the latter, the former is predicated upon synchrony; unlike the modern, however, the postmodern inscribes the real of this synchrony in the symbolic rather than the imaginary.¹⁰⁶ Thus, when Bennington proposes that ‘the postmodern is the working out of a psychoanalytic *temporality*’ we may understand this to express, more specifically, a relation between the time of fantasy and the time of traversing the fantasy in which the latter is privileged over the former.¹⁰⁷ In order to distinguish this relationship from the dominant conception of history as a diachronic narrative, we may refer to this symbolization of the synchronic by the term ‘historicity’. As Jameson reminds us, ‘[h]istoricity... can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.107. It is worth pointing out here that Bennington is not using “real” in the precise Lacanian sense even if, in this context, it corresponds to that designation.

¹⁰⁵ *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, p.58.

¹⁰⁶ As Žižek points out, ‘[w]hat characterizes the symbolic order is the specific mode of causality, namely *retroactive* causality’. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment As A Political Factor* (London; Verso, 1991), p.201.

¹⁰⁷ *Introducing Lyotard*, p.59.

immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective'.¹⁰⁸ Which is to say that historicity is a history not exclusively moulded by the present of the ego, but, rather one in which the latter is suitably relativized by the real of the 'past' and the 'future'. '[A] postmodern historicity,' then, as Peter Nicholls argues, 'conceives the subject as shaken out of its secure metaphysical time and exposed to the shock of a temporality which is always self-divided.'¹⁰⁹ The postmodern, in other words, besieges the imaginary fortifications of the modern problematic and attempts to surmount them at the same time. In contradistinction to the history of the imaginary, it recognizes and attests to its constitutive split as the very condition of both the object that is knowledge and the subject that knows it. The postmodern, therefore, represents the return of history rather than its end.

Indeed, we may add in response to the question set up earlier, that what postmodernism wants, as it were, is precisely the return of the object *qua* history, or more properly, historicity. For what Lyotard is implicitly propounding with the sublimity of postmodernism is a non-subjectivizable object, or, what Lacan describes as 'the object that cannot be swallowed...', which remains stuck in the

¹⁰⁸ *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.284.

¹⁰⁹ Peter Nicholls, 'The Belated Postmodern: History, Phantoms and Toni Morrison', in *Psychoanalytic Criticism; A Reader*, ed. by Sue Vice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1966), pp.50-67 (p.56). In the context of this study it is worth pointing out that Nicholls has, here and elsewhere, criticized 'Jameson's developmental view, which is founded on a rigorous, unpassable opposition between modern and postmodern'. Peter Nicholls, 'Divergences: Modernism, Postmodernism, Jameson and Lyotard', *Critical Quarterly*, 33:3, (1991), 1-18, (p.4). Apart from the fact that we have already seen how Jameson identifies the postmodern as the intensification of the modern, he has remained concerned throughout his *oeuvre* to sensitize us to the complexities of periodical schema. As Jameson argues, 'such categories are produced within an initial diachronic or narrative framework, but become usable only when that initial framework has been annulled, allowing us now to coordinate or articulate categories of diachronic origin (the various distinct modes of production) in what is now a synchronic or metasynchronic way'. Fredric Jameson, *The*

gullet of the signifier'.¹¹⁰ This unassimilable object is the condition of possibility for the subject as such; it is, as Žižek argues, 'the subject himself in his oppositional determination, the negative of the subject, a piece of flesh that the subject has to lose if he is to emerge as the void of distance towards every objectivity'.¹¹¹ In this sense, the object inheres within the subject as the subject's cause, it is 'the subject itself in the mode of objectivity'.¹¹² The *imaginary* conflation of subject and object which we earlier noted as characteristic of the problematic of modernity can only be overcome, then, by recognizing the *symbolic* conflation of subject and object. In other words, it is only with the disappearance of the subject, in the object, that the subject can emerge at all, just as it is only with the disappearance of history, in the present, that history too can finally emerge.

3: Time and Time Again

If Lacan is foremost amongst those who have been responsible for re-articulating the Freudian concept of a retroactive temporality, then he has clearly

Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (London: Routledge, 1989, 1981), p.98.

¹¹⁰ *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.270.

¹¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994), p.33.

¹¹² Slavoj Žižek, 'Hegel with Lacan, or the Subject and its Cause', in *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*, ed. by Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp.397-413 (p.400).

been joined in this enterprise by many others.¹¹³ Lyotard obviously serves as our most pertinent example here, but equally striking over recent years has been the work of Jacques Derrida. Indeed, it would perhaps not be overstating the case to say that Derrida's entire *oeuvre* is a working-through of the problematics of time, a working-through that finds the self-dividing temporality of *différance* forever disturbing the traditional temporality of presence/absence and all that it underwrites. The former thus manifests itself, in a relevant example, as an 'historicity which cannot be historical, an "ancientness" without history, without anteriority, but which produces history', in contradistinction to the latter which is articulated as a 'history [that] has no doubt always been associated with a linear scheme of the unfolding of presence, where the line relates the final presence to the originary presence according to the straight line or the circle'.¹¹⁴ History, for Derrida, is therefore only produced by a temporality that exceeds its teleology.

¹¹³ In their discussion of the modality of retroversion identified by Freud as *Nachträglichkeit*, Laplanche and Pontalis note that '[t]he credit for drawing attention to the importance of this term must go to Jacques Lacan'. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, p.111. Typically, Lacan is not slow to acknowledge this credit. For example, whilst distinguishing between 'the retroactive effect of meaning in sentences, meaning requiring the last word of a sentence to be sealed' and *Nachträglichkeit* [which] reveals a temporal structure of a higher order', he remarks of the latter 'remember I was the first to extract it from Freud's texts'. Jacques Lacan, 'Position of the Unconscious', in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's 'Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis'*, ed. by Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), pp.259-82 (pp.267-268). If the latter concept is Freud's, we may perhaps find something of Friedrich Nietzsche in the former concept and his argument that '[n]ot every end is a goal. The end of a melody is not its goal; but nonetheless, if the melody had not reached its end it would not have reached its goal either.' Friedrich Nietzsche, *A Nietzsche Reader*, ed. and trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1977), p.278.

¹¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul De Man*, 2nd edn., trans. by Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler and Eduardo Cadava (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, 1986), p.95, and Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), p.85 respectively. It is probably worth pointing out that Derrida maintains the impossibility of ever actually escaping from the kind of metaphysical time identified in the latter quotation. David Wood, however, takes issue with this contention, noting that, for Derrida, 'the denial of the possibility of an alternative concept of time is compromised by his own endorsement of a pluri-dimensional temporality'. David Wood, *The Deconstruction of Time* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1991, 1989), p.xi.

As Vincent Descombes contends, '[t]here is history because, from the origin onwards, the present is, so to speak, always delayed with regard to itself'.¹¹⁵ As we have seen, such logic finds a particular application in the contemporary and Mark C. Taylor, writing in the tradition of Derrida and Maurice Blanchot, argues that we can only understand the modernist/postmodernist split in terms of a differential temporality. He therefore proposes that '[t]o think difference – the difference that marks the margin *between* modernism and postmodernism, it is necessary to refigure space by imagining time without presence'.¹¹⁶

If these examples disclose the rise in the privileging of retroversion in theory, they are allied, at the level of form, to the increasing attention paid to its role as a stylistic and exegetical device. Steven Connor, for example, commenting on Jameson's problematical deployment of tenses, argues that '[t]he proliferation of conditionals and varieties of the future perfect leave us permanently unclear whether what we are reading is past, or passing, or to come'.¹¹⁷ Connor is certain, however, that this is no mere stylistic quirk, but rather 'attests... to the puzzling virtuality of time in our time'.¹¹⁸ As such, this

¹¹⁵ Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. by L. Scott-Fox and J.M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, 1979), p.145.

¹¹⁶ Mark C. Taylor, 'Back to the future', in *Postmodernism: Philosophy and the Arts*, ed. by Hugh J. Silverman (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp.13-32 (p.13).

¹¹⁷ *Postmodernist Culture*, p.50. While I disagree with this criticism, its point of attack nevertheless remains symptomatic of the wider temporal self-consciousness being elaborated here.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.50. It is perhaps worth noting in this context that the title of one of Jameson's more recent works, *The Seeds of Time*, finds its incipience in the Shakespearean play, *Macbeth*, which is most explicitly committed to an exploration of complex temporalities:

BANQUO: If you can look into the seeds of time
And say which grain will grow and which will not....

writing perhaps demands a new kind of reading too. In this respect, Žižek's analyses of Lacan are exemplary for they comprehend his work 'as a work in progress, as a succession of attempts to seize the same persistent traumatic kernel':

The shifts in Lacan's work become manifest the moment one concentrates on his great negative theses: "There is no Other of the Other", "The desire of the analyst is not a pure desire".... upon encountering such a thesis, one must always ask the simple question: who *is* this idiot who is claiming that *there is* an Other of the Other, that the desire of the analyst is a pure desire, and so on? There is, of course, only one answer: *Lacan himself a couple of years ago*. The only way to approach Lacan, therefore, is to read "Lacan *contre* Lacan".¹¹⁹

Which is to say that when we read Lacan's *oeuvre* we need to work through his earlier theses in terms of his later ones, in much the same way that he continued to re-elaborate even his central concepts throughout his career. There is, of course, a certain kinship in this approach with the more mundane fact of signification which, as we have already noted, requires some provisional 'buttoning down' of meaning for it to make sense. Commenting upon Terence Hawkes' article 'Telmah' (itself, of course, 'Hamlet' backwards), Peter Barry finds that, characteristically, cultural materialists exploit this feature of narrativization to produce what he terms 'novelistic' effects. Thus, he finds, for example, that 'suspense is maintained by holding back key details about identity or situation till the moment of maximum impact', whilst the typical 'structure is a

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by G.K. Hunter (London: Penguin 1995), 1:3:57-58.

¹¹⁹ *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, p.173.

series of seemingly unrelated incidents or situations which turn out to be intimately intertwined'.¹²⁰

Such esoteric concerns find their popularization in the realm of demotic culture. In the genre of cinema, for example, a cursory glance at the biggest box-office earners over the last twenty years would include such retroactive-plotted films as *Terminator* (Parts I and II), *Back to the Future* (Parts I, II and III), *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*, *Groundhog Day*, *Time Cop*, *Twelve Monkeys*, *Total Recall* and *Big*.¹²¹ Even a film as apparently 'linear' as *Men In Black* is explicitly, as well as implicitly, concerned with the effects of retroversion. The film's enabling premise is the existence of a secret government agency supposed to administer alien activity which was, it is maintained, formed in the 1950s. If there is such an organization, this is, of course, precisely the time when it will always have been set up.¹²² However, its existence is kept secret by the use of memory erasers (or 'neurolysers') on all those who come into contact with it. The agents of this erasure, in every sense of the phrase, are pure letters 'J' (Will Smith), 'K' (Tommy Lee Jones) and 'Z' (Rip

¹²⁰ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Studies* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.189.

¹²¹ Whilst there is clearly a certain irony in making sequels to films predicated on recursive temporalities, it does at least attest to the popularity of the genre. For a more detailed account of these films it is worthwhile consulting Constance Penley, *The Future of an Illusion: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

¹²² Indeed, the periodization of this film, as well as others like *Independence Day* and *Mars Attacks!*, is symptomatic of the transferential process by means of which the past always comes from the future. For, while these films are essentially 1950s 'B'-movies updated to 1990s blockbusters, their forms also connote a certain futurity in terms of their generic matrices in science fiction, a genre which depends on a temporality which is specifically anticipatory. The paradox of transference, in which the future determines the past, is equally emblemized at the level of content in the technology which, whilst being far more sophisticated than our present equipment, is styled in that smooth bland plastic fashion so redolent of the 1950s.

Torn). Without identity themselves (their fingerprints are burnt off, for example), they work to rewrite the past by inducing the forgetting inherent to the transferential illusion of *capitonnage*, which, as we have seen, must always efface its traces as a condition of its success. Thus is it that they are, as ‘Z’ remarks to ‘J’, “recognizable only as *déjà vu*”, as repetitions without origin.¹²³ Indeed, one of the film’s finest moments in this respect is its closing theme. This is a rap cover version of a song called ‘Forget-Me-Nots’ which replaces the old eponymous lyric in the chorus with the phrase ‘Men in black’.

The main concern of this study, however, is the form of the contemporary narrative. Utilizations of an ego-shattering, retroactive temporality are everywhere to be found here, but one example that irresistibly proposes itself is Walter Abish’s collection of short stories *In The Future Perfect*. The most extreme, and also the most typical narrative strategy employed by Abish in this collection is that used in ‘In So Many Words’. Here Abish narrates the banal routine of an American woman, interspersing it with a series of randomly numbered fragments which anticipate the words of the story in alphabetical, rather than syntactical order:

17

*American an and another diary great in introduction is my
Saturday simply Sunday the this to weekend*

20

¹²³ *Men In Black*, directed by Barry Sonnenfeld, written by Ed Solomon (Columbia Pictures, 1997). On this point, ‘Z’ also says to ‘J’, “You were never born”.

This is an introduction to my diary. In the diary the Great American Weekend is simply another Saturday and Sunday.¹²⁴

These fragments render the story unreadable; they resist interpretation but by that resistance foreground the compunction of the reading mind to coagulate all the elements of a narrative into an imaginary whole. In other words, as these fragments are unassimilable to such a whole they disclose the presupposition of a time when they will have meant; that is, when the alphabetical ordering of the words of the fragments will have been like their syntactic concatenation in the narrative of the story. It is a point that finds more concrete expression in John Berger's *G.*, where the narrator discerns an analogy of this narrative problematic in psychical and historical processes:

She could not explain her feelings to herself. There is a historical equivalent to the psychological process of repression into the unconscious. Certain experiences cannot be formulated because they occurred too soon. This happens when an inherited world-view is unable to contain or resolve certain emotions or intuitions which have been provoked by a new situation or an extremity of experience unforeseen by that world-view. [...] In certain respects we are likely to be better understood by those who follow us than by ourselves. Nevertheless their understanding will be expressed in terms which would now be alien to us.¹²⁵

The two parts of Abish's story (the meaningless fragments and the meaningful narrative) dramatize the temporal theory of Berger's narrator. In each initial meaningless fragment we may discern that which 'cannot be formulated', and in

¹²⁴ Walter Abish, *In the Future Perfect* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984, 1975), p.95.

¹²⁵ John Berger, *G.*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1996, 1972), p.104.

the meaningful fragment which follows it we may discern an ‘understanding’ which returns to the fragment in the future perfect, expressing the truth of that fragment in terms which are now ‘alien’ to it. Invoking another example, the story is thus like the jackal in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* in whose ‘jaws are pieces of the past he delivers to you, and when all of that time is fully discovered it will prove to have been already known’.¹²⁶

The differences in form, content and effect of these three examples attests to the diversity in articulating retroversion in contemporary narratives. This diversity, it may be ventured, is not best served by attempting to codify a poetics of postmodern fiction. Such a project would seem to fetishize the figures and techniques of the novels in question which, in any case, produce their effects through various combinations and in a complex relation to the historical content of these texts. Indeed, this is merely to emphasize a point made throughout this study that form is best understood as the logic of content. Rather what is at stake in characterizing the contemporary novel is an elaboration of the processes by which its ‘raw’ materials (ultimately, the postmodern condition itself) are fashioned, and in turn, fashion their narrativization. The broad proposal of this thesis is that the postmodern novel designates those contemporary texts which subject their imaginary ‘raw’ materials to the temporality of the symbolic; texts which, in other words, disclose the historicity of history.

¹²⁶ Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (London: Picador, 1993, 1992), p.259.

It is a proposal which may be mapped out in more detail using the coordinates already provided in the analysis of postmodernity. In particular we may invoke Žižek's definition of fantasy as 'the primordial form of *narrative*, which serves to occult some original deadlock'.¹²⁷ The structure of narrative expedites such mystification by collapsing the synchronic onto the diachronic, a diachrony which then assumes as its *telos* what it will seek to explain. It is thus, perversely, a synchrony masquerading as diachrony: a straight line, as it were, which is secretly a circle, positing its own presuppositions in an endless temporal loop.¹²⁸ As such, narrative, like fantasy, may be understood as an imaginary discourse, accruing to itself only that which is already presupposed as the same. However, this definition can be refined, for if this is narrative *qua* fantasy, then, it may be proposed there is also, as its counterpoint, narrative *qua* traversing the fantasy: in other words, a symbolic narrative. It is a distinction that Jameson also makes when he argues that an imaginary narrative is one which, *qua* fantasy, stages a series of objections to its own constitution which must then be overcome for it to be realized. The imaginary narrative thus conducts an inquiry into its own conditions of possibility and, by so doing, secures those conditions and therefore

¹²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *the Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), p.10.

¹²⁸ As an example of such a narrative Žižek proffers the following: 'The sociopolitical fantasy *par excellence*, of course, is the myth of "primordial accumulation": the narrative of the two workers, one lazy and free-spending, the other diligent and enterprising, accumulating and investing, which provides the myth of the "origins of capitalism", obfuscating the violence of its actual genealogy'. However, this 'effectively explains nothing, since it already presupposes a worker behaving like a full-blown capitalist'. *Ibid.*, pp.10-11. In regard to the novel, Elizabeth Deeds Ermath has produced a singular theorization of circular time in postmodern fiction in her *Sequel to History*. Unfortunately, her approach has little in common with the one advanced here, but her proposal that '[p]ostmodern narrative can be instructively thought of as a temporal instance of collage, or rather collage in motion' provides an interesting alternative to this one. Elizabeth Deeds Ermath, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1992), p.8.

itself. In contradistinction to this form, Jameson sets up a second order of narrative:

Unlike the more degraded, and easily commodifiable, texts of the Imaginary level, these new, second-level narratives – we will call them... “Symbolic texts” – entertain a far more difficult and implacable conception of the fully realized fantasy: one which is not to be satisfied by the easy solutions of an “unrealistic” omnipotence or the immediacy of a gratification that then needs no narrative trajectory in the first place, but which on the contrary seeks to endow itself with the utmost representable density and to posit the most elaborate and systematic difficulties and obstacles... It then sometimes happens that the objectives are irrefutable, and that the wish-fulfilling imagination does its preparatory work so well that the wish, and desire itself, are confounded by the unanswerable resistance of the Real.¹²⁹

An imaginary narrative, then, is one which resolves contradictions by mystifying them, obscuring the forces beyond its control and, as it were, wishing them away. A symbolic narrative, however, foregrounds these contradictions, rehearsing objections which may either be answered or refuted by the real.

We may detect a local variation of this distinction in the work of the metafictional novel. Such texts as Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* or John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* operate at two different narrative levels: the diegetic and the exegetic. The former level is subject throughout to the symbolic scrutiny of its exegesis which, traversing the fantasy of the narrative, stages and represents the contradictions inherent to the diegesis. These texts therefore remain in some way unresolved, but in that irresolution sensitize us to

the persistence of the real, 'that bedrock against which the desiring subject knows the break up of hope and can finally measure everything that refuses its fulfilment'.¹³⁰ In other words, these novels resist the easy accommodations of the ego for a more uncomfortable, but ultimately more solid grounding in the differential relation between subject and object. Underpinning this relation is the retroactive temporality of the future perfect which yokes together the diegetic level of a narrative and its exegetic counterpoint in a synchronic structure that is, however, differentiated from its imaginary form by the provisionality of its temporal mode.

It is within this conceptual framework, then, that the following expositions take their bearings. Chapter One analyses the representation of imaginary experience in the postmodern, relating it specifically to the sublimity of both the process of urbanization and the operations of the commodity form. It designates the cyberspace of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* as a fantasy-gaze which occasions the disappearance of the subject and argues that it is this subject that is being sought for in the butchery of *American Psycho*. Chapter Two delineates the symbolization of imaginary experience in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. In particular, it proposes that the anamorphic temporality of the detective story affords an apposite rubric for Walter Benjamin's monadic historiography. Utilizing Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* as its point of departure, Chapter Three analyses the narrativization of the imaginary and

¹²⁹ *The Political Unconscious*, p.183.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.184.

symbolic temporalities of trauma. Finally, Chapter Four discusses the role of the vanishing mediator in John Banville's *Doctor Copernicus*. This point of opacity in the narrative of history, it is argued, finds its corollary in the pleonastic character of the subject. These readings, then, represent less the development of an argument than a constellation of analyses which attempt to illuminate the problematic outlined in this chapter from different, and hopefully instructive angles. In this regard, each exposition returns to its topic, as it were, for the first time.

Chapter One – Shangri-da:

The Postmodern Imaginary in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*.¹

1: Garden of Earthly Delight

Over the past two decades 'science fiction has with some success struggled against its ghettoization as lowbrow genre fiction'.² In doing so, it has become, as Annette Kuhn comments, 'a privileged cultural site for enactments of the postmodern condition'.³ Apart from the fact that postmodernity is, for Scott Bukatman, 'a moment that sees itself *as* science fiction', one of the principle reasons for this renewed interest in science fiction has been the genre's own invigoration in the form of cyberpunk.⁴ This slick, sassy and seedy subgenre finds its finest hours in the works of William Gibson, Rudy Rucker, Lewis

¹ A condensed version of this chapter was initially presented as a paper to the Departmental Seminar, Department of English Studies, University of Stirling, 29 April 1997. I am grateful for the comments made by all participants, particularly Vance Adair, David Punter, Nicholas Royle and Rory Watson.

² Claire Sponsler, 'Cyberpunk and the Dilemmas of Postmodern Narrative: The Example of William Gibson', *Contemporary Literature*, 33:4, (1992), 625-644, (p.625).

³ Annette Kuhn, ed., *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema* (London: Verso, 1990), p.178. Echoing these comments, Steven Connor notes that '[o]ne of the most remarkable developments in postmodernist writing and writing about postmodern writing during the 1980s has been the increased prominence and standing of science fiction, especially that brand of science fiction known as "cyberpunk"'. Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p.134.

⁴ Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodernist Science Fiction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p.6.

Shiner, John Shirley and Bruce Sterling. Surveying this loose body of work Brian McHale concludes that the latest generation of science fiction is ‘ a paradigm of contemporary writing at large’;⁵ indeed, it has impelled Fredric Jameson to remark, rather more pointedly, that cyberpunk is ‘henceforth, for many of us, the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself’.⁶ If this is so, then it owes this dubious position, in large part, to the groundbreaking novel *Neuromancer* by William Gibson.⁷ For although, as Bukatman argues, ‘[c]yberpunk at its best is not quite reducible to the work of William Gibson [...] he is certainly its most archetypal literary figure’.⁸

Neuromancer is set in the twenty-first century underworld of high-tech *zaibatsu* culture. Information is the privileged commodity of this culture and it is the vocation of the novel’s protagonist, Case, in his role as a cowboy, to steal it. He does this by jacking into the universal fund of data known as cyberspace, an advanced form of the Internet, and hacking through corporate electronic defences. The narrative concerns itself with one particular ‘run’ or mission in which Case is hired by an artificial intelligence to break into the information vaults of the Tessier-Ashpool *zaibatsu* in order that the artificial intelligence may free itself

⁵ Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.12.

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p.419.

⁷ This is the first in a series of three novels set in the same near future. In the editions used here, they are *Neuromancer* (London: Harper Collins, 1993, 1984), *Count Zero* (London: Harper Collins, 1993, 1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (London: Harper Collins, 1994, 1988). These novels are also augmented by a collection of short stories entitled *Burning Chrome* (London: Harper Collins, 1995, 1986). Gibson’s other novels *The Difference Engine* (with Bruce Sterling), *Virtual Light* and *Idoru* do not draw upon the paradigm first set out in *Neuromancer*.

⁸ *Terminal Identity*, p.146.

from its pre-programmed limits to join with another of its kind and form a super artificial intelligence.

Much of the novel, then, is centred around cyberspace, or the matrix as it is alternatively called, the representational innovation for which the work of Gibson has become famous. It is first defined for the reader via the medium of a children's educational programme:

“Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts.... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights receding....”⁹

It is precisely in its ability to represent ‘unthinkable complexity’, to gain a cognitive purchase upon the welter of data, that the concept of cyberspace persists as an innovative narrative strategy. For it is a response to what Jameson has articulated as ‘the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects’.¹⁰ The spatial metaphor Jameson invokes here, his troubled call for cognitive mapping, is richly suggestive; for, in trying to think the totality, the postmodern novelist encounters a more immediate problematic, which, as Jameson notes, operates as an analogue of the former, and

⁹ *Neuromancer*, p.67.

¹⁰ *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.44.

that is the metamorphosis of space itself. This latter 'has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world'.¹¹

In this respect, we may see cyberspace as an attempt at a postmodern cartography; that is, as a representational strategy for domesticating what Jameson terms 'postmodern hyperspace'.¹² Central to this enterprise is, as Gibson's reference to the 'city lights' above suggests, a recognition of the change in, and thus a recodification of, contemporary urban experience. As Paul Patton notes, '[i]mages of the city play a crucial role in accounts of the postmodern

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.44. It is probably fair to point out that of all Jameson's analyses of postmodernity his comments on space have been subject to the most trenchant critiques. On Jameson's conception of cognitive mapping, Doreen Massey, for example, remarks that 'while space is posed as unrepresentable, time is thereby, at least implicitly and at those moments, *counterposed* as the comforting security of a story it is possible to tell. This of course clearly reflects a notion of the difference between time and space in which time has a coherence and logic to its telling, while space does not.' Doreen Massey, 'Politics and Space/Time', *New Left Review*, 196, (1992), 65-84, (p.83). Echoing this point, Steve Pile suspects 'that the lack of dynamism in Jameson's model stems from his underlying sense of space as being a passive backdrop to social relationships'. Steve Pile *The Body and The City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.247. Similarly, Sean Homer finds that '[d]espite [Jameson's] ostensible intentions, space has once more become defined negatively in relation to time'. Sean Homer, *Fredric Jameson: Marxism, Hermeneutics, Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p.145. While it is undoubtedly true that Jameson proposes a certain level of difficulty in co-ordinating oneself in postmodern space, it by no means follows that this is an implicit valorization of time. Indeed, as he states explicitly, there is no easy way to separate the two categories and what he therefore means by the 'spatial turn' of postmodernism is the distinction 'between two forms of interrelationship between time and space rather than between those two inseparable categories themselves'. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.154. Jameson's critique of postmodern space is thus bound to a critique of a postmodern temporality which 'has forgotten how to think historically'. *Ibid.*, p.ix. In the light of this, we may understand Jameson's call for cognitive mapping as an attempt to produce a form of representation which is able to articulate the relationship between the individual and the general, the particular and the universal, as they are mediated by the socio-economic and cultural productions of both space and time. It is an attempt, in other words, to think the totality, and therefore its 'representational failure' does not stand for a wilful castigation of space; indeed, as Jameson points out, 'once you knew what "cognitive mapping" was driving at, you were to dismiss all figures of maps and mapping from your mind and try to imagine something else'. *Ibid.*, p.409.

condition. As a matter of course, these accounts include as one of their essential moments a description of the experience of contemporary urban life.’¹³ Indeed, the individual’s relationship with, and navigation of, metropolitan space has, as Raymond Williams argues, occupied a privileged position in the thematic hierarchy of literary materials since the Romantic era. On Williams’ reading the city always presents itself as a space of sublimity – from the literal strangeness of crowds in Wordsworth to the impenetrable fogs of Dickens and the dark and dizzying streets of Conrad – the metropolis is never completely knowable, and therefore the individual’s relationship to it is always monadic and alienated, even as it revels in a certain vital exoticism produced by this estrangement. Literary attempts to tame the concrete jungle vary, but one worth noting in this context is, as Williams observes, ‘the new figure of the urban detective’:

In Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* stories there is a recurrent image of the penetration by an isolated rational intelligence of a dark area of crime which is to be found in the otherwise (for specific physical reasons, as in the London fogs, but also for social reasons, in that teeming, mazelike, often alien area) impenetrable city. This figure has persisted in the urban ‘private eye’ (as it happens, an exact idiom for the basic position in consciousness) in cities without the fogs.¹⁴

¹² *Ibid.*, p.44.

¹³ Paul Patton, ‘Imaginary Cities: Images of Postmodernity’, in *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp.112-121 (p.112). Patton has in mind here Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity*. In terms of postmodern fiction, some of the more pertinent examples of writing urbanity are Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark: A Life in 4 Books*, Jonathan Raban’s *Soft City* and Iain Sinclair’s *Downriver*.

¹⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1996, 1989), p.42.

The very name of *Neuromancer's* protagonist –‘Case’ – signposts an inheritance from this tradition of urban rationalism which Bukatman, among others, has located as a specific relationship with ‘the alienated spatialities of Chandler’.¹⁵ Echoing Friedrich Engels’ comments about Manchester crowds, Jameson proposes that the work of Raymond Chandler is subtended by a sense of spatial disjunction:

...the form of Chandler’s books reflects an initial American separation of people from each other, their need to be linked by some external force (in this case the detective) if they are ever to be fitted together as parts of the same picture puzzle. And this separation is projected out onto space itself: no matter how crowded the street in question, the various solitudes never really merge into a collective experience, there is always distance between them. Each dingy office is separated from the next; each room in the rooming house from the one next to it; each dwelling from the pavement beyond it. This is why the most characteristic leitmotif of Chandler’s books is the figure standing, looking out of one world, peering vaguely or attentively across into another....¹⁶

We may note a certain equivocation in the social status of detectives, from Sherlock Holmes to Philip Marlowe, which stems from an involvement with marginalized activities and characters (opium and *femmes fatales*, for example)

¹⁵ *Terminal Identity*, p.142. Gibson himself, it is worth pointing out, refutes such connections: “But with Chandler – I have never read much of his work, and I never enjoyed what I did read because I always got this creepy puritanical feeling from his books”. Larry McCaffrey, ‘An Interview with William Gibson’, in *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction*, Larry McCaffrey (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), pp.263-285 (p.269).

¹⁶ Fredric Jameson, ‘On Raymond Chandler’, in *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory*, Glen W. Most and William W. Stone (San Diego, New York; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), pp.122-148 (p.131).

that is seemingly at odds with a more respectable pursuit of justice and the law.¹⁷ This can be seen as the expression of an affinity with, and therefore of an ability to negotiate, just those urban spaces that are occluded from the ‘normal’ social gaze. If we plot this affinity as a trajectory, then its logical end-point might well be found in a character like Case who, being a thief, is, in every sense of the word, streetwise.

In *Neuromancer*, as Claire Sponsler avers, ‘although the dominant culture always looms in the background – in the multinational corporations (the Maas-Biolabs and Hosakas) as well as in the form of a few powerful individuals (the Tessier-Ashpools and Josef Vireks of the world) – the surface attention is all on the counterculture, from orbiting Rastafarians to punk street gangs to mincome Project voodoo worshipers’.¹⁸ For Case the ‘outlaw zones’¹⁹ that provide the topography of *Neuromancer* are readily navigable, throwing up certain understandable patterns as long as you know what you are looking for, such as in this description of the apparently aleatory mobilities of the street mob:

Groups of sailors up from the port, tense solitary tourists
hunting pleasures no guidebook listed, Sprawl heavies showing off

¹⁷ Recent criticism has discerned in these proclivities the mechanism of identification, for the detective has in some way to repeat the crime in order to catch the criminal. Jameson, for example, argues that in the works of Georges Simenon ‘Maigret’s conclusions are based on the fact that he can or cannot visualise the character in question committing the crime which is to be solved. Maigret is thus called on to imagine, or indeed to reinvent the character before him as a potentiality for a certain number of acts...’ Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p.204. This process will be explored in more detail in the following chapter.

¹⁸ ‘Cyberpunk and the Dilemmas of Postmodern Narrative: The Example of William Gibson’, p.629.

¹⁹ *Neuromancer*, p.19.

grafts and implants, and a dozen distinct species of hustler, all swarming the street in an intricate dance of desire and commerce.²⁰

The taxonomic specificity of the expert gaze here obviates the unknown terror of the urban crowd and replaces it with cognizance of an otherwise invisible concatenation of distinct purposes that unite in the collective experience of ‘desire and commerce’. We may note then that, as with Jameson’s Chandler, the metropolitan populace’s ‘need to be linked by some external force’ is fulfilled by what, following Williams, we may term the ‘private eye’ of Case. At one level, this example of Case’s all-knowing gaze operates as a rehearsal of the larger problematic of point of view in the novel and in the postmodern generally; for, as Bukatman observes of the latter, there has ‘arisen a new and boundless urbanism, one which escapes the power of vision through its very dispersal’.²¹

We may take this ‘boundless urbanism’ to register both a geographical and a metaphorical metropolitan incontinence. The former finds its instantiation in the topography of *Neuromancer*, where Case’s home town, ‘the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis’, is suitably indexed, for a city overflowing the measure, by the sobriquet ‘the Sprawl’.²² The sheer material expansiveness of the metropolis, which in *Neuromancer* extends even into the extra-terrestrial orbit of Freeside, ‘brothel and banking nexus, pleasure dome and free port, border town

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.18-19.

²¹ *Terminal Identity*, pp.122-123.

²² *Neuromancer*, p.57.

and spa', is matched in another sense by the ubiquity of urban experience.²³ It is this that Jameson has in mind when he remarks upon the complementary 'disappearance of Nature':

Where the world system today tends toward one enormous urban system - ... - the very conception of the city itself and the classically urban loses its significance and no longer seems to offer any precisely delimited objects of study, any specifically differentiated realities. Rather, the urban becomes the social in general, and both of them constitute and lose themselves in a global that is not really their opposite either (as it was in the older dispensation) but something like their outer reach, their prolongation into a new kind of infinity.²⁴

We may perhaps discern in this global imperative of the urban the broad outline of an imaginary dynamic. For the city, like the ego, pursues its other in 'Nature', or the countryside, only insofar as it then subsumes that difference within the identity of itself. This, then, is what Lacan means in referring to the imaginary 'vertigo of the domination of space'.²⁵ As Teresa Brennan points out:

The ego ...is opposed to the history of anything different from itself. It is interested in difference only in so far as everything different from it provides it with a mirror for itself. In this respect, it will reduce all difference to sameness; if everything different is deadened and dominated in the process of becoming totally preoccupied with the ego, it loses the lively heterogeneous difference rightly celebrated in the postmodern *Zeitgeist*.²⁶

²³ *Ibid.*, p.125.

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp.28-29.

²⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. By Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1997, 1977), p.28.

²⁶ Teresa Brennan, *History After Lacan* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.37.

If 'difference' is continually being chewed up and swallowed in the territorializing maw of the ego then this, as Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen reflects, makes of its world a space 'strangely petrified and static, a sort of immense museum peopled with immobile "statues", and "images" of stone, and hieratic "forms"'.²⁷

We can find something of this unregeneracy in the character of the postmodern city, for, as Sharon Zukin contends, '[d]espite local variations, ... the major influence on urban form derives from the internationalization of investment, production and consumption. In socio-spatial terms ... internationalization is associated with the concentration of investment, the decentralization of production, and the standardization of consumption.'²⁸ Zukin cites McDonald's and Benetton as examples of this standardization and notes that '[t]heir shops are ubiquitous in cities around the world', and therefore help to make those cities over in the image of each other.²⁹ Such a process, however, occasions a problematic definition of otherness. For if urbanicity has achieved such a ubiquity that even the most bucolic of backwoodsmen can simultaneously assume the position of streetwise urbanite, how can urban experience be characterized with any sense of singularity? For Jameson the answer to this can be found in the global sweep of representation. Instead of drawing upon national

²⁷ Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, trans. by Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p.59.

²⁸ Sharon Zukin, 'The Postmodern Debate Over Urban Form', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 5:2-3, (1988), 431-446, (p.436).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.436.

images of provincial and rural boredom to counterpoint and thus characterize the excitement of the city, he argues that this contrast is preserved, 'but simply transferred to a different kind of social reality, namely the Second World city and the social realities of a nonmarket or planned economy'.³⁰ As adductions for his argument Jameson calls upon the now classic images of 'meager shelves of consumer goods in empty centrals from which the points of light of advertising are absent, streets from which small stores and shops are missing, [and the] standardization of clothing fashion (as most emblematically in Maoist China)'.³¹ This, of course, is a local truth of the wider proposition advanced by Robert Young that '[p]ostmodernism can best be defined as European culture's awareness that it is no longer the unquestioned and dominant centre of the world'.³²

In *Neuromancer* Turkey occupies the position of other in capitalism's cultural imaginary; it is, the narrative assures us, 'a sluggish country'.³³ Such sluggishness is due, in no small part, to the antiquated technologies still operating in Turkey: a Citroen sedan is only 'a primitive hydrogen-cell conversion', "the left hand of John the Baptist" is merely kept "inside this brass hand thing" rather than "in a support vat", and even 'the written word still enjoy[s] a certain

³⁰ *The Seeds of Time*, pp.29-30.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.30.

³² Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.19. In this context we may plausibly read 'capitalist' for 'European'. If such a notion seems to betray Jameson's assertion of the ubiquity of capital (for which Young takes him to task, *Ibid.*, p.115), it is only because we fail to designate this ubiquity as experiential, rather than as empirical. In other words, this is the experience of an imaginary relationship.

³³ *Neuromancer*, p.108.

prestige here'.³⁴ More tellingly, however, it is the superannuated architecture, with its 'crazy walls of patchwork wooden tenements' and 'soot-stained sheets of plastic and green-painted ironwork out of the age of steam', that provides the most pressing sense of otherness.³⁵ It is, the narrator comments, 'an old place, too old'.³⁶ Indeed, without the seclusion of a 'dome', the Finn feels "agoraphobic", and it is only upon entering the bazaar that he is 'comforted by the crowd density and the sense of enclosure'.³⁷ The irony of this is it constitutes a kind of return to origins, for as Jameson points out, postmodern buildings 'which are open emporia in which one finds food markets, theaters, bookstores, and all kind of other specialized services, run together in a fashion that surely derives ultimately and historically from the great open-air markets or bazaars of the East and of precapitalist modes of production'.³⁸

What is striking about this observation and its relation to the representation of Turkish space in *Neuromancer* is how it articulates the dynamic of capitalism's cultural imaginary. If the Finn feels 'comfortable' in a bazaar, it is because his indigenous topography has already subsumed that archaic spatial form within itself. The otherness of Turkey here is thus merely a property of its separation from the other spatial and technological forms which constitute the postmodern in its unity.³⁹ Indeed, for Jameson, the form of cyberpunk develops

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.108, p.116 and p.108 respectively.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.107 and p.112 respectively.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.113.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.108 and p.112 respectively.

³⁸ *The Seeds of Time*, pp.156-157.

³⁹ *Neuromancer*, however, does hint that Turkey will soon succumb to the capitalist imaginary and the homogenization of space. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the hotel the

from 'the evaporation of a certain Otherness'.⁴⁰ Such a process of 'evaporation' perhaps finds its most salient expression in an economy of enclosure or fortressing.⁴¹ An example of this is, of course, the bazaar, which stands as such an emblematic postmodern form because of 'the sense of enclosure' it affords. This sense of envelopment proceeds from what Jameson terms 'a logic specific to Imaginary space, whose dominant category proves to be the opposition of container and contained' and 'the fundamental relationship of inside to outside'.⁴² Without explicitly making the connection himself, Jameson has, in later publications, linked these relationships to both postmodern architecture and science fiction in general. Of the former he notes that it is subject to what he designates 'the *Blade Runner* syndrome' in which 'the interfusion of crowds of people among a high technological bazaar with its multitudinous nodal points, all of it sealed into an inside without an outside, ...thereby intensifies the formerly urban to the point of becoming the unmappable system of late capitalism itself'.⁴³ Of the latter, Jameson proposes that 'all SF of the more "classical" type is "about" containment, closure, the dialectic of inside and outside'.⁴⁴ Above and

protagonists stay in while there: '[t]heir room might have been the one in Chiba where he'd first seen Armitage. He went to the window, in the morning, almost expecting to see Tokyo Bay'.

Neuromancer, p.108.

⁴⁰ *The Seeds of Time*, p.151.

⁴¹ Lacan notes that 'the formation of the *I* is symbolized in dreams by a fortress, or a stadium – its inner area and enclosure, surrounded by marshes and rubbish tips, dividing it into two opposed fields of contest'. *Écrits: A Selection*, p.5.

⁴² Fredric Jameson, 'Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan', in *The Ideologies of Theory Essays – 1971-1986: Volume 1 – Situations of Theory*, Fredric Jameson (London: Routledge, 1988), pp.75-115 (p.86).

⁴³ *The Seeds of Time*, p.157. It is also worth pointing out here that Jameson argues '[w]e must think of the space of dirty realism [i.e., cyberpunk] as a collective built space, in which the opposition between inside and outside is annulled'. *Ibid.*, p.155.

⁴⁴ Fredric Jameson, 'Science Fiction as a Spatial Genre: Generic Discontinuities and the Problem of Figuration in Vonda McIntyre's *The Exile Waiting*', *Science-Fiction Studies*, 14, (1987), 44-59, (p.58).

beyond the spaces we have already been looking at, then, it is perhaps not fortuitous that the *mise en scène* of much of *Neuromancer* is cyberspace or, more pertinently, the matrix, a word which finds its etymology in ‘womb’ – the paradigmatic *topos* of container and contained.⁴⁵ In this respect, of course, the name of Case himself is a not insignificant reference to such a spatial formation.

There is, then, a contradiction at work in the postmodern metropolis. It is, in its boundlessness, what Jameson terms a ‘total space’⁴⁶; it is also, in its replication at the micro-level, a totalising space, one whose very boundedness aspires to ‘some new category of closure’.⁴⁷ This ‘imploded urbanism’⁴⁸, as Bukatman describes it, may be more readily understood by reference to Jameson’s celebrated analysis of the Bonaventure Hotel. Jameson detects a certain modality of hermeticism at work in the overtly discreet construction of the entrances to the Bonaventure, which serve to seal its occupants into the total space of the hotel:

...ideally the minicity of Portman’s Bonaventure ought not to have entrances at all, since the entryway is always the seam that links the building to the rest of the city that surrounds it: for it does not wish to be part of the city, but rather its equivalent and its replacement or substitute. That is obviously not possible, whence the downplaying of the entrance to its bare minimum.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Jameson notes that imaginary space ‘clearly enough originates in the infant’s fantasies about the maternal body as the receptacle of part-objects (confusion between childbirth and evacuation, and so forth)’. ‘Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan’, p.86.

⁴⁶ *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.40.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.39.

⁴⁸ *Terminal Identity*, p.126.

⁴⁹ *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, pp.40-41.

We can find a similar thematic at work in the architecture of *Neuromancer*, for example in Cheap Hotel, where ‘the courtyard that served the place as some combination of lobby and lawn’⁵⁰ is located on some unspecified level above the fifth floor; or in Straylight where ‘the entrance to the elevator had been concealed beside the stairs to the corridor’.⁵¹

In a second moment the difficulty of locating an entrance to postmodern buildings is joined by an active repulsion in the form of the building’s very materiality, which in the case of the Bonaventure is its ‘great glass reflective skin’:

...the glass skin repels the city outside, a repulsion for which we have analogies in those reflector sunglasses which make it impossible for your interlocutor to see your own eyes and thereby achieve a certain aggressivity toward and power over the Other. In a similar way, the glass skin achieves a peculiar and placeless dissociation of the Bonaventure from its neighbourhood: it is not even an exterior, inasmuch as when you seek to look at the hotel’s outer walls you cannot see the hotel itself but only the distorted images of everything that surrounds it.⁵²

As Bukatman argues, ‘[t]he new monument is no longer the substantiality of the building, but the depthless surface of the screen. This is a transformation literalized in *Blade Runner* by the proliferation of walls which *are* screens, sites

⁵⁰ *Neuromancer*, p.30.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.299.

⁵² *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.42.

of projection now rather than inhabitation.’⁵³ The city, in other words, maintains an extimate relation with itself; it is, to recall Borch-Jacobsen’s memorable phrase ‘ex-posing itself, exactly as the eye can see itself only by exorbiting itself in a mirror’.⁵⁴

The move from the opacity of walls, with all their connotations of density, solidity and substantiality, to the reflectiveness of screens is realized as something of a *leitmotif* in *Neuromancer*. Indeed, according to Gibson, mirror/silver is clearly the colour of the future. For example, ‘[t]he Jarre [is] walled with mirrors’, the Sense/Net building is ‘mirror-sheathed, the Chinese virus programme has ‘black mirrors’ on its flanks ‘reflecting faint distant lights that [bear] no relationship to the matrix around it’, boots are ‘sheathed in bright Mexican silver’, ‘the beach [is] silver-gray’ and even the aftershave has a ‘metallic edge’.⁵⁵ It is little wonder, then, that with so many reflective surfaces, one of the paradigmatic *topoi* of *Neuromancer* is the *mise-en-abyme*. For example, when Molly, who has ‘twin mirrors’ of ‘empty quicksilver’ (‘surgically inset, sealing her sockets’), meets Terzibashjain, similarly attired with ‘silver glasses’, the reflections cause them to make, as he points out, “‘the *tunel* infinity,

⁵³ *Terminal Identity*, p.32. Peter Marcuse argues that such walls reflect ‘an increasing social division, along increasingly sharp but double-edged and hence ambiguous lines, often buried in apparently chaotic or “natural” spaces, divisions hierarchical in nature and of growing severity in impact’. Peter Marcuse, ‘Not Chaos, but Walls: Postmodernism and the Partitioned City’, in *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp.243-253 (p.244).

⁵⁴ *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, p.52.

⁵⁵ *Neuromancer*, p.14, p.80, p.216, p.4, p.281 and p.111 respectively.

mirror into mirror””.⁵⁶ This is equally a problem at the level of built space, for example, in Freeside:

The glass wall of the balcony clicked in with its view of Desiderata, but the street scene blurred, twisted, became the interior of the Jarre de Thé, Chiba, empty, red neon replicated to scratched infinity in the mirrored walls.⁵⁷

Traditional architectural notions of exteriority and interiority are thus suspended in this new reflective space. People and buildings are absented from their actual place by projection, only to return in the phenomenologically vertiginous non-space of the *mise-en-abyme* in which location is never fixed. It is a problem compounded by the autotelic spatiality of postmodern interiors, that total space which, like the Villa Straylight, ‘is a body grown in upon itself’⁵⁸ and which replicates its traditional exterior within itself in the connotative form of street lights and road signs and, most obviously, plants which for Case on Freeside are ‘too cute, too entirely and definitively treelike’.⁵⁹ Indeed, in this respect, Bukatman argues that ‘the city is now composed of a “synthetic space-time” that *simulates* the lost geophysical urban spaces of human habitation and circulation’.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.42, p.41, p.36 and p.109 respectively.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.172.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.206.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.154.

⁶⁰ *Terminal Identity*, p.126.

Whilst, on one level, there is something uncanny about this environment, something too unfamiliarly familiar, where even the random forms of nature itself betray a degree of calibration in the ‘too cleverly irregular slopes of sweet green grass’, we may also take this as an instance, at another level, of the larger problematic of co-ordination that is so pointedly emblemized in the *mise-en-abyme*.⁶¹ For Bukatman, ‘[t]he new urban space is directionless – co-ordinates are literally *valueless* when all directions lead to more of the same’.⁶² Such a sublime topography is precisely what is adumbrated in *Neuromancer*. On Freeside, for example, ‘[i]f you turned right, off Desiderata, and followed Jules Verne far enough, you’d find yourself approaching Desiderata from the left’.⁶³ Molly sums up the problem with admirable terseness when she points out to Case that “[t]he perspective’s a bitch”:

They were standing in a broad street that seemed to be the floor of a deep slot or canyon, its either end concealed by subtle angles in the shops and buildings that formed its walls. The light, here, was filtered through fresh green masses of vegetation tumbling from overhanging tiers and balconies that rose above them. The sun...

There was a brilliant slash of white somewhere above them, too bright, and the recorded blue of a Cannes sky. He knew that sunlight was pumped in with a Lado-Acheson system whose two-millimeter armature ran the length of the spindle, that they generated a rotating library of sky effects around it, that if the sky were turned off, he’d stare up past the armature of light to the curves of lakes, rooftops of casinos, other streets – But it made no sense to his body.⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Neuromancer*, p.154.

⁶² *Terminal Identity*, p.126.

⁶³ *Neuromancer*, p.180.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.148.

If this metropolitan simulacrum, in which even the sky can be ‘turned off’, makes no sense to Case’s body it is because, as Jameson declares, ‘[w]e do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace [...] in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism’.⁶⁵ Absented from itself, this imaginary space finds its most succinct and troubling definition in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* when one of the characters recalls the fundamental lesson of the new geography: ‘*There’s no there, there*’.⁶⁶

What strikes the reader about this concatenation of spatial motifs is how the logic of the topographical content in *Neuromancer* finds its expression in the form of the novel itself. We may note, for example, how the postmodern building’s impediments to entry and its rebarbative exterior are realized formally by the novel’s entrance, as it were, *in medias res*. Furthermore, the reader’s difficulty in co-ordinating her/himself in the reading space of *Neuromancer* is exacerbated by the genuinely forbidding nomenclature and technical innovations it portrays. The novel is, in effect, a total space which repels the cyberspace

⁶⁵ *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, pp.38-39. ‘It is,’ for Patton, ‘tempting to ridicule this analysis.’ Indeed, Patton duly gives in to such a temptation, arguing that, as Jameson ‘is someone who gets lost in large supermarkets’, we can only understand his analysis of the Bonaventure in terms of ‘a somewhat overblown response to a novel architectural design’. (‘Imaginary Cities’, p.114). If there is a certain inflationary rhetoric to Jameson’s comments, we may perhaps detect in this the critical work of estrangement. We may also adduce Edward W. Soja’s observations on the same building – he accompanied Jameson and Henri Lefebvre on a field trip to the Bonaventure – when he proposes that ‘its pastiche of superficial reflections bewilder co-ordination and encourage submission instead.... Once inside ...it becomes daunting to get out again without bureaucratic assistance.’ Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), p.243-244.

⁶⁶ *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, p.55.

ingénue. As Bukatman observes, its difficulty rehearses a certain elitism, for '[n]ot everyone can read *Neuromancer*; its neologisms alienate the uninitiated reader'.⁶⁷ Such assertions, of course, beg the question of how one joins the privileged ranks of the initiates. In this respect we may profitably attend to the construction of metaphors in the text, which replicate at the level of the sentence the tope we have already identified as the *mise-en-abyme*. Nowhere is this metaphorical incest more clearly expressed than in cyberspace itself, operating as both vehicle and tenor of a series of tropological substitutions that ultimately dissolve the very saliency of such distinctions. For example, early on in the novel, the narrative recounts Case's experience of being followed in the street:

...in some weird and very approximate way, it was like a run in the matrix. Get just wasted enough, find yourself in some desperate but strangely arbitrary kind of trouble, and it was possible to see Ninsei as field of data, the way the matrix had once reminded him of proteins linking to cell specialities. Then you could throw yourself into a high speed drift and skid, totally engaged but set apart from it all, all around you the dance of biz, information interacting, data made flesh in the mazes of the black market....⁶⁸

The macro- and microscopic are conflated here in a process of equivalence which finds being chased through the city comparable to programming a computer, the content of which is subsequently compared to the metropolis itself and that, in turn, to bio-chemical systems in the body, which is then an image of bodies themselves, and, finally, an analogy of cyberspace data. Similarly, in the penultimate run of the novel, Case's sensory experience is described as 'receding,

⁶⁷ *Terminal Identity*, p.152.

as the cityscape recedes: city as Chiba, as the ranked data of Tessier-Ashpool SA, as the roads and crossroads scribed on the face of a microchip, the sweat-stained pattern on a folded, knotted scarf'.⁶⁹ What is disclosed by this collocation of images is how, throughout *Neuromancer*, the metropolis is troped by cyberspace, and vice versa, in a series of substitutions which finds each element operating as the deep structure and regulatory frame of the other.

In other words, we can understand cyberspace by reference to the city and we can understand the city by reference to cyberspace. This is a point also noted by Bukatman:

The notion of a dark and crowded space broken by neon forms and corporate structures is surely not unfamiliar. Perhaps we can begin to learn about Gibson's cyberspace by learning from Las Vegas or Times Square or Tokyo for, on one level, cyberspace only represents an extension of the urban sector located at the intersection of postmodernism and science fiction.⁷⁰

From the very first sentence of the novel, '[t]he sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel'⁷¹, Gibson deploys a mode of representation in which technology and space are strictly indivisible. For Bukatman this 'establishes the impossibility of a "real" space existing apart from its electric analogue'.⁷² This indivisibility has several implications, but, for our immediate

⁶⁸ *Neuromancer*, p.26.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.310.

⁷⁰ *Terminal Identity*, p.121.

⁷¹ *Neuromancer*, p.9.

⁷² *Terminal Identity*, p.148. For our purposes, such a notion finds particularly apt expression in *Count Zero*, where one of the characters notes that '[t]he sinister thing about a simstim construct,

purposes, we may note that, as readers, we are being asked to refer one description in the novel to another in a circular trail of signifiers that only obliquely signposts an extra-textual referent. In turn, this may be ascribed to the formal constraints of science fiction itself; by definition, science fiction presupposes a level of innovation or novelty in content that finds its sanction as novelty precisely in a calculated non-referentiality. Which is to say that if an intra-diegetic detail can be thoroughly transcribed extra-diegetically it invalidates the novelty which is its generic signature. This formal necessity for intra-diegetic cross-referencing, at least to a degree, begets a narcissistic thematic that we have noted in the predominance of the *mise-en-abyme* but which, more properly, is a condition of possibility of spatiality as such.

Indeed, Jameson has proposed that ‘the distinctiveness of SF as a genre has less to do with time (history, past, future) than with space’.⁷³ We may perhaps qualify this by understanding the dominance of space in science fiction as an expression of a form of time, that is as a spatialization of temporality.⁷⁴ In

really, was that it carried the suggestion that *any* environment might be unreal, that the windows of the shopfronts she passed now with Andrea might be fragments. Mirrors, someone had once said, were in some way essentially unwholesome; constructs were more so, she decided.’ *Count Zero*, p.197.

⁷³ Fredric Jameson, ‘Science Fiction as a Spatial Genre: Generic Discontinuities and the Problem of Figuration in Vonda McIntyre’s *The Exile Waiting*’, p.58.

⁷⁴ We may find a warrant for this in the fact that Jameson executes a similar manoeuvre in regard to postmodern temporality when he argues that ‘[w]hat one means by evoking its spatialization is rather the will to use and to subject time to the service of space, if that is now the right words for it’. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.154. Jameson’s caution here is part of a more widely expressed concern not to disable the concept of space with *a priori* characteristics, for, as Kristin Ross attests, ‘[o]ur tendency is to think of space as an abstract, metaphysical content, as the container for our lives rather than the structures we help create. The difficulty is also one of vocabulary, for while words like “historical” and “political” convey a dynamic of intentionality, vitality and human motivation, “spatial”, on the other hand, connotes a

cyberspace, Wintermute avouches for this process when he remarks to Case that “‘An hour here’ll only take you a couple of seconds’”.⁷⁵ Time is petrified, as it were, in the imaginary museum as a kind of stasis. For Malcolm Bowie, it is a concept disclosed in the very name of the mirror stage itself, because ‘the double meaning of *stade* turns time into space’.⁷⁶ Perhaps the most salient manifestation of such inertia can be found in the form of the computer. For Jameson, ‘this new machine’ does not, unlike ‘the older machinery of the locomotive or the airplane, represent motion’, rather it ‘can only be represented *in motion*’.⁷⁷ This is exactly how *Neuromancer* portrays the new technology, often by recourse to the kinetic idiom of an older machinery, such as, for example, when Case has ‘the strange impression of being in the pilot’s seat in a small plane’.⁷⁸ Speed, under such conditions, is merely experienced as ‘the sensation of speed’, thereby giving rise to the paradoxically ‘worrying impression of solid fluidity’ that troubles Case on one of his runs.⁷⁹ He can, as it were, travel anywhere without ever actually moving. Equally, Bukatman has observed of the postmodern metropolis that ‘time is displaced within a field of inaction and, ultimately, inertia as the city, the universe, circles back upon itself in a closed feedback loop’.⁸⁰ This temporal inertia, in its guise as an obsession with space, is the condition of possibility for science fiction and therefore we may say that, at one level, Gibson’s *Neuromancer* is narrativizing just this condition of possibility. The irony of this

stasis, neutrality, and passivity.’ Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris communes* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p.8.

⁷⁵ *Neuromancer*, p.202.

⁷⁶ Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London: Fontana, 1991), p.35.

⁷⁷ *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.45.

⁷⁸ *Neuromancer*, p.302.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.302.

is precisely that it reproduces another ‘closed feedback loop’. Somewhat less ironically, we may allow that this constitutes science fiction’s moment of self-consciousness, or, rather, an awareness built in the form of *Neuromancer* that is startlingly self-reflexive. It is clear, therefore, why the chronotope of science fiction has assumed the generic supremacy it has within the similarly narcissistic and topophilic culture of postmodernity, which is itself forever in search of a referent.

2: Finding Your Feet

Given what we have seen so far of the imaginary topography adumbrated in *Neuromancer*, it is little wonder that the story the novel is concerned to articulate is itself one of co-ordination. Like the mirror stage child, Case starts the narrative with a certain level of motor incapacity, ‘his nervous system [damaged] with a wartime Russian mycotoxin’ that leaves him in ‘the prison of his own flesh’.⁸¹ His inability to jack into the matrix at this stage in the drama is thus analogous to what Lacan terms the ‘primordial Discord betrayed by the signs of uneasiness and motor unco-ordination of the neo-natal months’.⁸² Indeed, the ‘mirror’ in which Case comes to assume his specular image is the matrix, where the body is not so much mastered as a whole but rather dispensed with completely:

⁸⁰ *Terminal Identity*, p.128.

⁸¹ *Neuromancer*, p.12.

For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, [the damage done to his nervous system] was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hot shot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat.⁸³

If the 'bodiless exultation' described here bears comparison with the imaginary infant's 'triumphant jubilation'⁸⁴ at his/her spatial captation, it also indexes the division proper to the latter in which body and self are happily sundered in order that the 'self' may be at all. The serial deprecation of the physical body in *Neuromancer*, which is always figured as 'eat' - ('Travel was a meat thing' 'Meat, some part of him said. *It's the meat talking, ignore it.*')⁸⁵ - attests to its status as an embarrassing surplus that always threatens to topple the project of unification back into an undignified heap. Intimations of corporeality are thus ugly reminders of the awkward truth of the body, a truth that must be forgotten if the fictions of the *imago* are not to melt in the air. As Lacan argues, it is 'méconnaissance that characterizes the ego in all its structures', it must

⁸² *Écrits*, p.4.

⁸³ *Neuromancer*, p.12. As well as being part of a larger religious framework in the novel, the Biblical reference here finds a resonance in what Bowie argues is Lacan's attempt with the mirror stage 'to find an early moment in the human life cycle when the individual's humanity is already fully at stake, and to find a new beginning for the moral drama of psychoanalysis. Lacan's account of the "specular" moment provides the ego with its creation myth and its Fall.' *Lacan*, p.21. We may find a more implicit Biblical resonance in those hosts in the machine, *Neuromancer* and *Wintermute*. The latter's name, for example, can be understood to designate a state 'after the Fall' ('winter') and, equally, one 'without the Word' ('mute'). These entities are imprisoned in a state of imperfection, as it were, and it is Case's task to fashion them into a *Gestalt*. They therefore parallel his own trajectory from fragment to whole, from state of sin to one of redemption, and become, in suitably imaginary terms, "the sum total of the works, the whole show". *Neuromancer*, p.316.

⁸⁴ *Écrits*, p.18.

⁸⁵ *Neuromancer*, p.97 and p.181 respectively.

misrecognize itself in what it is not in order to be what it is.⁸⁶ The self, in other words, can only exist outside of itself, keeping at arm's length the cackhanded reality which would otherwise rudely intrude upon what Lacan suggestively terms 'the virtual complex' of the co-ordinated *Gestalt*.⁸⁷ Such virtuality is, of course, also afforded by cyberspace:

He'd operated on an almost permanent adrenaline high, a by-product of youth and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix.⁸⁸

There is a clear link articulated here between 'proficiency' and the 'projection' of Case's 'disembodied consciousness'; as Borch-Jacobsen comments, '[i]f there is a "stage" here, it is one that is both unstable and instantaneous, that of an ekstasis that pro-jects the ego before itself'.⁸⁹

Mastery of the self is, then, only realized at the price of both a specular schism and a schismatic speculation and it is therefore not surprising that the illusory self is constantly haunted by cracks in the mirror. As Bowie points out, the infant's 'projections towards the ego are constantly threatened by a retrospective pull towards fragmentation'.⁹⁰ Such fragmentation manifests itself

⁸⁶ *Écrits*, p.6.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁸⁸ *Neuromancer*, p.12.

⁸⁹ *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, p.48.

⁹⁰ *Lacan*, p.26.

in fantasies about the *corps morcelé* which, for Lacan, attains an emblematic form in the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch:

This fragmented body ...usually manifests itself in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual. It then appears in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs represented in exoscopy, growing wings and taking up arms for intestinal persecutions – the very same that the visionary Hieronymous Bosch has fixed, for all time, in painting, in their ascent from the fifteenth century to the imaginary zenith of modern man.⁹¹

If the ‘imaginary zenith of modern man’ is, by necessity, always-already in the future, then Gibson’s anticipation of it in *Neuromancer* is surely one of its most profound exempla in its depiction of what we might term a world of ‘techno-Bosch’, a world where the most exquisite violence is constantly being executed upon the most ethereal flesh. One of the clearest instances of this is the “‘horror-show’” that figures as Riviera’s inaugural appearance in the novel⁹²:

The back of the fallen man’s jacket heaved and burst, blood splashing the wall and doorway. A pair of impossibly long, rope-tendoned arms flexed grayish-pink in the glare. The thing seemed to pull itself up out of the pavement, through the inert, bloody ruin that had been Riviera. It was two meters tall, stood on two legs, and seemed to be headless. Then it swung slowly to face them, and Case saw that it had a head, but no neck. It was eyeless, the skin gleaming a wet intestinal pink. The mouth, if it was a mouth, was circular,

⁹¹ *Écrits*, pp.4-5. Given our earlier discussion of postmodern architecture, it is interesting to note that, in turning ‘to the works of Hieronymous Bosch for an atlas of all the aggressive images that torment mankind’, Lacan finds particularly striking ‘the narcissistic structure of those glass spheres in which the exhausted partners of the garden of delights are held captive’. *Ibid.*, pp.11-12.

⁹² *Neuromancer*, p.115.

conical, shallow, and lined with a seething growth of hairs or bristles, glittering like black chrome.⁹³

Riviera's projections are only the most (literally) spectacular examples of techno-Bosch in *Neuromancer*, for in this, and the rest of the cyberspace trilogy, 'an armoured mechanical creature is being produced', as Bowie phrases it, '[f]rom spare parts'.⁹⁴ Such 'spare parts' take the form of a variety of artificial supplements, from aluminium talons through replica simstim corneas to mirrored glass implants. These prostheses are, of course, only the most conspicuous examples of the fluidity of relations that obtain between subject and object within the novel's imaginary rubric. At the level of form such fluidity is realized by a strategy of oxymoronic substitution; what is organic is described mechanically and what is mechanical is described organically:

His teeth sang in their individual sockets like tuning forks, each one pitch-perfect and clear as ethanol. His bones, beneath the hazy envelope of flesh, were chromed and polished, the joints lubricated with a film of silicone.⁹⁵

The junk looked like something that had grown there, a fungus of twisted metal and plastic. He could pick out individual objects, but then they seemed to blur back into the mass: the guts of a television so old it was studded with the glass stump of vacuum tubes....⁹⁶

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.114.

⁹⁴ *Lacan*, p.26.

⁹⁵ *Neuromancer*, p.184.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.63.

At one level this synthesis of the mechanical and the organic announces a starker re-articulation of its elements, as the corruption of each constituent (by the other) offers the contrast against which the purity of the element may more readily be perceived. The vacuity of the inscription of sensory experience within language is thus offset by a kind of plenitude which is the soiling of its abstractive purity with its opposite register. Whilst this is somewhat of a Utopian gesture, it is also, in its attempts to forestall the abstractive properties of language, a further envelopment within the 'here-and-now'. Such envelopment is characteristic of the imaginary mode which, without language, is unable to differentiate between the function and the person who embodies it, and therefore suffers from what Jameson terms 'the "bad immediacy" of the pre-Symbolic'.⁹⁷ There is, as we have already noted, something of this in the first-time reader of Gibson who is confronted by a plethora of proper names (Ninsei, Cloud Dancers, Mitsubishi-Genetech, Sanpaku, Jarre) and nouns that act like proper names whose designation is not always clear and which therefore fail to specify their objects clearly. As such, these stand as isolated signifiers, impeding diachrony and meaning, like many of what initially appear to be the redundant details of the narrative. This bewilderment on the part of the reader is analogous to the inability to conceptualize that hampers the imaginary mode, with the *Gestalt*, as it were, not yet visible in the sum of its parts.

The paradigmatic form of the prosthesis, in *Neuromancer* as elsewhere, is the mirror itself, which, as we have seen, serves as a means of completing the

⁹⁷ 'Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan', p.90.

incipient ego ‘in the same way,’ for Borch-Jacobsen, ‘that the deformed foot ends up adopting the form of the so-called orthopedic shoe.’⁹⁸ Such an ‘orthopedic’ relationship can be witnessed throughout the novel in Case’s progress in assuming a ‘proficiency’ of movement, his attempt to master the ‘meat’, which is anticipated metonymically by the dexterity of the Flatline. The Flatline is the ROM personality construct of McCoy Pauley, who, we are informed, is one of the ‘legends in the biz’.⁹⁹ In his adroit negotiation of cyberspace and his status as a literally disembodied consciousness, the Flatline functions as a form of ideal-ego for Case, an ‘orthopedic shoe’ in which the latter’s foot, as it were, will take proper shape:

The matrix blurred and phased as the Flatline executed an intricate series of jumps with a speed and accuracy that made Case wince with envy.

“Shit Dixie...”

“Hey, Boy, I was that good when I was alive. You ain’t seen nothin’. No hands!”¹⁰⁰

The ““No hands!”” joke here is a pointed reminder of the *corps morcelé* which still incapacitates Case at this stage in the novel, whilst the reference to his ‘envy’ attests to the fact that if he is to overcome his fragmented body he must submit to what Lacan designates ‘the dialectic of jealousy’:

⁹⁸ *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, p.65. Borch-Jacobsen takes his cue for this analogy from Lacan’s comment that ‘[t]he *mirror stage* is a drama ...which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopedic.’ *Écrits*, p.4.

⁹⁹ *Neuromancer*, p.11.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.199.

All human knowledge stems from [this] dialectic of jealousy.... It's a matter of an observable generic notion, behaviouristically observable. What takes place between two young children involves this fundamental transitivity expressed by the fact that one child who has beaten another can say – *The other beat me*. It's not that he is lying – he *is* the other literally – there you have the true sense of the expression *fragmented body* – and the initial synthesis of the *ego* is essentially an *alter ego*, it is alienated.¹⁰¹

Such looking-glass confusions between the self and the other provide a template for the technologies of transitivity which predominate in *Neuromancer*. The Flatline ROM construct is but one example, and others include the '[m]imetic polycarbon' suits of the Panther Moderns, the Chinese virus whose "logics kinda sleaze [...] up to the target and mutate [...], so it gets to be exactly like the ice fabric", and the various simstim units which enable Case to 'flip [...] into [Molly's] sensorium'.¹⁰² One particularly striking instance of the use of the latter technology occurs when Case sees himself as Molly sees him, that is from the point of view of the mirrors on her lenses:

He flipped.

And found himself staring down, through Molly's one good eye, at a white-faced, wasting figure, afloat in a loose fetal crouch, a cyberspace deck between its thighs, a band of silver trodes above closed, shadowed eyes. The man's cheeks were hollowed with a day's growth of dark beard, his face slick with sweat.

He was looking at himself.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III – 1955-1956*, ed. By Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Russell Grigg (London: Routledge, 1993), p.39.

¹⁰² *Neuromancer*, p.74, p.202 and p.78 respectively.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.301.

If Case's alienation from himself, and the 'wasting figure' he pejoratively apprehends himself to be, is clearly evinced here, then so also is the problematization of notions of interiority and exteriority this entails and which we have already seen realized in the architecture of the postmodern. For Žižek, what characterizes the kind of technologies employed in *Neuromancer* – technologies which are effectively hyperbolized versions of really existing virtual reality machines and technobiology – is their predication upon 'the loss of the surface which separates inside from outside':

This loss jeopardizes our most elementary perception of 'our own body' as it is related to its environs.... On the one hand, inside is always outside: with the progressive implantation and replacement of our internal organs, techno-computerized prostheses (bypasses, pacemakers...) function as an internal part of our 'living' organism.... On the other hand, outside is always inside: when we are directly immersed in VR, we lose contact with reality – electro-waves bypass the interaction of external bodies and directly attach our senses: 'it is the eyeball that now englobes man's entire body'..¹⁰⁴

With such technologies, then, our most basic phenomenological relationships with the world are submitted to a kind of conceptual vertigo in which '[p]otentially, total subjectivization (the reduction of reality to an electro-mechanically generated cyberspace "window") coincides with total objectivization (the subordination of our "inner" bodily rhythm to a set of stimulations regulated by external apparatuses)'.¹⁰⁵ We might, in the context of our analysis, designate this coincidence of ontologies as an imaginary relation, for

¹⁰⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), p.134.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.135.

in the imbrication of ego with alter ego there is the continual threat that everything will either be reduced to self or to other. Such a threat is indexed by the verb employed to indicate the alternation between these states in *Neuromancer* – ‘to flip’: each is the obverse side and necessary condition of the other. Indeed, we may even allow that Case and Molly respectively correspond, at one level, to the processes of total subjectivization and objectivization, for the enfeebled body of the former is offset by the augmented athleticism of the latter, while the latter’s automatized psyche is compensated for by the colonizing ego of the former. Following Žižek, we can see here an example of ‘the way the progressive immobilization of the body overlaps with bodily hyperactivity’ in postmodernity:

[O]n the one hand I rely less and less on my proper body; my bodily activity is more and more reduced to giving signals to machines which do the work for me (clicking on a computer mouse, etc.); on the other hand, my body is strengthened, “hyperactivated”, through body-building and jogging, pharmaceutical means, and direct implants, so that, paradoxically, the hyperactive superman coincides with the cripple who can move around only by means of prostheses regulated by a computer chip (like the Robocop).¹⁰⁶

This paradox reaches a zenith in *Neuromancer* where, for example, in the above passage, the infantile (‘fetal crouch’), ‘wasting figure’ of Case moves around only by virtue of his prosthetic, hyperactive, superwoman Molly.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.134-135.

It is, of course, the prosthesis of cyberspace that finally delivers the mastery of his motor capacity Case has been questing for throughout the novel:

In the instant before he drove Kuang's sting through the base of the first tower, he attained a level of proficiency exceeding anything he'd known or imagined. Beyond ego, beyond personality, beyond awareness, he moved Kuang moving with him, evading his attackers with an ancient dance, Hideo's dance, grace of mind-body interface granted him, in that second by the clarity and singleness of his wish to die.¹⁰⁷

There seems to be an acknowledgement here that Case's proficiency can only be realized at the expense of an alienation from himself; that is, in a spatial relation '[b]eyond ego', which is then disavowed as the identity he establishes with the ice breaker – 'he moved Kuang moving with him'. The ego, in other words, is conceived in a kind of nescience, a self-deception which is simultaneously the necessary condition of self-deliverance.¹⁰⁸ As Vance Adair points out, '[i]t is not so much alienation that constitutes the ego as it is the denial of that very of process of alienation'.¹⁰⁹ The laceration of the dash in 'mind-body interface' is perhaps a sufficient indication of this in itself, for the point of union discloses the faultline it seeks to conceal. What is also of interest in this respect is that just prior to Case achieving the 'grace of the mind-body interface' here, the

¹⁰⁷ *Neuromancer*, p.309.

¹⁰⁸ We may note with Phillippe Julien that the misrecognition upon which the mirror stage is contingent 'is not ignorance: what is denied is in some way known'. Phillippe Julien, *Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud: The Real, The Symbolic and The Imaginary*, trans. By Devra Beck Simiu (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p.38. The very fact of virtual technology, for example, betrays a cognizance of an alienation from the very reality it seeks to reproduce: its presence merely marks the absence to which it is the solution. In this way cyberspace may be said to offer itself up as a paradigm of alienation that is constitutive in so far as it is denied.

Flatline construct disappears from the narrative in a manner “[t]hat’s kinda hard to explain”.¹¹⁰ Indeed, it is not explained, and for this very reason it suggests that Case’s identification with the Flatline has fully realized itself, that the latter has been swallowed up by the imaginary maw of the former, in so far as Case has attained the proficiency of which the Flatline was the supreme exponent and thus, as it were, become himself by becoming the construct. That Case has successfully addressed the infelicities between the body and the self can be witnessed in the triumphant last image of the novel:

And one October night, punching himself past the scarlet tiers of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority, he saw three figures, tiny, impossible, who stood at the very edge of one of the vast steps of data. Small as they were, he could make out the boy’s grin, his pink arms, the glitter of the long gray eyes that had been Riviera’s. Linda still wore his jacket; she waved, as he passed. But the third figure, close behind her, arm across her shoulders, was himself.¹¹¹

Here, for the first time, is Case’s own figure projected as a totality onto cyberspace. Previous to this he has only been able to see ‘a representation of his deck, fingers flying automatically across the board’.¹¹² Such bleak intimations of the *corps morcelé* are, however, finally banished by this image of unity and he is, we might say, ‘(w)hole’ again.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Vance Adair, ‘Rewriting the (S)crypt: Gazing on *Hamlet*’s Interiors’, *Q/W/E/R/T/Y*, 6, (1996), 5-15, (p.8).

¹¹⁰ *Neuromancer*, p.308.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.317.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p.303.

¹¹³ I say ‘again’ here because the trajectory of the narrative is merely a repetition of what we must assume preceded it: Case has already been a ‘cowboy hotshot’, has already been ‘whole’ and the novel recounts his attempt to regain that status. From a symbolic perspective this is merely the retroactive effect of the imaginary process of totalization, as Jane Gallop explains: ‘[t]he mirror

This wholeness, understood as a privileging of the absolute over the differential, is, of course, not purely structural, for, at a more ideological level, the novel is concerned to elaborate the recuperation of Case to a socially acceptable status. Whilst he starts *Neuromancer* as ‘just another hustler, trying to make it through’, he ends it by having his criminal record erased, undergoing a ‘complete flush out’ of his blood and being in possession of a valid passport, as well as a large sum of legal money¹¹⁴:

He spent the bulk of his Swiss account on a new pancreas and liver, the rest on a new Ono-Sendai and a ticket back to the Sprawl.

He found work.

He found a girl who called herself Michael.¹¹⁵

This fairy-tale ending is nothing more than the inscription of Case within the social imaginary of late capitalism. Even the ersatz exoticism of the girl’s name here betrays the kind of bourgeois fantasy life that he has been heading towards all along. We can, perhaps, see this more clearly if we attend to Jameson’s suggestive analysis of ‘science fiction’ films of the 1950s. Such a genre, he

stage would *seem to come after* “the body in bits and pieces” and organize them into a unified image. But actually, *that* violently unorganized *image only comes after* the mirror stage so as to *represent what came before*. What appears to precede the mirror stage is simply a projection or a reflection. There is nothing on the other side of the mirror.’ Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.86. In this respect we may say that Case’s tortuous journey from a state of fragmentation to one of unity represents the effect of narrativizing a spatial relation, or, articulating the synchronic diachronically.

¹¹⁴ *Neuromancer*, p.11 and p.314 respectively.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.317.

argues, 'is a wish fulfilment that takes as its object a vision of ideal work'.¹¹⁶

This fantasy of non-alienating labour refers...

...to a kind of collective folk dream about the condition of the scientist himself – he does not do *real* work, yet he has power and crucial significance; his remuneration is not monetary, or at the very least money seems no object; there is something fascinating about his laboratory (the home workshop magnified into institutional status, a combination of factory and clinic), about the way he works nights (he is not bound by routine or by the eight-hour day); his very intellectual operations are caricatures of the way the non-intellectual imagines brainwork and book knowledge to be. There is, moreover, the suggestion of a return to older modes of work organization, to the more personal and psychologically satisfying world of the guilds, in which the older scientist is the master and the younger one the apprentice....¹¹⁷

We can find a similar model of 'libidinally gratifying' work in *Neuromancer*. From his 'work place' (itself an exciting environment – hotels and spaceships – augmented by the portable comforts of his keyboard), Case is able to effect transformations of global significance; money is limitless where it is not actually meaningless (a sharp difference from his previous non-cowboy work); he is apprenticed to Dixie Flatline and, perhaps most pertinently, he is not alienated by the technology he utilizes: it is, rather, a passport to ecstasy, wholeness and social valorization. Much of this fantasy is indicated by his designation as a 'cowboy', suggestive, as it is, of a nostalgic vision of work which encompasses notions of a pioneering spirit, camaraderie, a semi-renegade status and an empathetic contact with nature. If there is an irony in this latter point (which perhaps finds its

¹¹⁶ Fredric Jameson, 'Metacommentary', in *The Ideologies of Theory Essays – 1971-1986: Volume One – Situations of Theory*, Fredric Jameson, (London: Routledge, 1988), pp.3-16 (p.15).

expression in the description of cyberspace as a ‘consensual hallucination), it may be observed that Case’s disgust with the ‘meat thing’ (that is, any activity outside of cyberspace) contrasts markedly with the kind of intuitive appreciation of the matrix he experiences that in older fictions would ordinarily be reserved for Nature.

Read in this manner, Case’s assumption of legality at the end of *Neuromancer* corresponds to the latent content of the rest of the novel: his character is always-already a fantasy of the socialized subject he will become. It is a connection that Andrew Ross contextualizes in appropriately Gibsonesque terms when he argues that, ‘Yuppie gentrification was the new pioneer frontier of the 1980s, and cyberpunk was one of its privileged genres, splicing the glamorous, adventurist culture of the high-tech console cowboy with the atmospheric ethic of the alienated street dick whose natural habitat was exclusively concrete and neon’.¹¹⁸ In this respect, as Jameson notes, ‘urban punks are merely the opposite numbers to the business yuppies’, for, unlike the fictions of an earlier phase of capitalism, ‘[t]here is now a circulation and recirculation possible between the underworld and the overworld of high-rent condos and lofts’.¹¹⁹ What this process of ‘recirculation’ indexes is the

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.15.

¹¹⁸ Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits* (London: Verso, 1991), p.147. Indeed, as Ross points out, the ‘hacker mythology’ begotten by *Neuromancer* is almost exclusively white, masculine and middle class’. *Ibid.*, p.84.

¹¹⁹ *The Seeds of Time*, p.152. The connection between the underworld and the overworld is also implicit in Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.’s scathing critique of cyberpunk: ‘for the one thing that cyberpunk is fascinated with above all else, its ruling deity, is sleaze – the scummy addiction to thrill that can focus all of a person’s imaginative power on a sensation that wipes out all discipline, and which at the same time sells books, attracts movie options, and generates sequels.’

dissolution of otherness that we have already witnessed operating in the imaginary architecture of the postmodern. It will be unsurprising, then, to learn that the work of de-differentiation can finally be detected in the form of the novel itself.¹²⁰ Apart from the chronotope of science fiction, to which, as Gibson admits, *Neuromancer* stands in something of an antagonistic relationship¹²¹, the whole novel finds its matrix in various pulp fictions, including those of the cowboy/frontier, spy, private detective and gangster genres, as well as in a more specific relationship to Thomas Pynchon.¹²² Such mongrelization extends right through *Neuromancer* down to the primacy of the neologism itself, which is, perhaps, most clearly represented in the compound 'cyberspace'.¹²³ We are, then, in a sense returned to the problematic of co-ordination, for, in its aggregation of forms, *Neuromancer* fails to afford a single generic point, other than itself, from

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., 'Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism', in *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction*, Larry McCaffrey (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), pp.182-193 (p.193).

¹²⁰ Scott Lash proposes that postmodernism may be understood as a culture of de-differentiation in contradistinction to the differentiation of modernism. Drawing upon Jean-François Lyotard's early work, his approach has, unfortunately, little in common with the one advanced here. However, it is interesting to note, given the imaginary rubric of de-differentiation in this chapter, that he draws on a metaphors of spacing for much of his analysis: 'De-differentiation is also present in the postmodernist refusal to separate the author from his or her oeuvre or the audience from the performance; in the postmodernist transgression of the boundary (with no doubt greater or lesser success) between literature and theory, between high and popular culture, between what is properly cultural and what is properly social.' Scott Lash, 'Discourse or Figure? Postmodernism as a "Regime of Signification"', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 5:2-3, (1988), 311-336, (p.312).

¹²¹ "When I was starting out I simply tried to go in the opposite direction from most of the stuff I was reading". Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.245.

¹²² *Ibid.*, c.f. pp.231-233. Unusually, Gibson concurs with his critics in telling Larry McCaffrey here that "Pynchon has been a favourite writer and a major influence all along". 'An Interview with William Gibson', p.272.

¹²³ Gibson's explanation of the matrix of 'cyberspace' is suitably inflected within the indeterminate rubric of irony: "Assembled word *cyberspace* from small and readily available components of language. Neologic spasm: the primal act of pop poetics. Preceded any concept whatever. Slick and hollow – awaiting received meaning." Julian Stallabrass, 'Empowering Technology: The Exploration of Cyberspace', *New Left Review*, 211, (1995), 3-32, (p.5). What, of course, is not ironic about this description is how it attests to the value of the signifier in the

which to establish its meaning. For Jameson this is symptomatic of a wider problematic:

From the generic standpoint, what interests us here is the way in which the former genres (thrillers, spy films, social exposés, science fiction, and so on) now conflate in a movement that re-enacts the dedifferentiation of the social levels, and by way of their own allegorization: so that the new post-generic genre films are allegories of each other, and of the impossible representation of the social totality itself.¹²⁴

The irony of reading the form of *Neuromancer* as a symptom of the impossibility of negotiating the overdetermined social spaces of late capitalism is that cyberspace represents an attempt to overcome just such an impossibility in the first place. In fact, it is, as we shall see, the supreme example of a machinery of de-differentiation.

3: With an Eye to the Future

That *Neuromancer*'s primary register is a visual one finds a particular resonance in the fact that it is also a 'visionary' text. As the suffix '-mancer' suggests (from the Greek *manteia*, meaning 'soothsaying'), the novel proclaims its divinatory project from the title onwards, one which finds Gibson sketching an

market place. It is perhaps only the plasticity of 'postmodernism' that can compare in this respect for sheer marketing success.

¹²⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and World Space in the World System* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.5.

intuitively suasive portrait of the near future. Part of the suaveness of this account lies in the content-level detail he has picked up from postmodernity and re-cast, like geomantic earth, within another configuration that is, nevertheless, recognizably cognate with our own period.¹²⁵ Features, such as the company names and the hegemony of Japanese-American culture, right up to the obsession with the technologization of nature itself, are granted a sanction of plausibility from the reader precisely because they are extensions of existing practices. Indeed, anticipation in its own right is just such a practice, if not *the* dominant one of late capitalism, as the necessity of accelerating turnover time has occasioned a wholesale discounting of the future into the present. This, in turn, has spawned a mass expectancy industry concerned to forecast and forge market trends, using, more often than not, the very computer technology that forms the subject matter of *Neuromancer*.

Speculation is also a defining characteristic of the imaginary mode. As Lacan comments, '[t]he *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation', for the anaclitic child prefigures in an image the full development of its motor-nervous system and thus achieves a kind of self-mastery.¹²⁶ Such a child, in other words, is something of *neuro* (nerves) – *mancer* (of the future). In terms strikingly akin to these, Marshall

¹²⁵ In conversation with Larry McCaffrey, Gibson himself has commented on this facet of his work, noting that, "When I write about technology, I write about how it has *already* affected our lives; I don't extrapolate in the way I was taught an SF writer should". 'An Interview with William Gibson', p.274.

¹²⁶ *Écrits*, p.4.

McLuhan has famously written of humanity's progress towards self-mastery by way of the annihilation of space-time:

After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western World is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electronic technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.¹²⁷

In this image of the extension of our central nervous system we can witness the problems of the imaginary amplified to global proportions. Once again the task of self-mastery is imperilled by its own success, ex-posing itself to the Kantian jeopardy of a boundless subjectivity that is pure self and that thereby fails to secure its own objective conditions of existence. In this respect, the 'consensual hallucination' of cyberspace can be understood as a kind of collective solipsism in which the aspirations of bourgeois individualism are given free reign and end up being strangled on the leash. For Terry Eagleton these temporal and spatial projections are of a piece with each other:

The fantasy of total technological omnipotence conceals a nightmare; in appropriating Nature you risk eradicating it,

¹²⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), pp.3-4. McLuhan's triumphalism is poignantly undercut some twenty years later by Jameson's befuddlement: 'The newer architecture therefore – like many of the other cultural products I have evoked... - stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions'. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.39. Of course, just as Jameson was making this plea, Gibson was refining his own response to this crisis in the form of the reticulated networks of cyberspace, which, in one of its definitions, is 'actually a drastic simplification of the human sensorium'. *Neuromancer*, p.71.

appropriating nothing but your own acts of consciousness. There is a similar problem with predictability, which is surrendering phenomena into the hands of the sociological priests threatens to abolish history. Predictive science founds the great progressive narratives of middle-class history, but by the same stroke offers to undermine them, converting all diachrony to a secret synchrony.¹²⁸

The tension that Eagleton alights upon here between the diachronic and the synchronic is endemic to all anticipatory projects and, as such, it enables us to read them in two seemingly contradictory ways.

Firstly, while conceding that the imaginary mode fosters a secret synchronization, equally it expedites a form of diachronization by affording the nascent subject the possibility of narrativization. The anticipation of the mirrored infant enables it to impute to its current position a teleology it would otherwise lack, ‘decisively project[ing],’ as Lacan remarks, ‘the formation of the individual into history’.¹²⁹ We may understand this to mean re-situating our own present as cause rather than effect, which is to say as ‘history’. For Jameson, this is the generic function of science fiction, which, in presenting us with its possible futures, thereby ‘transform[s] our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come. It is this present moment.... that upon our return from the imaginary constructs of SF is offered to us in the form of some future world’s remote past, as if posthumous and as though collectively remembered.’¹³⁰ In

¹²⁸ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p.74.

¹²⁹ *Écrits*, p.4.

¹³⁰ Fredric Jameson, ‘Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can we Imagine the Future?’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 9:2, (1982), 147-158, (p.152). It is also interesting to note that in this same article, Jameson proffers the neat, but ultimately unpersuasive, thesis that the emergence of SF as a discourse on the future corresponds to the disappearance of the historical novel. The former, he

Neuromancer it may be argued that this historicizing process offers itself up more clearly in the guise of redemption, or at least (given the dystopian qualities of Gibson's near future) the cool comforts of survival after the mutually assured destruction of the Cold War, which was threatening to thaw at the time of the novel's production.

In the light of this, as Steven Connor notes, anticipation has come to acquire a regenerative potency as a narrative strategy:

If one form of the novel of history is concerned with investigating the new relations to the past required by the dramatic changes of the late twentieth century, another form is concerned with the possibility of narrating a future, and with the assailed potential of narrative as such in a world in which absolute finality and closure, which had hitherto been available to human life through narratives, now threatened to bring to an end the narrative of human history.¹³¹

There is a sense in which the speculative novel does run the risk of effecting closure upon the narrative of history, and, as Eagleton points out above, of smuggling in synchrony under the assumption of diachrony. For like the narcissistic infant captivated by its own image, there is a danger of imagining the future in terms of the present and thereby of forming a closed circuit of representation. *Neuromancer's* all too persuasive future would seem to attest to this predicament, but in doing so it also bears testament to a collective

argues, 'now registers some nascent sense of the future, and does so in the space on which a sense of the past has once been inscribed'. *Ibid.*, p.150.

¹³¹ Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History: 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.199-200.

enfeeblement of the utopian imagination. We are so thoroughly immersed in the here-and-now, that we are, as it were, inured to the future as much as we are inoculated against the past. For Jameson, science fiction's function is to disclose this limited horizon, because in 'setting forth for the unknown, [it] finds itself irrevocably mired in the all-too-familiar, and thereby becomes unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits'.¹³² The limits of the postmodern are, as we have already noted, always those of the 'self'. One of the more notable expressions of this predicament is, for Eagleton, the triumphal pronouncements of the end of history – pronouncements which he takes to task in a suitably speculative register:

It is not out of the question that, in the apparent absence of any "other" to the prevailing system, any utopic space beyond it, some of the more desperate theoreticians of the day might come to find the other of the system in itself. They might, in other words, come to project utopia onto what we actually have, finding in, say, the mobilities and transgressions of the capitalist order, the hedonism and pluralities of the marketplace, the circulation of intensities in media and disco, a freedom and fulfilment which the more puritanical politicians among us still grimly defer to some ever-receding future. They might fold the future into the present and thus bring history slithering abruptly to a halt.¹³³

One of the more curious manifestations of the temporal folds that have been produced by *Neuromancer* is its effects on the development of technology. The

¹³² 'Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?', p.153.

¹³³ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp.18-19. The point of 'pretending to forecast what is already staring us in the face' is, according to Eagleton, 'to estrange it to the point where we might be able to grasp something of its historical logic'. *Ibid.*, p.20. This, of course, echoes the insight we have already attributed to a 'benign' reading of futurity in fiction.

novel's central innovation is, for example, discussed as if it were actually in existence, as Julian Stallabrass points out:

[C]yberspace as a technological development has a strange status, not only because it has not been realized, but also because it is a concept which has its origins in fiction, particularly in the cyberpunk novels of William Gibson.¹³⁴

So persuasive is Gibson's vision that the first virtual reality machine was named after cyberspace, British Telecom are developing a 'neuro-camera' under the label 'Soul Catcher' (from the title of Chapter 37 in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*) and Timothy Leary (now self-proclaimed virtual technology guru) has described Gibson as the author of the 'underlying myth, the core legend, of the next stage of human evolution'.¹³⁵ The new machines of virtuality are, in other words, in an analogous position relative to *Neuromancer*, as the imaginary infant is to the image in the mirror.

¹³⁴ 'Empowering Technology: The Exploration of Cyberspace', p.5.

¹³⁵ Benjamin Woolley, *Virtual Worlds: A Journey in Hype and Hyperreality* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp.36-37. Gibson has registered his unease at this proclivity for epochal astrology, stating that, "I sometimes get the feeling that technical people who like my work miss several layers of irony". *Ibid.*, p.37. Critics of cyberspace technology tend, like Mark Slouka, to be alarmed by it because it helps to accentuate 'our growing separation from reality'. Mark Slouka, *War of the Worlds: Cyberspace and the High-Tech Assault on Reality* (London: Abacus, 1996), p.1. For Žižek, however, this alarm merely indexes an over-proximity to the 'secret' of reality, which is its very virtuality: '[T]he experience of virtual reality should... make us sensitive to how the "reality" with which we were dealing *always-already* was virtualized. The most elementary procedure of symbolic identification, identification with an Ego Ideal, involves... an identification with a virtual image: the place in the Big Other from which I see myself in the form in which I find myself likeable (the definition of Ego Ideal) is by definition virtual. Is not virtuality, therefore, the trademark of every, even the most elementary, ideological identification? When I see myself as a "democrat", a "communist", an "American", a "Christian", and so on, what I see is not directly "me": I identify with a virtual place in the discourse. And in so far as such an identification is constitutive of a community, every community is also *stricto sensu* always-

The enfeeblement of the utopic faculty may itself be read as a symptom of the encroachment of immediacy upon the postmodern subject. The geographies of enclosure, which we have already observed at work in the contemporary metropolis, are emblematic of this condition, and it is one that, as Jameson remarks, threatens the very practice of symptomology in the first place:

The new space that emerges involves the suppression of distance (in the sense of Benjamin's aura) and the relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty places, to the point where the postmodern body... is now exposed to a perceptual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering layers and intervening mediations have been removed.¹³⁶

Such a 'suppression of distance', of course, is precisely the organizing principle of cyberspace, whose totem is, as we have already noted, the container. Indeed, according to Gibson, cyberspace as a concept was intended to suggest...

...the point at which media [flow] together and surround us. It's the ultimate extension of the exclusion of daily life. With cyberspace as I describe it you can literally wrap yourself in media and not have to see what's really going on around you.¹³⁷

We may read this statement as an acknowledgement of the function of cyberspace as an imaginary resolution of the real problems of co-ordination that have been identified as so perplexing to the postmodern subject. For Bukatman

already virtual.' Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: Essays on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), p.194

¹³⁶ Postmodernism, or, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, pp.412-413.

¹³⁷ Benjamin Woolley, *Virtual Worlds: A Journey in Hype and Hyperreality*, p.122.

this is a reason for celebration, because, in its 'open acknowledgement of the supersession of individual bodily experience', cyberspace offsets the impoverishment of the self with a kind of cognitive compensation¹³⁸:

[C]yberspace certainly hyperbolizes the space of the city, projecting the metroscape into an exaggerated representation that accentuates its bodiless vertigo, but it permits the existence of a powerful and controlling gaze.¹³⁹

The power of this gaze lies in its ability to unify and thereby domesticate the city's heterogeneous spatial practices. In this respect, we might concede that it is cyberspace, and not Case, that assumes the mantle of 'private eye' which for Raymond Williams is the emblem of urban rationalism.

Nowhere is the status of the cyberspace subject more clearly realized as what Bukatman terms a '*pure gaze*' than in the climactic run of the novel¹⁴⁰:

The Kuang program spurted from a tarnished cloud. Case's consciousness divided like beads of mercury, arcing above an endless beach the color of the dark silver clouds. His vision was spherical, as though a single retina lined the inner surface of a globe that contained all things, if all things could be counted.¹⁴¹

Perhaps the most significant part of this astounding image is the subjunctive mood of the last clause and its qualification of the totalizing claim made in the

¹³⁸ *Terminal Identity*, p.149.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.150.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.151.

previous statement. The one 'thing' that cannot be counted in this scenario is, of course, Case himself, reduced as he is to the status of a pure gaze. For Žižek this situation is exemplary of both the fantasy-gaze and, in a final irony for a postmodern text, the Cartesian *cogito*:

Cogito designates [the] very point at which the "I" loses its support in the symbolic network of tradition and thus, in a sense which is far from metaphorical, ceases to exist. And the crucial point is that this pure *cogito* corresponds perfectly to the fantasy-gaze: in it, I found myself reduced to a non-existent gaze, i.e., after losing all my effective predicates, I am nothing but a gaze paradoxically entitled to observe the world in which I do not exist (like, say, the fantasy of parental coitus where I am reduced to a gaze which observes my own conception, prior to my actual existence, or the fantasy of witnessing my own funeral).¹⁴²

In this respect, cyberspace, we might say, is a computerized *cogito*; a fantasy construct in which the 'I' is absorbed by the 'eye' and the subject is reduced to observing reality from behind his/her retina. Looking at everything from all sides, the cyberspace gaze embodies what Miran Božovič describes as 'the unbearable experience of the absolute point of view'.¹⁴³ This experience remains, however, an ideological one, because, as Stallabrass argues,

¹⁴¹ *Neuromancer*, p.304.

¹⁴² Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p.64.

¹⁴³ Miran Božovič, 'The Man Behind His Own Retina', in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid To Ask Hitchcock)*, Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1992), pp.161-177 (p.166). It is unbearable because, as Žižek notes elsewhere, 'self-consciousness is the very opposite of self-transparency: I am aware of myself only insofar as outside of me a place exists where the truth about me is articulated'. *Tarrying with the Negative*, p.67. The 'absolute point of view', in other words, occasions the disappearance of the subject. In this respect, Žižek argues that 'what brings about the "loss of reality" in cyberspace is not its emptiness (the fact that it is lacking with respect to the fullness of the real presence) but, on the contrary, its very excessive fullness (the potential abolition of the dimension of symbolic virtuality). Is not one of

[a] number of old bourgeois dreams are encompassed in the promise of this technology: to survey the world from one's living room, to grasp the totality of all data within a single frame, and to recapture a unified knowledge and experience.¹⁴⁴

Stallabrass here reminds us that if cyberspace serves as a kind of cognitive map of the city (that is as a way of representing and reordering the relationship between the subject and the metropolis), then this is merely a level of mediation; what Jameson terms a 'representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentred global network of the third stage of capital itself'.¹⁴⁵

We may understand this assertion more clearly by reference to one of the most graphic descriptions of cyberspace in *Neuromancer*:

Program a map to display frequency of data exchange, every thousand megabytes a single pixel on a very large screen. Manhattan and Atlanta burn solid white. Then they start to pulse, the rate of traffic threatening to overload your simulation. Your map is about to go nova. Cool it down. Up your scale. Each pixel a million

the possible reactions to the excessive filling-in of the voids of cyberspace therefore *informational anorexia*, the desperate refusal to accept information, in so far as it occludes the presence of the Real?' *The Plague of Fantasies*, p.155. Interestingly, Žižek links this filling-in of the hole that sustains the symbolic to the re-writing of canonical texts from the viewpoints of hitherto marginalized characters. These texts, such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* or Salman Rushdie 'Yorick' (in *East, West*), thereby bear witness to an over-proximity to the real. If this remains an unconvincing thesis, it is perhaps because such isolated works fail to saturate their respective 'ur-texts' in the way that other media, such as cyberspace, apparently saturate their respective provenances. Indeed, Wolf's own explanation of the 'genre' seems far more persuasive when she writes, 'How quickly does lack of speech turn into lack of identity?' Christa Wolf, *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*, trans. By Jan Van Heurck (London: Virago, 1984), p.161.

¹⁴⁴ 'Empowering Technology', p.4.

¹⁴⁵ *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.38.

megabytes. At a hundred million megabytes per second, you begin to make out certain blocks in midtown Manhattan, outlines of hundred-year-old industrial parks ringing the old core of Atlanta....¹⁴⁶

Like capital itself, all qualities are transmuted into quantities here, recalibrated as a universal form of data and thus domesticated within 'a single frame'. The recodification of data as absolutes, what Stallabrass affirms as 'its transformation into readily understood visual forms', is what finally betrays the imaginary provenance of cyberspace.¹⁴⁷ At the time of *Neuromancer*'s production, that is before 1984, computers were still essentially a literary technology, documenting data in terms of figures and words.¹⁴⁸ On Gibson's screens, however, data is represented pictorially and, as such, it represents a retreat from the differential values of the symbolic into the absolutism of the imaginary.¹⁴⁹ For Stallabrass this amounts to a Utopian gesture:

Such quantitative modes of thought presuppose an identity between concept and object, word and thing, and privilege mathematical logic as alone capable of grasping the essence of things. The invention of cyberspace is, then, the attempt to create a world where to perceive is the same as to understand, where "objects" are entirely adequate to

¹⁴⁶ *Neuromancer*, p.57.

¹⁴⁷ 'Empowering Technology', p.8.

¹⁴⁸ Indeed, Ian Parker pointedly notes that 'William Gibson used a manual typewriter to write his earliest cyberpunk novels, with his knowledge of word-processing, let alone email and the internet, gained second-hand from friends'. Ian Parker, *Psychoanalytic Culture: Psychoanalytic Discourse in Western Society* (London: Sage, 1997), p.212.

¹⁴⁹ It is a feature of the new technology that Vivian Sobchack has commented upon in similar terms: 'digital electronic technology atomizes and *abstractly schematizes* the analogic quality of the photographic and cinematic into discrete *pixels* and *bits* of information that are transmitted *serially*, each bit discontinuous, discontiguous, and absolute – each bit "being-in-itself" even as it is part of a system.' Vivian Sobchack, 'The Scene of the Screen: Towards a Phenomenology of Cinematic and Electronic Presence', *Post-Script*, 10, (1990), 50-59, (p.56).

their concepts, and are even, through their dematerialization, identical with them.¹⁵⁰

What such a space ultimately represents, however, is a world without lack, a ‘Shangri-da’ we might say, in which the constitutive insufficiency of the symbolic is fatally replenished by the transparency of the image. Lacking any point of mediation, representation thus collapses back into reality and the subject disappears from the signifying chain, finally failing to enjoy the ostensive paradise that it has dreamt about for so long.

The irony of this disposition, in which the realization of the fantasy of the subject occasions the subject’s death, is articulated, paradoxically, by the refusal of death in *Neuromancer*. As Sponsler notes, ‘[r]ather than marking the end of one person’s life, death can be nearly infinitely evaded, with humans such as Herr Virek or the Dixie Flatline being kept alive in machinelike eternity in vats or as computer constructs’.¹⁵¹ Case, for example, begins the narrative renting ‘a coffin’ in Cheap Hotel where he is described as ‘grinn[ing] like a skull’.¹⁵² However, despite this close association with death, he ends the novel starting, what we have already observed, as a new life. In this respect, the matrix can be said to function

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.31. The abstractive register of cyberspace finds its conditions of possibility in what we might term the urban experience of generalizable immigration, as Eagleton explains: ‘The deracinated fate of the modernist exiles and émigrés is a material condition for the emergence of a newly formalizing, universalizing thought, one which having spurned the ambiguous comforts of a motherland can now cast a bleak analytic eye, from its “transcendental” vantage-point in some polyglot metropolis, on all such specific historical legacies, discerning the hidden global logics by which they are governed.’ *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p.321.

¹⁵¹ ‘Cyberpunk and the Dilemmas of Postmodern Narrative’, p.633. In this respect, *Neuromancer* is, according to Thomas Pynchon, typical of science fiction: ‘I suspect one of the reasons that

as something of a life-support machine. This insistence upon living nevertheless signifies an imaginary death because, as Lacan remarks, 'the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing'.¹⁵³ Which is to say that death is constitutive of the symbolic order because the symbol, as placeholder of the thing, substitutes the thing and effectively kills it. If the symbol stands as the gravestone of the thing, then, it is appropriate that Case begins the novel in a coffin for, as Lacan comments, '[t]he first symbol in which we recognize humanity in its vestigial traces is the sepulture'.¹⁵⁴ Case's refusal to lie down and die in the coffin therefore designates his refusal of symbolization and a concomitant retreat into the delusions of the imaginary. The essentially solipsistic character of this manoeuvre (that is, its abnegation of intersubjective relations) is evinced by Lacan's point that...

...[i]t is in effect as a desire for death that [the subject] affirms himself for others; if he identifies himself with the other, it is by fixing him solidly in the metamorphosis of his essential image, and no being is ever evoked by him except among the shadows of death.¹⁵⁵

fantasy and science fiction appeal so much to younger readers is that... mortality is so seldom an issue.' Thomas Pynchon, *Slow Learner: Early Stories* (London: Vintage, 1995, 1984), p.5.

¹⁵² *Neuromancer*, p.30 and p.32 respectively.

¹⁵³ *Écrits*, p.104.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.104. Commenting on this passage, Bowie argues that '[i]f analytic practice places its main stress on the Imaginary, and on the bolstering of the ego, it will find itself purging death-fears and death-desires from its activities. At worst, it will collude with the analysand in creating an empty and demeaning sense of immortality. A stress on the Symbolic, on the other hand, allows the individual's mortality to speak and be spoken; it allows him to be unillusioned in his desire, and for a time, to fly in the face of the Real.' *Lacan*, p.100.

¹⁵⁵ *Écrits*, p.105.

The technology that perpetuates life in *Neuromancer* thus finally denies the death that would give that life any meaning. As with the transcendental vista that cyberspace seems to offer at the expense of the loss of the subject for whom it is meant to benefit, the imaginary placations of *Neuromancer* are a set of self-undoing conceits fit only for the habituation of capital and psychosis. Indeed, it is to this grim pairing that we must now turn.

4: Postmortemism

The veracity of Jameson's contention that, in postmodernity, 'urban punks are merely the opposite numbers to the business yuppies' is perhaps given its most brutally convincing testament in *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis.¹⁵⁶ In this truly rebarbative narrative, Ellis adumbrates the singular monotony of the life of a powerful New York financier, Patrick Bateman, and his ineluctable descent into a psychopathic hell where 'no-one is safe, [and] nothing is

¹⁵⁶ *The Seeds of Time*, p.152. There is depressingly little literature on this, one of the most technically accomplished novels of recent years. As Nancy and Joe Applegate report, the initial reviews of the novel were concerned to elaborate a sensationalized indignance at its detailed anatomies of the act of murder, thereby giving the 'impression that critics seem[ed] to be quoting the same one or two offensive passages, without attempting to read the entire book before condemning it'. Nancy and Joe Applegate, 'Prophet or Pornographer: An Evaluation of Black Humor in *American Psycho*', *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 25, (1995), 10-12, (p.10). Elizabeth Young advances a compelling analysis of these shocked reviews: 'The publication of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* in 1991 was replete with ironies. It seemed as if the world had decided to add to the book all the old-fashioned fictional qualities that it so conspicuously lacked: melodrama, plot, characterization, irony, hubris. The story of the book – its publication history, its author, its controversial aspects, its fashionability – has to stand in for the lack of story in the book which no one seemed to bother to read in any detail.' Elizabeth Young, 'The Beast in the Jungle, The Figure in the Carpet: Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*', in *Shopping in Space: Essays on American "Blank Generation" Fiction*, Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney (London and New York: Serpent's Tail, 1992), pp.85-122 (p.85).

redeemed'.¹⁵⁷ Here, the truth of Lacan's dictum that 'no being is ever evoked by him except among the shadows of death' is morbidly literalized in the bloody recrudescence of Bateman's indifferent and indiscriminate butchery of the denizens of New York. The reason for this savagery may have its origins in the fact that, as he claims when asked why he works even though he is superfluously rich, "I...want...to...fit...in".¹⁵⁸ This halting articulation of his desire to belong to a society he routinely eviscerates is paradoxical only in so far as we fail to designate the imaginary mode of the psychopath as being precisely the facsimile of the society of yuppie New York.¹⁵⁹ What Bateman's homicidal activities represent is an attempt to wrest meaning from the soporific homogeneity of a culture in which the only value is exchange and therefore in which 'everyone is interchangeable anyway'.¹⁶⁰

Such numbing indifference to particulars is, perversely, a kind of hyperbolic pluralism, characteristic of the late capitalist vanguard, in which even the most intractable individuation is effortlessly absorbed in the abstract and thus

¹⁵⁷ Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 1991), p.377.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.237.

¹⁵⁹ For Elizabeth Young, Bateman 'is Everyyuppie', an aggregate indistinctness of consumerist practices whose existence can only be divined from the signature on his American Express Gold Card slips. 'The Beast in the Jungle, The Figure in the Carpet', p.103.

¹⁶⁰ *American Psycho*, p.379. The interchangeable subject is also the subject of democracy as Žižek notes: 'The subject of democracy ... is none other than the Cartesian subject in all its abstraction, the empty punctuality we reach after subtracting all its particular contents. In other words there is a structural homology between the Cartesian procedure of radical doubt that produces the *cogito*, an empty point or reflective self-reference as a remainder, and the preambles of every democratic proclamation "all people *without regard to* (race, sex, religion, wealth, social status)". We should not fail to notice the violent act of abstraction at work in this "without regard to"; it is an abstraction of all positive features, a dissolution of all substantial, innate links, which produces an entity strictly correlative to the Cartesian *cogito* as a point of pure, nonsubstantial subjectivity.' Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction To Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: MIT Press, 1992), p.163.

ruthlessly divested of its meaning. As Eagleton comments, '[c]apitalism is the most pluralistic order history has ever known, restlessly transgressing boundaries and dismantling oppositions, pitching together diverse life-forms and continually overflowing the measure'.¹⁶¹ If the appellation 'yuppie' indexes the perfection of consumerism, it is only realized by disabling all evaluative machinery and leaving in its stead the singular calibration of the commodity form. The taxonomic obsession of even the most diluted of late capitalist societies – (What hair type do you have? What skin tone? What car? What child? What politics? What life style?) – is thus pushed to its limits in *American Psycho* by the interminable cataloguing of clothes, restaurants, equipment, manners and people:

...vases and felt fedoras with feather headbands and alligator toiletry cases with gilt-silver bottles and brushes and shoehorns that cost two hundred dollars and candlesticks and pillow covers and gloves and slippers and powder puffs and handknitted cotton snowflake sweaters and leather skates and Porsche-design ski goggles and antique apothecary bottles and diamond earrings and boots and vodka glasses and card cases and cameras and mahogany servers and scarves and aftershaves and photo albums and salt and pepper shakers and ceramic-toaster cookie jars and two-hundred-dollar shoehorns and backpacks and aluminium lunch pails and pillow covers...¹⁶²

The inscription of commodities within the inventories that pepper *American Psycho* provides a structural qualification of their individual value as the transmute seamlessly into each other, thereby sundering each item from its

¹⁶¹ *The Illusions of Postmodernism* p.133.

¹⁶² *American Psycho*, p.179. Many critics have identified the list as a key trope of postmodernist fiction, usually arguing, with Brian McHale, that its effect is one of 'evacuating language of presence, leaving only a shell behind – a word list, a mere exhibition of words'. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987), p.153. I would concur with this argument but

prospective usefulness and robbing it of meaning. This is manifest here in the fact that the two hundred dollar shoehorn is listed twice and that, as with the other inventories, this list has no beginning and no end. Each object thus assumes the status of a signifier, with the effect that, as Jean Baudrillard notes, '[r]eferential value is annihilated, giving the structural play of value the upper hand'.¹⁶³ Choice thus cheats itself in the same moment that its radical possibility is realized. Variety, in this instance, is relegated to mere form, a parodic abstraction which marks the self-cancelling recto and verso of absolute difference and absolute identity. It is little wonder, then, that '[s]ome kind of existential chasm opens before [Bateman] while [he's] browsing in Bloomingdale's'.¹⁶⁴ The pluralism that finds its deftest articulation in the lists of products leaves him bereft of any kind of ethical mooring from which to anchor his evaluations. If, symptomatically, he chooses to paper over the abyss by buying 'six tubes of shaving cream while flirting nervously with girls who work there', it is equally a dramatization of the colonization of the commodity form that he decides 'this emptiness has, at least in part, some connection with the way [he] treated Evelyn at Barcadia the other night, though there is always the possibility it could just as easily have something to do with the tracking device on [his] VCR'.¹⁶⁵ For, quite as much as the ready transplantation of the human and the mechanical in *Neuromancer*, *American Psycho* highlights the ease of trafficking between the

add the proviso that this should be seen as a symptom of, among other factors, the incontinence of the commodity form being discussed here.

¹⁶³ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage Publications, 1993, 1976), p.6.

¹⁶⁴ *American Psycho*, p.179.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.179-180.

organic and the artificial. This process begins in the novel as an assertion of qualitative equipollency:

“He’s rich,” I say.
“*Everybody’s* rich,” she says, concentrating on the TV screen.
“He’s good-looking,” I tell her.
“*Everybody’s* good-looking, Patrick,” she says remotely.
“He has a great body,” I say.
“*Everybody* has a great body now,” she says.¹⁶⁶

Quality is here alchemized into quantity, as what was a mark of differentiation within a social unit – what may be quaintly termed rank – now serves only as a badge of divarication from other social units. Thus it comes as little surprise that much of the humour of the novel arises from the protagonists’ endless mistaking of each other for each other, to the point where Bateman manages to snare one of his victims, Owen, by playing on just this interchangeability. Equally, much of the disgust that *American Psycho* inspires turns on the vicious treatment of those characters, like the tramps, who remain forever outside the province of yuppie perfection:

Coming out of the cab he eyes a beggar on the street – “Bingo: *thirty*” – wearing some sort of weird, tacky, filthy green jumpsuit, unshaven, dirty hair greased back, and jokingly Price holds the cab’s door open for him. The bum, confused and mumbling, eyes locked shamefully on the pavement, holds an empty Styrofoam coffee cup out to us, clutched in a tentative hand.

“I suppose he doesn’t want the cab,” Price snickers, slamming the cab door.

“Ask him if he takes American Express.”

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.23.

“Do you take Am Ex?”
The bum nods yes and moves away, shuffling slowly.
It’s cold for April and Price walks briskly down the street
towards Evelyn’s brownstone, whistling “If I Were A Rich
Man....”¹⁶⁷

Here the qualitative impoverishment of the individual beggar is transmogrified into an instance of quantity (the thirtieth beggar Price has counted on their short taxi journey); the clothes of the tramp signifying an absolute difference (‘sort of weird’) from those interchangeable designer garments that measure the absolute identity of the yuppie demesne and which Bateman’s narrative tirelessly, and for the reader tiresomely, describes.

It is but a short step from such seeming expressions of moral lassitude to a total recuperation of the *Lebenswelt* within the operations of the commodity form, as individuals become just one more fetishized object in the chain of abstraction that disinterestedly links all objects together. In this nightmare of blandness, where all content is subject to an indefinite truancy – (to the point where such consumer lullabies as the work of Genesis, Whitney Houston and Huey Lewis and the News aptly provide the soundtrack for a psychopath) – Bateman’s topography, ‘the geography around which my reality revolved’, is rendered as a kind of pure aridity.¹⁶⁸ Absolute hedonism turns back on itself to become total asceticism, such that ‘where there was nature and earth, life and water, I saw a

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.7.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.375.

desert landscape that was unending'.¹⁶⁹ Everything from sex to salt cellars, slumgullion to stereos, is grist for the equivalency mill in which infelicities are carved up and blankly spat out in the manner of Bertolt Brecht's stockyard sausage machines, even while Bateman sleeps:

The dreams are an endless reel of car wrecks and disaster footage, electric chairs and grisly suicides, syringes and mutilated pinup girls, flying saucers, marble Jacuzzis, pink peppercorns.¹⁷⁰

As Bateman notes, 'surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in... this was civilisation as I saw it'.¹⁷¹ Of course, if meaning is only produced by difference, then a homogeneity of surface forestalls this at source and fosters the kind of society in which all residual humanism is effaced. Bateman's banal confession of brutality can thus be equally banally absorbed by those around him:

I pause, distracted, and then stand up. Before walking into the bathroom I mutter, "And then? I beat the living shit out of her." I open the medicine cabinet for a condom and, as I re-enter the bedroom, say "She had misspelled disabled. I mean that's not the reason I did what I did but... you know." I shrug. "She was too ugly to rape."

Daisy stands up, placing the spoon next to the Haagen-Dazs on the Gilbert Rode-designed nightstand.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.374.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.371. For Eagleton, '[e]ach act of commodity exchange is at once uniquely differentiated and a monotonous replaying of the same old story. The epitome of the commodity is thus the cult of fashion, in which the familiar returns with some slight variation, the very old and the very new caught up together in some oxymoronic logic of identity-in-difference.' *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p.317. This, of course, is the same imaginary logic that Guy Debord has identified as underwriting the society of the spectacle: 'Like modern society, the spectacle is at once united and divided. In both the unity is grounded in a split. As it emerges in the spectacle, however, this contradiction is itself contradicted by virtue of a reversal of its meaning: division is presented as unity, and unity as division.' Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994, 1967), p.36.

¹⁷¹ *American Psycho*, p.375.

I point. "No. Put it in the carton."
"Oh, sorry," she says.
She admires a Palazetti vase while I slip on the condom. I
get on top of her and we have sex and lying beneath me she is only a
shape, even with all the halogen lamps burning.¹⁷²

As elsewhere in the novel, Bateman's admission of homicidal culpabilities, which can almost be seen as a plea to make a difference, to make meaning (especially his taped confession), is readily factored into the all pervasive identity of the world around him, to the point where his statements are no more meaningful than any others. Bateman is not cut adrift from society, but rather fully "in touch with... humanity".¹⁷³ His oft-quizzed expertise on manners and presentation marks him out as a paradigmatic instance of his class. In this respect, we can understand the obsession with etiquette in the novel as merely an alibi for the deeper moral precepts which have been sublated by the dialectic of the market place and preserved in the fetish of dress codes.

Whilst manners once functioned as a discreet compact between puissance and pleasure, invigorating the social *Lebenswelt* with a set of naturally felt consensual practices that served as a bulwark against the rather more unpleasant coerciveness of the law, then the yuppie sociolect of *American Psycho* would seem to represent a wholesale collapse into means rather than ends, that is, means as ends. Which is to say that whereas the aesthetic *qua* manners (in Edmund

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p.213. Leigh Brock argues, not altogether persuasively, that '[i]f Ellis didn't describe Bateman's cold removal of himself from both his crimes and victims, the graphic violence would overwhelm the readers' and it is thus that '[t]he exceedingly graphic episodes become more dull

Burke's work for example) was seen as a means of securing social cohesion, in *American Psycho* pleasurable conduct becomes its own end, and thus, like the work of art itself, sinks into a kind of autotelic solipsism divorced from the social machinery it was designed to bolster. What begins with the idea of aestheticizing morality, finishes with the morality of aesthetics. If manners once served as a kind of perpetual serenade by the law, then such subliminal wooing may now be said to have assumed its own telos, a feature that is emblemized in that most pervasive and pernicious of terms – 'lifestyle'. Manners, in *American Psycho*, are subject to a moral kenosis as the ethical content of conduct is flushed out, leaving behind the pleasing husk of their form, such that 'the meticulous disciplining of the body' which Eagleton ascribes to eighteenth century manners is here parodied in a narcissistic obsession with tans, taut bellies and how many bench presses Bateman can do in the shortest possible time.¹⁷⁴ If, then, 'pleasurable conduct is the true index of successful hegemony' and '[t]he maladroit or aesthetically disproportioned thus signals in its modest way a certain crisis of political power', the etiquettal obsession of Bateman and his coterie would suggest that such hegemonization has secured itself as thoroughly as possible.¹⁷⁵ One of the novel's epigraphs, an extract from *Fortune* magazine's 'Miss Manners', points to just this conclusion:

than interesting'. Leigh Brock, 'Distancing in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*', *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 24, (1994), 6-8, (p.7).

¹⁷³ *American Psycho*, p.341.

¹⁷⁴ *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p.41.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.42.

That's what civilisation is about – doing it in a mannerly and not an antagonistic way. One of the places we went wrong was the naturalistic Rousseauian movement of the Sixties in which people said, “Why can't you just say what's on your mind?” In civilisation there have to be some restraints. If we followed every impulse, we'd be killing one another.¹⁷⁶

The irony here, of course, is that Bateman does end up killing people, precisely because he follows ‘every impulse’, for manners are just such a set of covertly organized impulses. They are the most refined apparatuses of capitalist hegemony and his butchery is thus no more than the splenetic expression of the logic of capital in its least unsullied form. For if capital has now achieved a kind of global consensus, it is a consensus riven with antagonisms which find their seat deep in the heart of the postmodern subject. As one of the other epigraphs to *American Psycho* attests, characters like Bateman ‘not only exist in our society, but indeed, must exist, considering the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed’.¹⁷⁷

Miss Manners' plea to act ‘in a mannerly and not an antagonistic way’ is a reminder of the imaginary topography of postmodernist hegemony and how, upon this terrain, resemblances, conformities and sympathies work to occlude the oppressive liabilities exacted by the law. Which is to say that dissent is always-already implicated in the moment of consensus. At one level, then, Bateman's mirrored relationship to the world is little more than a stark dramatization of the

¹⁷⁶ *American Psycho*, p.1. For Ellis, Bateman is “‘A mixture of *GQ* and *Stereo Review* and *Fangoria*... and *Vanity Fair*’”. Elizabeth Young, ‘The Beast in the Jungle, The Figure in the Carpet’, p.101.

erotic-aggressive tension that subtends the nexus between *imago* and infant, as he makes love to those he massacres. For Jacqueline Rose, 'this relation of the libidinal object-tie to identification reveals perhaps at its clearest the paradox that the subject finds or recognizes itself through an image which simultaneously alienates it, and hence, potentially confronts it. This is the basis of the close relationship between narcissism and aggressivity.'¹⁷⁸ It is a relationship that we can find also operating in the characterization of Case and the talismanic anger accompanying him throughout *Neuromancer*.

He still had his anger. That was like being rolled in some alley and waking to discover your wallet still in your pocket, untouched. He warmed himself with it, unable to give it a name or an object.¹⁷⁹

Accepting that Case and Bateman are fully hegemonized subjects, we can see their respective aggressivities as a 'working through' of the imaginary logic of the law. Which is to say that, on the one hand, the law is a narcissistic entity, regulated by itself and therefore self-authorizing, and that, on the other hand, this totalization occludes a bifurcation constitutively essential to its autonomy. It is a point also noted by Eagleton:

The law is the law: it must be obeyed for its own sake, since if one can adduce reasons for obeying it it ceases in that moment to be absolute. In this empty tautology, then, can be glimpsed something of

¹⁷⁷ *American Psycho*, p.1.

¹⁷⁸ Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1996, 1986), p.174.

¹⁷⁹ *Neuromancer*, p.186.

the madness of the law, which since it is a law unto itself, answerable to no other authority, is sheerly anarchic.¹⁸⁰

Inscribed within the law is a lawlessness essential to it that stems from the aboriginal compact by which the law came into being in the first place, when, in a moment of violent self-authorization, it announces a legality without reference to any other law but itself. As Žižek comments, “[a]t the beginning” of the law, there is a certain “outlaw”, a certain Real of violence which coincides with the act itself of the establishment of the reign of law’.¹⁸¹ For it to be efficacious the law must then proceed, as it were, with its fingers trailing in lethic waters, while still maintaining a crepuscular awareness of the fact that its primal scene has to and ‘will persist as a repressed traumatic kernel, since to eradicate this would be to abolish the condition of legality as such’.¹⁸² The name of this forgetting is that set of aesthetic practices we have been calling hegemony. Just as the infant is seduced by his *Gestalt* into an anticipation of powers he does not have, so the populace is seduced by the totality of the law into expunging the memory of the law’s fragmented and ultimately fragile grounding.

It is therefore altogether appropriate that Bateman’s confessional narrative discloses the normally occult fissuring of his subjectivity at just that point when

¹⁸⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and The Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), p.45.

¹⁸¹ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment As a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), p.204.

¹⁸² *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p.46.

he encounters for the first time the brute fact of the law behind the eternal seductiveness of hegemony:

...racing blindly down Greenwich I lose control entirely, the cab swerves into a Korean deli, next to a karaoke restaurant called Lotus Blossom I've been to with Japanese clients, the cab rolling over fruit stands, smashing through a wall of glass, the body of a cashier thudding across the hood, Patrick tries to put the cab in reverse but nothing happens, he staggers out of the cab, leaning against it, a nerve-racking silence follows, "nice going Bateman," he mutters, limping out of the store, the body on the hood moaning in agony, Patrick with no idea where the cop running toward him across the street has come from, he's yelling something into his walkie-talkie, thinking Patrick is stunned, but Patrick surprises him by lunging out before the cop can get to his gun and he knocks him over onto the sidewalk...¹⁸³

The narcissistic totality of the 'I', which has organized the narrative coherence of *American Psycho* until this point in the novel, here splinters, acceding to the alienation of the third person singular to the extent of taking that to the second power ("nice going Bateman"). Crucially this occurs when the consensual gives way to the coercive and Bateman recognizes the contingency of the law by attacking the policeman. The obscene face of the law thus comes to see itself in the mirror that is Bateman, as the repressed returns to re-enact the law's own conditions of possibility by staging a bloody battle for the right to assert legitimacy, which provisionally ends with Bateman 'shoot[ing] him in the face'.¹⁸⁴ That it is a battle for legitimacy is realized in the coded shift of personal pronouns:

¹⁸³ *American Psycho*, p.349.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.349.

...the terror he thought had passed engulfing him again, thinking; I have no idea what I've done to increase my chances of getting caught, I shot a saxophonist? A *saxophonist*? Who was probably a *mime* too? For *that* I get this? And in the near distance he can hear other cars coming...¹⁸⁵

The imaginary unity of the subject and the law is manifest in the 'I' here which implicitly acknowledges that what he has done is wrong and that he could therefore be theoretically caught. This sense of culpability is then dissolved by a series of questions about the value of the person he executed, to which the law can clearly offer no transcendental answers. In turn, this results in the re-fracturing of the imaginary unity, manifest in the form of the third person singular, as Bateman seeks to assert his own law and does so by killing more policemen.

This encounter with the law, then, constitutes Bateman's moment of subjectification, providing we take that to mean, as we have been doing so far, the persistence of a certain opacity in the signifying chain. As Ernesto Laclau argues, 'I am a subject precisely *because* I cannot be an absolute consciousness, because something constitutively alien confronts me'.¹⁸⁶ In this instance the absolutism of

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.350.

¹⁸⁶ Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipations* (London: Verso, 1996), p.21. In the 'Preface' to Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Laclau advances the necessity for such a formulation in its 'break with structure-subject dualism, positing the question of "social agency" in terms which clearly go beyond all objectivism. There is subject because the substance – objectivity – does not manage to constitute itself fully; the location of the subject is that of a fissure at the very centre of the structure. The traditional debate as to the relationship between agent and structure thus appears fundamentally displaced: the issue is no longer a problem of *autonomy*, of determinism versus free will, in which two entities fully constituted as "objectivities" mutually limit each other. On

the law 'alienates' the absolutism of Bateman and thus is disclosed the constitutive fracturing of the third person singular. Later in the novel this manifests itself more properly as a self-consciousness about the illusory construction of self;

...there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: *I simply am not there.*¹⁸⁷

The solipsism of the imaginary order leaves its subject bereft of the objectivity upon which subjectivity needs to be grounded, shearing it from the referent and stranding Bateman in the realm of pure ideation, one 'sign' among others. At the level of form this is manifest in *American Psycho* by the adherence throughout the novel to the present tense, as Bateman is consigned to a perpetual fugacity. Its effect at the level of content is precisely to abnegate the import of content, each sentence being interchangeable with another in a kind of temporal, and ultimately historical, paralysis that finds no release in the claustrophobic last words of the novel: 'THIS IS NOT AN EXIT'.¹⁸⁸

the contrary, the subject emerges as a result of the failure of substance in the process of its self-constitution.' Ernesto Laclau, 'Preface', in Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p.xv. It is in this light that we may read Lacan's otherwise misleading remark: 'What do we call a subject? Quite precisely, what in the development of objectivation, is outside of the subject.' Jacques Lacan, *Seminar I: Freud's Papers on Technique – 1953-54*, trans. by John Forrester (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.194.

¹⁸⁷ *American Psycho*, pp.376-377.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.399.

The ellipses that begin and end each segment of the text in the chapter concerning Bateman's encounter with the law would then seem to betoken a constitutive vacancy which can be read variously in terms of diachrony, objectivity and subjectivity, but ultimately can be thought of as an evacuation of content. As with the inventories of commodities, these 'paragraphs' are as close to assuming the form of a list of actions as it is possible to imagine without actually forsaking narrative completely. Each action is packaged by commas ('leaning against it, a nerve-racking silence follows') which mark the limits of equivalence at the level of sense, which if it is not yet the phoneme, is at least no longer that older syntactical unit of the sentence. That the form of the confession should properly assume the form of the commodity catalogue during Bateman's encounter with the law signifies the disjunction between his hegemonization by capital (which we notarised earlier with the term 'yuppie') and society's adherence to that diluted form of capitalism known as liberalism. However, the former is increasingly trespassing on the latter with the result that more so than ever before, the law of private property provides the informing principle behind the hegemony of late capitalism, transforming everything into an imaginary relationship with itself, as Marx argues:

With the mass of new objects grows the realm of alien powers to which man is subjected, and each new product is a new *potentiality* of mutual fraud and mutual pillage. Man becomes ever poorer as a man. And needs ever more *money* if he is to achieve mastery over the hostile being. [...] The *quantity* of money becomes more and more its sole *important* property. Just as it reduces itself in the course of its own movement to something *quantitative*. *Lack of moderation* and *intemperance* become its true standard. ...the

expansion of production and needs becomes the *inventive* and ever *calculating* slave of inhuman, refined, unnatural and *imaginary* appetites – for private property does not know how to transform crude need into *human* need. Its *idealism* is *fantasy*, *caprice* and *infatuation*.¹⁸⁹

We may trace some of this sorry appetite for money in Bateman's obsession with 'the mysterious Fisher account', which proceeds despite the fact that the narrative fails to recount him doing any work on the accounts he already has.¹⁹⁰ Equally, Bateman admits to stopping 'at an automated teller where just for the hell of it I take out another hundred dollars, feeling better for having an even five hundred in my wallet'.¹⁹¹ Money becomes valued here for its own sake, describing a circular correspondence that is ultimately merely quantitative.

It is only in Bateman's encounter with the law that we may glimpse a betrayal of this circular logic, as the synchrony of the imaginary order gives way to a subreption of the diachronic. For the tautology of 'the law is the law' works to occlude its own historicity, that is its conditions of possibility, but precisely in that work is disclosed those conditions, as Žižek argues:

Let us return to the case of capitalism: what one can present dialectically is the "synchronous" functioning of the capitalist system in so far as this system has already "posited its presuppositions", reordered its external starting points so that they now function as inner moments of the closed circle of its self-reproduction. The role of historical description is, however, to "go through" the fantasy

¹⁸⁹ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, trans. by Gregor Benton, in *Early Writings* (London: Penguin/New Left Review, 1974, 1844), pp.358-359.

¹⁹⁰ *American Psycho*, p.216.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.128.

which masks this vicious circle: to denounce the mythical narration by means of which the synchronous system retroactively organizes its own past, its own origins, and to render visible the contingent reality full of blood and brute force.¹⁹²

Capitalism's fantasy is, as Marx argues, the myth of primitive accumulation which 'plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology':

[T]he accumulation of capital presupposes surplus-value; surplus-value presupposes capitalist production; capitalist production presupposes the availability of considerable masses of capital and labour-power in the hands of commodity producers. The whole movement, therefore, seems to turn around in a never-ending circle, which we can only get out of by assuming a primitive accumulation (the "previous accumulation" of Adam Smith) which precedes capitalist accumulation; an accumulation which is not the result of the capitalist mode of production but its point of departure.¹⁹³

Opposed to this myth of the profligate and the frugal, Marx contends that '[I]n actual history, it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part'.¹⁹⁴ Bateman, a kind of *ne plus ultra* of capitalist subjectivity, is himself the repressed diachrony of the synchronic myth. The ritual torture and execution he enacts on those around him is a staging of the conditions of possibility of the "surplus wealth" that initiates capitalism, conditions of possibility that are inscribed in law. These barbarous statutes, as outlined by Marx in Chapter 28 of *Capital*, include whipping 'until the blood

¹⁹² *For They Know Not What They Do*, p.212.

¹⁹³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy – Volume 1*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin/New Left Review, 1976, 1867), p.873.

streams from their bodies', slicing off half an ear, slavery, branding and finally execution without mercy.¹⁹⁵ Bateman's excoriation of his victims can thus be understood as an allegorical stripping away of historical layers, an almost childish dismembering of the synchronic machine to discover the secret mechanism of meaning (diachrony) which elsewhere completely eludes him. The fact that he never finds anything except his 'utter indifference toward it', is not surprising because it is Bateman *qua* the pathology of capitalism as a historical process that is the real meaning.¹⁹⁶ Like the infant who retroactively posits the *corps morcelé* as the fantasy matrix of its totality, Bateman can find no origin for his "myth", no primal scene from which to index the conception of his subject position, for there is, as Gallop points out, 'nothing there'.¹⁹⁷

As is now clear, then, Bateman's confrontation with a law that is designed to protect his interests as a capitalist operates in *American Psycho* as a kind of faultline whose eruption lays bare the contingency of his subjectivity, the law, and indeed, the historical stasis of postmodernity. This break with the narcissistic circuit of signifiers comes when he 'decide[s] to make public what has been, until now, my private dementia' by confessing to his crimes as if they were crimes on Carnes' answer machine.¹⁹⁸ The demarcation between self and other, which we have earlier noted in terms of a split in personal pronouns, here assumes a fully social dimension as a split between private and public, or self and

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.874.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.896.

¹⁹⁶ *American Psycho*, p.377.

¹⁹⁷ *Reading Lacan*, p.86.

Other. However, Carnes grants no more credence to this statement than he does to any other, locked as he is, with Bateman, into an imaginary order that resists such evaluations. This rebuttal confirms Bateman's own eschewal of history and intersubjectivity, and he is therefore finally able to declare: 'I am a noncontingent human being'.¹⁹⁹ Such a declaration of the dissolution of particulars in the universal, however, betrays a history and an overdetermination that can only be covertly wished away. It is precisely at that point when Bateman states that '[t]his confession has meant *nothing*', that we know (smuggled in with the rare appearance of the past tense) meaning begins.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ *American Psycho*, p.352.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.377.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.377.

Chapter Two – Broken Hallelujahs: Mystery, History and Anamorphosis in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*¹

1: The Mystical Estate of Thomas Pynchon

He is, perhaps, most famous for not wanting to be famous. As with the author Bill Gray in Don DeLillo's *Mao II* (upon which he has favourably commented), articles and monographs about his work inevitably find their initial focus in 'his disappearance, his concealment, his retirement, his alleged change of identity, his rumoured suicide, his return to work, his work-in-progress, his death, his rumoured return'.² Indeed, he has been grouped with DeLillo, J.D. Salinger and William Wharton as a member of what Ron Rosenbaum has called the 'Party of Silence', a coterie whose 'varieties of reticence and concealment and self-effacement cumulatively constitute a provocative dissent from the culture of self-promotion that has swept contemporary publishing'.³ However, the fact that he

¹ A condensed version of this chapter was initially presented as a paper to the Scottish Renaissance Seminar ('The Margins of the Renaissance' Conference at the University of Stirling, 4 October 1997). I am grateful for the comments made by all the participants, particularly Vance Adair, John Drakakis and Terence Hawkes.

² Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (London: Vintage, 1992, 1991), p.31. Pynchon's rare comments ('This novel's a beauty. DeLillo takes us on a breathtaking journey, beyond the official version of our daily history, behind all easy assumptions about who we're supposed to be, with a vision as bold and a voice as eloquent and morally focused as any in American writing.') appear on the dust-jacket of this edition.

³ Ron Rosenbaum, 'The Man in the Glass House', *Independent on Sunday*, 7 September 1997, p.7.

has ‘*always* been an absence rather than a presence’⁴ has only prompted critics to articulate his silences for him, fastening upon his diffidence either as if it were an iconoclastic publicity mechanism or a key explanatory aid to be factored into a successful reading of his texts. In the most spectacular, if slightly satirical, example of the former, John Calvin Batchelor has even argued that his name is a pseudonym for J.D. Salinger.⁵ Of the latter adducements of his name, Humphrey Carpenter is typical in making the following connection:

Suppressing all but the barest biographical information about himself – his birthdate (1937) and early career – he has managed to remain so elusive that his very existence has been called in to doubt. Could he just be a pseudonym? This tactic is entirely in keeping with [his] novels, which play tantalisingly surrealist narrative games of hide and seek.⁶

Despite maintaining elsewhere in this article that ‘it is time he cast off the cloak of invisibility and made contact with his audience’, Carpenter seems happy enough here to assuage these anxieties by co-opting his absence (as the only kind of authorial guide available) for a critical strategy with which to approach his novels.⁷ ‘He’ is, of course, Thomas Pynchon.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁵ John Calvin Batchelor, ‘Thomas Pynchon is Not Thomas Pynchon; or, This is the End of the Plot Which Has No Name’, *Soho Weekly News*, 22-28 April 1976. Pynchon’s response to this inventive speculation was the laconic ‘Not bad, keep trying’. Tony Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon* (London; Methuen, 1982), p.18.

⁶ Humphrey Carpenter, ‘The American Goon Show’, *The Sunday Times* (‘Books Section’), 4 May 1997, p.8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.8.

Such invocations of the phantasmal 'Pynchon' must stand as some of the more esoteric declensions of authorization in literary criticism, even though DeLillo's Bill Gray discerns in them a thoroughly vernacular theme: "When a writer doesn't show his face, he becomes a local symptom of God's famous reluctance to appear".⁸ If, like God, Pynchon is always and in every way spoken for, some of his more astute critics have recognized in this a bitter irony, not only because he is actively invisible as an author, but also because the very feature which most commentators have lauded in his work, its indeterminacy, is one that gives the slip to such notions. J. Kerry Grant is exemplary in noting of *The Crying of Lot 49*, for instance, that 'even after a number of readings, the novel resists interpretation to an extraordinary degree, especially if "interpretation" is taken to mean the effort to tease out a unitary and more or less comprehensive account of the novel's message from the tangled network of metaphor and allusion that is Pynchon's trademark'.⁹ Such ambiguity inevitably disturbs notions of propriety and authority because, as Roland Barthes attests, 'multivalence... is a transgression of ownership'.¹⁰ It is therefore rather unsettling to find that, for Michael Berube, 'it is almost characteristic of Pynchon's readers... to complain about Pynchon's readers' in the name of Pynchon himself.¹¹ It is as if, he goes on, that '[b]eneath the Pynchon's critic's admonitions to other Pynchon critics, in other words, we may sense a kind of

⁸ *Mao II*, p.36.

⁹ J. Kerry Grant, *A Companion to 'The Crying of Lot 49'* (Athens and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.xii.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p.45.

¹¹ Michael Berube, *Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon and The Politics of the Canon* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p.283.

regressive nostalgia for the Author'.¹² Alec McHoul and David Wills have also picked up on this irony in one of the rare sustained attempts to interrogate Pynchon utilizing critical theory:

In fact it is very rare to encounter a reading of Pynchon's work which does not at some stage revert to a precritical notion of the author as not only integral consciousness but also identifiable historical person, and that in spite of the fact that the person is recognized as an enigma, and the 'author', in at least one of the novels, dissolves into an array of conflicting narrative voices.¹³

By forging the authorial signature of Pynchon to use as a kind of veridical warrant for specific readings, such critics inevitably attest to their own role as cultural guardians, a role for which the signature figures as a placatory alibi. Indeed, Pynchon's invisibility is central to the disclosure of the institutional prerogatives which condition the dissemination of not just his texts and their meanings, but also those of his more publicity-friendly colleagues, as Berube argues:

...Pynchon's absence and near-silence throw into high relief the cultural center's power of representation, whereby academic critics are explicitly confronted with their power to re-present a contemporary writer and thereby to make him somehow representative insofar as he is made canonical.¹⁴

¹² *Ibid.*, p.305.

¹³ Alec McHoul and David Wills, *Writing Pynchon: Strategies in Fictional Analysis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), p.6.

¹⁴ *Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon and the Politics of the Canon*, p.306.

We may make the provisional observation, then, that, despite eliding the process beneath the proprietorial guise of the sign, all authors' names function as signifiers to which the critic appends a signified. Thus, Pynchon's manifest status as a signifier renders this elision conspicuous by occasioning an implicit comparison with authors' names which do apparently operate as signs.¹⁵

Pynchon's malleability *qua* signifier has perhaps abetted the work of canonization his writings have been subject to. He is, as Berube notes 'one of the most written-about post-war writers in English'.¹⁶ Specifically, Pynchon's work has maintained a singular presence in the emergent postmodern canon. Indeed, the enduring quarantine of the 'Pynchon' personality contrasts tellingly with his infectious ubiquity in the canonizing volumes of critics as diverse as Linda Hutcheon, Brian McHale, Fredric Jameson, Edmund Smyth, Geoffrey Lord, Christopher Nash and Steven Connor.¹⁷ As we have already noted, much of the reason for Pynchon's emblematic status as a postmodern writer can be found in the ambivalence generated by his texts. This ambivalence is then taken to be

¹⁵ Such a distinction relies on the fact that '[t]he sign is defined by a fixed relationship between the signifier and the signified represented by the signifier – its *signification* – whereas the signifier, through its incessant sliding, referring to the other signifiers in the chain, brings forth the effect-of-sense'. Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment; Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994), p.47.

¹⁶ *Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon and the Politics of the Canon*, p.51.

¹⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988); Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Edmund J. Smyth, ed., *Postmodernism and Contemporary fiction* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1991); Geoffrey Lord, *Postmodernism and Notions of National Difference: A Comparison of Postmodern Fiction in Britain and America* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996); Christopher Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction: A Guide* (London: Longman, 1993); and, Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997). It is worth pointing out that, with the exception of McHale and Lord, most of these critics merely cite Pynchon as exemplary of postmodernism without discussing his work in any detail.

characteristic of postmodernity itself in the kind of connection that Hutcheon makes here, for example:

We are emerging from a resolutely formalist age – which some call modernism. Its questioning of and simultaneous yearning for some order which would have a privileged explanatory power is exactly what has forced *postmodernism* to try to move beyond this “referential agnosticism”. Its attempts to do so are always self-reflexive; they may be mutually contradictory at times; they may raise more questions than they answer. But that is the only way they can approach what Thomas Pynchon once called “pulsing Stelliferous Meaning”.¹⁸

Patricia Waugh has located this contradictory character of Pynchon’s work in the conflict of registers he deploys as they instantiate what DeLillo has famously termed the ‘white noise’¹⁹ of the postmodern:

...the systems and structures presented to the reader never add up to a body of meaning or an interpretation. Documentation, obsessional systems, the languages of commerce, of the legal system, of popular culture, of advertising: hundreds of systems compete with each other, resisting assimilation to any one received paradigm, and thus the normal channels of data-processing.²⁰

Faced with such competing systems, ‘Pynchon’s characters are,’ according to David Seed, ‘constantly driven by the impulse to locate themselves within larger schemes which would authenticate their own experience, but waver between the

¹⁸ *A Poetic of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, p.157. The quotation can be found in *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.56.

¹⁹ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 1986, 1984).

²⁰ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988, 1984), p.39.

appalling extremes of total randomness (where no pattern is discernible) and paranoia (where *everything* is subsumed into pattern).²¹ Pynchon's texts, then, like Pynchon himself, seem to bear witness to the preponderance of the enigma of the signifier at the expense of the transparency of the sign. Which is to say, as Leo Bersani concedes about *Gravity's Rainbow*, that 'our most important discovery will be that [Pynchon's work] resists analysis'.²²

In this respect, Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, is emblematic of his work as a whole.²³ While it was not initially afforded the sort of praise that greeted his first novel, Patrick O'Donnell has argued that '[t]he criticism that has emerged in the twenty-three years since [its] publication... suggests that it is a much more subtle and complex novel than most of its earlier reviewers, both positive and negative, allowed'.²⁴ Set in 1964, *The Crying of Lot 49* narrates the futile attempt of Oedipa Maas, a Californian housewife, to execute the estate of her recently deceased ex-lover, and financial mogul, Pierce Inverarity. For O'Donnell, Oedipa, as the central character of the novel, 'can be seen to embody the condition of indeterminacy – which enables the act of inquiry

²¹ David Seed, 'In Pursuit of the Receding Plot: Some American Postmodernists', in *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, pp.36-53 (p.49).

²² Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p.194.

²³ Pynchon's novels and the editions used here are; *V* (1963); *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Picador, 1979, 1967); *Gravity's Rainbow* (London: Picador, 1975, 1973); *Vineland* (1990); and *Mason and Dixon* (1997). His early short stories are collected as *Slow Learner* (London: Vintage, 1995, 1984).

²⁴ Patrick O'Donnell, ed., *New Essays on 'The Crying of Lot 49'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.8.

and the scrutiny of existing conditions – that can be set against the assumptions and certainties of Western positivism’.²⁵

Such ‘assumptions and certainties’ perhaps succumb to their first self-doubts a mere five words into the opening chapter with the inaugural declaration of Oedipa’s name. ‘Few commentaries on the novel,’ Grant asserts, ‘are silent on the subject of Oedipa’s name’²⁶; ‘[i]t is,’ for Tanner, ‘right out of the line of plausibility’.²⁷ Indeed, a certain credulity may be invoked by the onomastic condition of any of Pynchon’s characters. Absurdity seems almost wilfully to attend such names as Dr Hilarius, Randolph Dribble, Genghis Cohen, Mike Fallopian, Diocletian Blobb and Messrs Warpe, Wistfull, Kubitschek and McMingus. This absurdity arises from the neo-Dickensian baptisms of the characters in which pedestrian titles are refused for the services of more spectacular monikers. However, whereas in Dickens the spectacular improbability of these sobriquets finds a kind of sober redress in their allegorical function, Pynchon’s names are far more giddily limber in their assignations. They advertize a semantic density which, on closer inspection, either yields too much or too little, as Debra A. Castillo comments:

Pynchon’s... names playfully generate a series of potential stories, perhaps even necessary fictions, but he gives us both too much and too little nominative significance. In hesitating between dream and materiality, the overdetermined and the literal, he provokes

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.9.

²⁶ *A Companion to ‘The Crying of Lot 49’*, p.3.

²⁷ *Thomas Pynchon*, p.60.

a ritual reluctance to choose a single story, a single identity, an unequivocal name, a clear motive, a definitive solution.²⁸

The characters' names promise a wealth of signification both by virtue of their difference from a vernacular onomastics and their identification with a specific literary tradition of antonomasia. However, if this is so at the level of the signifier, adductions for such an interpretation prove difficult to track down and the reader is forced to concede that the signified consigns itself to the former, rather than the latter, economy of naming. As Castillo suggests here, in producing such a deadlock, these names then provide a local dramatization of the general themes of ambivalence in the novel as a whole.

We may examine this ambivalence in more concrete terms by attending to the example of Mucho Maas, Oedipa's husband. The connotations of his name are rich in number, but it is this very wealth which impoverishes its analytical utility. 'Mucho' is Spanish for 'a lot', he is haunted by working in a car-lot – his 'lot' in life, as it were – the narrator constantly informs us that there are a lot of clues, and the novel is named after the crying of a 'lot' which finishes the narrative. The resonances are certainly abundant, but in the diversity of their attachments they are also superfluous: too much ultimately means too little. Equally, we may find a kind of semantic hubris at work in Mucho's surname. Cathy N. Davidson finds that, in translation, 'Maas', is the Afrikaans word for 'web' or 'net', thus suggesting 'someone trapped in various intermingling mazes

²⁸ Debra A. Castillo, 'Borges and Pynchon: The Tenuous Symmetries of Art', in *New Essays on*

and meshes'.²⁹ Judith Chambers, on the other hand, points out that 'in Dutch 'Maas' means 'mesh' or 'stitch' and is an idiom for 'to slip through the meshes and find an avenue of escape''.³⁰ With a somewhat greater licence, Tanner notes that "'Maas' has been read as suggesting Newton's second law of motion in which 'mass' is the term denoting a quantity of inertia. So the name suggests at once activity and passivity.'³¹ Indeed, if we follow this tack, we might perhaps concede that 'Maas' read as 'mass' refers to 'a lot' of something. Such tautological ironies are perhaps endorsed if we consider that 'mass' can be defined as 'a large coherent body of matter without a definite shape' or as 'a collection of the component parts of something': in other words, as something definitely there but not definitely something.³²

The onomastic economy of *The Crying of Lot 49* readily accedes to such a definition, even if it is difficult to tally this with the particular instance of Mucho Maas. In this respect, one final sift through the semantic detritus of his surname might disclose its tendentious connection to the religious Mass which celebrates the Eucharist, that most symbolic of naming acts which situates the world of things within the world of meaning. All names formally mimic the act of consecration by recuperating the sheerly material to the plenitude of the metaphysical, and this, perhaps, could be Pynchon's point. As the titles of the

²⁹ 'The Crying of Lot 49', pp.21-46 (p.28.-29).

²⁹ Cathy N. Davidson, 'Oedipa as Androgyne in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*', *Contemporary Literature*, 18, (1977), 38-50, (p.43).

³⁰ Judith Chambers, *Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), p.101.

³¹ *Thomas Pynchon*, p.60.

³² *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. by Patrick Hanks, 2nd edn (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1986).

characters seem to refuse a specific content-level designation, they thus force our attention back to the level of form itself, a form which, in the next step, then becomes its own content. This content is a kind of paternity suit of the sign in which competing signifieds vie for the authority of filiation. It is a trial, one may even say a labour, for which there is always insufficient evidence. Indeed, the terse rejoinder Oedipa challenges Kotecks with early in her quest “‘Sorting isn’t work?’” – pays grim testament to the exasperating toil involved in the process of meaning production.³³ Any adjudication must therefore be based ‘[u]pon incertitude, upon unlikelihood’, giving rise to the famous doubt voiced by Stephen Dedalus that ‘[p]aternity may be a legal fiction’.³⁴

It is perhaps instructive to invoke *Ulysses* as a counterpoint to the work of Pynchon here. In part, such a comparison serves a more generic purpose, because if *The Crying of Lot 49* has been deemed as thoroughly representative of postmodernism then, equally, *Ulysses*, according to Maurice Beebe and many others, ‘can be seen as a demonstration and summation of the major features of the entire [modernist] movement’.³⁵ Like Pynchon’s novel, *Ulysses* appears to exile the signified and proclaim the signifier king. The Homeric correspondences that structure the narrative would seem to stand as the most obvious and telling example of this. However, as soon as we establish the *Odyssey* as an intertext – and how could we fail to given the title, the propaedeutic letters written by Joyce

³³ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.59.

³⁴ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Minerva, 1994, 1936), p.219.

³⁵ Maurice Beebe, ‘*Ulysses* and the Age of Modernism’, in ‘*Ulysses*’: *Fifty Years*, ed. by Thomas F. Staley (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1974), pp.172-188 (p.176).

and the vast *apparatus criticus* surrounding the novel – the kingdom of the signifier comes to seem much more like a regency, a warming of the throne for an infant signified. Unlike the nomadic cosmology generated by the onomastics of *The Crying of Lot 49*, ‘the Joycean text’, for Bersani, ‘escapes from the reader’s dangerous freedom merely by insisting that it be read with an excruciatingly close attention and a nearly superhuman memory’:

It asks that we be nothing but the exegetical machinery necessary to complete its sense. *Ulysses* is constantly proposing homework, work we can do outside the text (checking Dublin geography, rereading Homer, Dante, Goethe, Shakespeare, Arnold, the theosophists, Gaelic legends), and in thus insisting on how much it needs us, it also saves itself from us. [...] *Ulysses* promises a critical utopia: the final elucidation of its sense, the day when all the connections will have been discovered and collected in a critical Book that would objectively repeat *Ulysses*, which, in being the exegetical double of its source, would express the quidditas of Joyce’s novel, would be *Ulysses* replayed as the whole truth of *Ulysses*.³⁶

Put simply, the task of interpretation is genuinely forbidding for both novels; the difference resides in the fact that in *Ulysses* ‘it has already been done by the author and we simply have to catch up with him’.³⁷

We cannot, of course, catch up with Pynchon, and not only because we do not know who or where he is; although, in this respect, and in opposition to Joyce, his only published comment on the text – ‘a “novel”... in which I seem to

However, as Brian McHale and others have noted, ‘*Ulysses* has lately entered upon a strange second career as a postmodernist text’. *Constructing Postmodernism*, p.43.

³⁶ *The Culture of Redemption*, p.175.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.175.

have forgotten most of what I thought I'd learned up till then' – seems designed merely to deflect critical attention.³⁸ Nor do we fail to catch him because we lack the Olympian views afforded by clambering up stacks of expository handbooks, for, as Berube notes, 'what is distinctive for nonspecialists in Pynchon criticism is... its sheer volume, its status as the newest burgeoning light industry in the critical enterprise zone'.³⁹ Indeed, the extravagance of this analytical project, like the onomastic prodigality it seeks to master, only serves to attest to the promiscuity of the signifier in Pynchon. With *The Crying of Lot 49* we are squarely faced with the void of parturition, the 'mystical estate' of filiation⁴⁰ in which, for Freud, 'paternity is a hypothesis, based on an inference and a premise'.⁴¹ It is with just such an hypothesis that *Ulysses* would seem to flirt only to fetishize it as fact, as Bersani laments:

For authors, the anguish of paternity is experienced as an uncertainty about the property of their work, about who owns it and if it is indeed their own. [...] In our tireless elucidation of *Ulysses*, we certify Joyce's paternity, we bring his work back to him, we eliminate what Stephen describes as the natural enmity between father and son by showing how the book gives birth to its author.⁴²

Pynchon, who we may perhaps say is father in name only, has forsaken the anxieties of authorial paternity for those of readerly conception. The speculative

³⁸ *Slow Learner*, p.22. Marc W. Redfield observes of this comment that 'blindness and irony are indistinguishable, the difference between them becoming provocatively irrelevant'. Marc W. Redfield, 'Pynchon's Postmodern Sublime', *PMLA*, 104:3, (1989), 152-162, (p.162).

³⁹ *Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon and the Politics of the Canon*, p.285.

⁴⁰ *Ulysses*, p.218.

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 23 (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), p.114.

pedigree of the Pynchonian name, its denotative wantonness, problematizes the genealogy of its signifying litter and thereby reveals it to be merely a letter. Stripped of its status as a sign, the bastard signifier is thus refused a destiny in the same manoeuvre, forced out of a self-ratifying tradition and into a genuinely novel production of meaning. In this respect, no other name in the novel, at least in one of its readings, offers a more striking commentary on the problematic of inheritance and lineage than that of its central character.

2: Oedipus Tex

In a letter to Carl Jung, written two months before their voyage to America, Freud confessed to an uncertainty over the content of the Clark lectures he would be giving there: 'What,' he ponders, 'am I to say to those people?'⁴³ His deliberations led him to conclude 'that the audience is... at our mercy, under obligation to applaud whatever we bring them'.⁴⁴ The vaguely menacing register of these comments is only underscored by the revelation to Jung shortly before landing, of the nature of his gift to the unwitting New World: "'They don't know that I am bringing them the plague'".⁴⁵ We may assume with André Green that

⁴² *The Culture of Redemption*, p.177.

⁴³ Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung, *The Freud/Jung Letters: The Correspondence Between Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung*, ed. by William McGuire, trans. by Ralph Mannheim and R.F.C. Hull (London: Penguin, 1991, 1974), p.153.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.153.

⁴⁵ André Green, 'Oedipus, Freud, and Us', trans. by C. Coman, in *Psychoanalytic Approaches to Literature and Film*, ed. by Maurice Charney and Joseph Reppen (London and Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1987), pp.215-237 (p.227). Shoshana Felman also refers to this remark in rather more cautionary terms: 'Freud, apparently, said to Jung (who reported it to

this remark ‘constitutes[s] a statement that one would attribute to Oedipus as he approaches Thebes, a city that in one sense he has just freed. The plague, in Freud’s case... is no other than unconscious thought against which culture will fight to the end...’.⁴⁶ ‘Culture’, in the form of a number of postmodern authors, has duly exercised itself over the incipient Oedipalization of the New World. If D.M. Thomas’s Ferenczi claims optimistically of the trip that ‘America is eager to receive our movement’⁴⁷, E.L. Doctorow’s narrator is rather less sanguine:

Of course Freud’s immediate reception in America was not auspicious. A few professional alienists understood his importance, but to most of the public he appeared as some kind of German sexologist, an exponent of free love who used big words to talk about dirty things. At least a decade would have to pass before Freud would have his revenge and see his ideas begin to destroy sex in America forever.⁴⁸

Precisely what the narrator means by this last remark is not altogether clear, but we may perhaps discern the workings of a crude Oedipal algorithm beneath the hyperbole. For, shortly after returning to Europe, Jung wrote that ‘[i]n America the mother is decidedly the dominant member of the family. American culture really is a bottomless abyss; the men become a flock of sheep and the women

Lacan): “They don’t know that we bring with us the Plague”. Shoshana Felman, ‘Beyond Oedipus: The Specimen Story of Psychoanalysis’, in *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*, ed. by Maud Ellman (Harlow: Longman, 1994), pp.76-102 (p.102).

⁴⁶ ‘Oedipus, Freud, and Us’, p.227. It is perhaps worth noting here that only after his 1909 trip to America did Freud publicly rename the ‘*Kerncomplex*’ as the ‘Oedipus complex’, c.f. Sigmund Freud, ‘A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men: Contributions to the Psychology of Love I’ (1910), in *The Penguin Freud Library*, Volume 7, ed. by Angela Richards and Albert Dickson, trans. by James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1973-91), pp.227-242 (p.238). Hereafter cited as *P.F.L.*. This action may well have had something to do with the ‘Oedipal’ strain beginning to obtain in his relationship with Jung. For more on this see note 50.

⁴⁷ D.M. Thomas, *The White Hotel* (London: Penguin, 1981), p.9.

⁴⁸ E.L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (London: Picador, 1984, 1974), p.34.

play the ravening wolves.’⁴⁹ However, once America had been exposed to the father of psychoanalysis (‘Pater’ as Jung called him⁵⁰), with his gift of the ‘plague’ from an ‘entropic European civilisation’⁵¹, then such reverence for the mother was seemingly doomed, as Doctorow’s narrator bemoans:

Houdini was destined to be, with Al Jonson, the last of the great shameless mother lovers, a nineteenth-century movement that included such men as Poe, John Brown, Lincoln and James McNeil Whistler.⁵²

Ever since his unhappy discovery of the New World, then, Freud’s infection has spread to the point where all culture is riddled, we might say, with the same lament, a lament most succinctly expressed by Roland Barthes’ rhetorical question: ‘Doesn’t every narrative lead back to Oedipus?’⁵³

If every story is, indeed, basically the tale of Oedipus, *The Crying of Lot 49* is, perhaps, a singular instance of this precept. Our warrant for this assertion is, of course, initially drawn from Oedipa’s name; as Grant points out ‘[t]he

⁴⁹ *The Freud/Jung Letters*, p.163.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.164. It is perhaps worth noting that during the period leading up to and including the trip to America, Freud and Jung became embroiled in something of an Oedipal contest, as the former implies in writing to the latter: ‘It is remarkable that on the same evening that I formally adopted you as an eldest son, anointing you as my successor and crown prince... than then and there you should have divested me of any paternal dignity, and that the divesting seems to have given you as much pleasure as investing your person gave me’. C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. by Aniela Jaffé, trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (London: Fontana, 1995, 1961), p.397. D.M. Thomas gives this full play by allowing his fictional Ferenczi to note that ‘Jung said to me later,’ following one of Freud’s outbursts aboard the outgoing ship, ‘that at that moment Freud had *lost* authority, as far as he was concerned’. *The White Hotel*, p.11.

⁵¹ *Ragtime*, p.36.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.34.

⁵³ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, 1973), p.47.

association of Oedipa with the Sophoclean Oedipus is almost a leitmotif of critical writing on the novel, with Freud coming in a close second'.⁵⁴ Tony Tanner, however, scoffs at the utility of this connection:

...given that the riddle Oedipus finally has to solve concerns his own parents, parricide and incest, and given that this in no way applies to Oedipa, we may pause.⁵⁵

Our pause, *pace* Tanner, affords us the opportunity of both dismissing the invocation of the Sophoclean Oedipus as a literal paradigm for *The Crying of Lot 49*, whilst also allowing us to attend to the thematic resonances betokened by the comparison. In particular, we might note that the 'parricide' Tanner refers to finds an explicit echo in the nature of Oedipa's quest. If she is not investigating the death of her own father (such biological affiliations are, significantly, only manifest in the moment of their transgression), she does, however, spend the novel tracking down the deathly effects of Pierce Inverarity, a 'founding father'⁵⁶ whose 'legacy was America'.⁵⁷ Oedipa, we might provisionally argue, is thus attempting to construct a genealogy – (Tanner's 'parents') – of the American nation and her place in it.

⁵⁴ *A Companion to 'The Crying of Lot 49'*, p.4.

⁵⁵ *Thomas Pynchon*, p.60. It is perhaps worth noting Terry P. Caesar's assertion, referred to with approval by Tanner, that "'Maas" can be voiced to sound like "my ass"; this Oedipa is no Oedipus, or only one at the earnest reader's peril'. Terry P. Caesar, 'A Note on Pynchon's Naming', *Pynchon Notes*, 5, (1981), 5-10, (p.5). Given the illustrious associations of his own name, we can only guess why Caesar chooses to voice such ridicule. It may well be, as McHoul and Wills observe, that '[a]t best, or at most, what Pynchon writings have given rise to is a certain informality, something of a modulation in the tone of academic address'. *Writing Pynchon: Strategies in Fictional Analysis*, p.1.

⁵⁶ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.16.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.123.

What dogs Oedipa's genealogical project, however, is a form of incest. If incest finds more or less literal expression in *The Crying of Lot 49* as the contravention of agnatic laws, such as when, for example, Oedipa spies a boy 'kissing his mother passionately goodbye, using his tongue'⁵⁸, it also achieves a multivalent presence as a relation of tautology. This relation, which we have already designated as imaginary, perhaps finds its most striking depiction in the description of Mucho's car lot:

Even if enough exposure to the unvarying grey sickness had somehow managed to immunise him, he could still never accept the way each owner, each shadow, filed in only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else's life. As if it were the most natural thing. To Mucho it was horrible. Endless, convoluted incest.⁵⁹

The first, and not entirely incidental, feature to be noted about the remarkable passage from which this quotation is plucked, is the reference to 'sickness'. This invokes a comparison with the Oedipal plague besetting Thebes, and phrases like 'infected by its grey'⁶⁰ and 'the infected city'⁶¹ bolster this connection throughout the novel. Its association with the process of exchange here is also telling, but, even more invidious is the latter's representation as incest. If the term itself suggests the obviation of any differential matrix from which meaning may be

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.85.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.90.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.80.

gleaned, then the pejorative figuration of the commodity form (as ‘horrible’, ‘sickness’ and ‘incest’) also attests to the role of value in this process, or, more precisely, its transmutation from a qualitative use to a quantitative exchange. The ‘unvarying grey sickness’ is not merely indicative of a reference to abstraction *per se* in this respect, for, as Fredric Jameson proposes, ‘[s]ameness... is not merely the concept of the category of this particular object (several different things being steaks, cars, linen, or books) but also, and above all, the equivalence of their *value*’.⁶² This value is, then, tautological, an incestuous construct in which we can recognize Malcolm Bowie’s succinct delineation of the imaginary as ‘the scene of a desperate delusional attempt to be and to remain “what one is” by gathering to oneself ever more instances of sameness, resemblance and self-replication’.⁶³ The infection of otherness by the plague of self is, for Marx, a defining characteristic of the commodity form, for ‘[w]hat chiefly distinguishes a commodity from its owner is the fact that every other commodity counts for it only as the form of appearance of its own value’.⁶⁴

As in *Neuromancer*, the encryption of all haecceities within the secret of the commodity form also extends to the codification of space itself. Nowhere is this more apparent than the aptly-named San Narciso, the ‘domicile, and headquarters’ of Pierce Inverarity and ‘the place he’d... put down the plinth course of capital on which everything afterwards had been built’:

⁶² Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1996, 1990), p.23.

⁶³ Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London: Fontana, 1991), p.92.

Like many named places in California it was less an identifiable city than a group of concepts – census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access-roads to its own freeway. ...if there was any vital difference between it and the rest of Southern California, it was invisible on first glance.⁶⁵

As the name 'San Narciso' suggest, 'difference' is here dissipated in the solution of 'capital' which gives rise to the city in the first place. Urban particulars are thus subordinated to a general principle of abstract equivalency or 'concepts'. This subordination then exacts its price in terms of deracination, as all specific meaning for the city is always-already forestalled by referral to an abstract *langue* that must necessarily be elsewhere. In this respect the logic of San Narciso is very much bound to its founding premises, for, as Jameson observes, 'money is... both abstract (making everything equivalent) and empty and uninteresting, since its interest lies outside itself'.⁶⁶ The secret source of this 'interest' is, of course, ultimately labour, as Lyle, in Don DeLillo's *Players*, comes to understand during the course of a similar urban lament:

He felt lessened somehow. Freighter cranes slanted across the tops of sheds in the Brooklyn dock area. It was the city, the heat, an endless sense of repetition. The district repeated itself in blocks of monochromatic stone. He was present in *things*. There was more of him here through the idle nights than he took home with him to vent and liberate. He thought about nights. He imagined the district never

⁶⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1, trans. by Been Fowkes (London: Penguin/New Left Review, 1990, 1976), p.179.

⁶⁵ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.14.

⁶⁶ Fredric Jameson, 'Culture and Finance Capital', *Critical Enquiry*, 24:1, (1997), 246-265, (p.264).

visited, empty of human transaction, and how buildings such as these would seem to hold untouchable matter, enormous codifications of organic decay. He tried to imagine the immense complexity of going home.⁶⁷

The 'endless sense of repetition' that Lyle feels here may be read as an awareness of form *qua* abstraction, because it is only with the liberation of an object from its quiddity in the moment of conceptualization that the conditions of possibility for iteration are initially met. Repetition is, in this sense, a haemorrhaging of content and one that Lyle traces to an excentric secretion in the very buildings of the city itself – '[t]here was more of him here... than he took home with him'. If he feels 'lessened somehow', his vitality sapped and stored as inorganic matter in the 'blocks of monochromatic stone', it is because, as Terry Eagleton writes, '[w]hen capital employs labour rather than vice versa, the dead come to assume a vampiric power over the living, since capital itself is simply "dead" or stored labour'.⁶⁸ The city thus holds a kind of uncanny fascination, concealing the living in the dead and the dead in the living. Unhomeliness thereby comes to assume an intolerable ubiquity which renders even the attempt to plot a trajectory for a symbolic 'home', through the convoluted layers of mediation, a task of 'immense complexity'.

As such, it also prompts a thoroughgoing alienation and, in this respect, we may note that Oedipa, maintaining a kind of symbolic detachment from her milieu is more of a driver than a *flâneur*. It may perhaps be instructive at this

⁶⁷ Don DeLillo, *Players* (London: Vintage, 1977), p.49.

point to invoke Ulysses once more. In particular we may profitably attend to the perambulations of Bloom through Dublin at the beginning of 'The Lotus Eaters':

By lorries along Sir John Rogerson's Quay Mr Bloom walked soberly, past Windmill lane, Leask's the linseed crusher's, the postal telegraph office. [...] And past the sailors' homes. He turned from the morning noises of the quayside and walked through Lime street. By Brady's cottages a boy for the skins lolled, his bucket of offal linked, smoking a chewed fagbutt. [...] Tell him if he smokes he won't grow. [...] He crossed Townsend street, passed the frowning face of Bethel. [...] And past Nichols' the undertaker's. [...] In Westland row he halted before the window of the Belfast and Oriental Tea Company and read the legends of lead-papered packets.... He turned away and sauntered across the road.⁶⁹

Bloom's leisurely ramble around the docks and thoroughfares of Dublin follows in the tracks of Baudelaire's *flâneur* as he was theorized by Walter Benjamin:

The street became a dwelling for the *flâneur*; he is as much at home among the façades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls. To him the shiny, enamelled signs of businesses are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his salon.⁷⁰

The *gemütlich* metropolis of Bloom and the *flâneur*, however, contrasts tellingly with the blunt refusals of Oedipa's urban experience. If, for Bloom, the city's homeliness proceeds from the 'slow grace'⁷¹ of his discursion, his ambulatory encounters with fellow denizens and their wares, then Oedipa's alienation arises

⁶⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Marx* (London: Phoenix, 1997), p.32.

⁶⁹ *Ulysses*, pp.73-74.

⁷⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1997, 1973), p.37.

⁷¹ *Ulysses*, p.74.

from her '70mph'⁷² dash along the unnamed *Blitzbahns* where 'address numbers were in the 70 and then 80,000s She had never known numbers to run so high. It seemed unnatural.'⁷³ Indeed, all aleatory commerce with either people or things is obviated 'by miles of fence topped with barbed wire and interrupted now and then by guard towers'.⁷⁴ Even the celerity of her odyssey fails to confer any advantages upon Oedipa because it merely turns out to be the 'illusion of speed, freedom, wind in your hair, unreeling landscape'.⁷⁵ The reason it is an illusion lies in the fact that, as another postmodern author, Milan Kundera observes, it is merely fleetness by proxy:

Speed is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on man. As opposed to a motorcyclist, the runner is always present in his body, forever required to think about his blisters, his exhaustion; when he runs he feels his weight, his age, more conscious than ever of himself and of his time of life. This all changes when man delegates the faculty of speed to a machine: from then on, his own body is outside the process, and gives over to a speed that is non-corporeal, non-material, pure speed, speed itself, ecstasy speed.⁷⁶

There is a certain felicity in Kundera's use of the word 'ecstasy' to designate the experience imparted by mechanical speed, for ecstasy, as its Greek etymology in *ekstasis* suggests, is a form of displacement. In this respect, it articulates a variation on the subjective unkenneling we have already noted as part of Lyle's metropolitan ontology. This ecstasy then finds appropriate expression as a kind

⁷² *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.15.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.15.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.15.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁷⁶ Milan Kundera, *Slowness*, trans. by Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p.4.

of arterial lotus in *The Crying of Lot 49* where Oedipa is described as ‘some single melted crystal of urban horse’ in the ‘hypodermic needle’ of the narcotizing road.⁷⁷

The difference between Bloom’s and Oedipa’s peregrinations through their respective cities stems from their contrary understandings of urban space. We may, following John Lechte, characterize this as the difference obtaining between a spatial idiolect and a civic grammar:

The proper meaning of urban space is the meaning based exclusively on causality and determination. Its inevitable accompaniment is a functionalist notion of space. The space of the idiolect, by contrast, is produced by an absolutely singular appropriation of space. Considered from the perspective of the collectivity of idiolects, the singular appropriation of space gives way to random distributions of all kinds, distributions which *are* people walking in the city.⁷⁸

We may interpret Bloom’s aleatory stroll, then with his leisurely excursions (both mental and physical), as an idiolectic appropriation of space. In contrast, the ‘group of concepts’ which Oedipa discerns on her approach to San Narciso betrays her inscription within the abstractive syntax of the city planners and, ultimately, ‘the plinth course of capital on which everything afterwards had been built’.⁷⁹ Indeed, there is a sense in which Oedipa’s city is not built in space at all, but rather on time. The specialized zones of San Narciso, ‘with access roads to

⁷⁷ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.16.

⁷⁸ John Lechte, ‘(Not) Belonging in Postmodern Space’, in *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, ed. by Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, 1995), pp.99-111 (p.105).

its own freeway'⁸⁰, disclose a preoccupation with the facility of commerce and an ease of movement. Such expeditiousness can only be realized by the instrumental elision of spatiality by temporality: space, in other words, is displaced.

Symptomatic of this exile is Oedipa's search for the meaning of San Narciso other than in the city itself:

...she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern California, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate.⁸¹

Picking up on the notion of the riddle of circuit and city here, we may note the striking correspondence with Marx's remark that '[v]alue... does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic'.⁸² If labour is, ultimately, the occulted meaning of both chipboard and civic centre, the secret of their immediate resemblance is bound to the facilitation of profit from that labour. Commenting on a 1990 exhibition in New York's Museum of Modern Art entitled 'Information Art: Diagramming Microchips', Scott Bukatman (in a context unrelated to *The Crying of Lot 49*) notes that...

⁷⁹ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.14.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.14.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp.14-15.

⁸² *Capital*, Volume 1, p.167.

...the show presented enlargements of computer-produced diagrams reminiscent of an aerial view of urban sprawl (this resemblance is no coincidence – the chip, like the city, is designed for ease of circulation, constant flow, and dense maximization of available space).⁸³

The circuit, then, with its connotative resonances listed here by Bukatman, appears as an adequate figure for the city because both designs proceed from the same instrumental logic; a logic which, to recall Lechte's rhetorical analogy, fosters the aphorism at the expense of the apostrophe. Indeed, the irony of the comparison is, perhaps, that rather than disclosing a productive difference it only admits of a mimesis of form from which no meaning can be gleaned: as Bukatman observes, 'the enlargement and aestheticization of the chip does not render it any *more* accessible'.⁸⁴

Oedipa's life is similarly cocooned by identity, at least in the beginning of the novel:

...she wondered, wondered, shuffling back through a fat deckful of days which seemed (wouldn't she be the first to admit it?) more or less identical, or all pointing the same way subtly like a conjurer's deck...⁸⁵

⁸³ Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p.109.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.111.

⁸⁵ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.8.

Summing up the critical *doxa* on this feature of the text, Grant argues that ‘Oedipa’s life is banal and predictable, a not-quite parody of a middle-class suburban routine’.⁸⁶ Much of this imaginary banality is figured by the narrator using the metaphors of insulation. One instance of this occurs when Roseman attempts to play ‘footsie’ with Oedipa, but, wearing boots, she ‘couldn’t feel much of anything. So, insulated, she decided not to make any fuss.’⁸⁷ There is a sense here in which Oedipa, during the moment of decision, recognizes the insularity of her existence. It is a view confirmed by the narrator in a description where the absence of deictic qualifications significantly impedes our ability to locate precisely the dawn of her awareness:

As things developed, she was to have all manner of revelations. Hardly about Pierce Inverarity, or herself; but about what remained yet had somehow, before this, stayed away. There had hung the sense of buffeting, insulation, she had noticed the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix.⁸⁸

The temporal, and therefore semantic, ductility of ‘before this’, torn as it is between the analeptic and the proleptic determinations of the first sentence, suggests we might more profitably interpret Oedipa’s self-reflexivity as a process which retroactively posits its origins. Indeed, the above comments proceed from the diegetic present of the novel (her meeting with Roseman) and lead into an

⁸⁶ *A Companion to The Crying of Lot 49*, p.12.

⁸⁷ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.12.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.12.

excursus on her trip with Inverarity to Mexico City at least a year before the narrative begins. Whilst there, they discover an exhibition by Remedios Varos:

...in the central paintings of a triptych, titled 'Bordando el Manto Terrestre', 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.⁸⁹

The description of the tower here as a self-replicating solipsistic totality would seem to designate an imaginary consciousness which recalls Lacan's remark that 'the formation of the *I* is symbolized in dreams by a fortress'.⁹⁰ This memory serves to qualify a memory previous even to her meeting Inverarity of when she 'had also gently conned herself into the curious, Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl somehow, magically, prisoner among the pines and salt fogs of Kinneret, looking for somebody to say hey, let down your hair'.⁹¹ It is, of course, Pierce who proves to be that 'somebody', symbolically slipping 'the lock on her tower door... using one of his many credit cards for a shim'.⁹² However, given what we have said so far about the imaginary logic of capital, it is not surprising that his presence fails to secure her release and that 'all that had gone on between them

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.13.

⁹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1997, 197), p.5.

⁹¹ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.12.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.13.

had never really escaped the confinement of that tower'.⁹³ Indeed, 'the tower,' as the narrator declares, 'is everywhere'.⁹⁴

The narrator, at one juncture in the novel, however, explicitly, if somewhat diffidently, identifies the point where Oedipa breaches the imaginary relations emblemized by the tower:

If one object behind her discovery of what she was to label the Tristero System or often only The Tristero (as if it might be something's secret title) were to bring to an end her encapsulation in her tower, then that night's infidelity with Metzger would logically be the starting point for it; logically.⁹⁵

Again, there is a certain temporal reluctance informing the narrative here, and, again, it is associated with an imaginary self-consciousness ('her encapsulation in her tower'). David Seed has also commented on the grammatical mobility of this passage, noting that 'Pynchon constantly draws back from attributing too definite an awareness to Oedipa. The Jamesian periphrastic tenses ('was to label' 'would come to haunt', etc.) suggest a knowledge of subsequent events – Pynchon is not tying himself rigidly to the moment – and yet the tone of the passage reflects Oedipa's early sense of puzzlement'.⁹⁶ Our sense of puzzlement is perhaps accentuated by the meaning of the word 'object': does it denote a thing or an aim? If it is the latter, then, of course, it betokens Oedipa's volitional

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.13.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.13.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.29.

displacement from the tower using the Tristero for leverage, paradoxically before she has even heard of the organization (this is the first mention of it in the novel); and if it is the former, it is not clear what it could designate because the bringing 'to an end [of] her encapsulation' is an action, not a thing. The syntactic choreography of the sentence might lead us to read 'object behind' as 'effect of' but, as the repetition of 'logically' suggests, reasoning here is seductive yet not completely persuasive. There is, we might say, a certain senselessness persisting in this 'object' and for any explanation of it we must turn to the episode recommended as 'the starting point for it'.

This episode revolves around the game of 'Strip Botticelli'⁹⁷ that Metzger initiates with Oedipa at 'Echo Courts', with its imaginary milieu of 'silence and paralysis', 'stillness' and 'flat' 'dead still air'.⁹⁸ During the game she must remove an item of clothing for every question she asks him concerning the outcome of a film he starred in as a child. Mindful of the contingencies such an interrogation might produce, she symbolically insulates herself by 'putting on as much as she could of the clothing she'd brought with her'.⁹⁹ It is in this state of sartorial repletion that...

...[s]he made the mistake of looking at herself in the full-length mirror, saw a beach ball with feet and laughed so violently she fell over, taking a can of hair spray on the sink with her. The can hit

⁹⁶ David Seed, *The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988), p.129.

⁹⁷ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.23.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.23.

the floor, something broke, and with a great outsurge of pressure the stuff commenced atomizing, propelling the can swiftly about the bathroom.¹⁰⁰

If Oedipa's mistake here is partly dependent on her discerning the preposterousness of her solipsistic protection, then it is the relation of this to the febrile spray can which comes to assume more importance for Lois Tyson. Without quite invoking a textual warrant for this interpretation, Tyson identifies the violent trajectory of the can as a 'metaphor for the complexity of historical events, both past and current, and for the impossibility of acquiring any sure knowledge of them'.¹⁰¹ While the respective flight paths of the can and of history may be characterized as uncertain (although 'something fast enough, God or a digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of its travel'¹⁰²), it is the can's relation to the mirror which perhaps countenances Tyson's exegesis: '[t]he can collided with a mirror and bounced away, leaving a silvery reticulated bloom of glass to hang a second before it all fell jingling into the sink'.¹⁰³ In a highly suggestive, yet strangely unique *obiter dictum*, Tyson perceives in the image of the mirror the imaginary 'sense of self and world [which] is then shattered by the Lacanian Symbolic Order'.¹⁰⁴ In support of Tyson's peremptory observations, we may note that the 'silvery reticulated bloom' here (and its reappearance as a 'net of invisible cracks propagating

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.23.

¹⁰¹ Lois Tyson, 'Existential Subjectivity on Trial: *The Crying of Lot 49* and the Politics of Despair', Pynchon Notes, 28-29, (1991), 5-25, (p.19).

¹⁰² *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.24.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.24.

¹⁰⁴ 'Existential Subjectivity on Trial: *The Crying of Lot 49* and the Politics of Despair', p.19.

leisurely through the air between' Oedipa and Fallopian¹⁰⁵) is an appropriate trope for the symbolic network, and that the can's rebarbative carving of the air, accompanied by a soundtrack of 'screams and chopped-off prayers of dying infantry'¹⁰⁶ from the television, is an agreeably grisly reminder of the violent precepts of castration. But perhaps more pedestrian evidence for this assertion can be found in a later incident:

Things grew less and less clear. At some point she went into the bathroom, tried to find her image in the mirror and couldn't. She had a moment of nearly pure terror. Then she remembered that the mirror had broken and fallen in the sink.¹⁰⁷

If, in Lacanian theory, the imago does not, strictly speaking, disappear with the advent of symbolization, its loss for Oedipa here registers a fracturing of her imaginary universe which corresponds to entry into the symbolic. As the narrator proclaims, '[t]hings grew less and less clear', '[t]hings... did not delay in turning curious'.¹⁰⁸

We have already noted how this transition in orders is indexed by the 'end [to] her encapsulation in her tower', but it is also charted, from this point on in the novel, by a series of refusals for an imaginary retreat. One of the more striking examples of this is occasioned by Oedipa's trip to Inverarity's Fangoso Lagoons:

¹⁰⁵ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.116.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.24.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.27.

Oedipa had believed... in some principle of the sea as redemption for Southern California... some unvoiced idea that no matter what you did to its edges the true Pacific stayed inviolate and integrated or assumed the ugliness at any edge into some more general truth. Perhaps it was only that notion, its arid hope, she sensed as this forenoon they made their seaward thrust, which would stop short of any sea.¹⁰⁹

In this description of the Pacific we can clearly recognize the rubric of the imaginary and its seductive integrity. Indeed, it recalls Freud's comments on the 'oceanic feeling' of the pre-Oedipal ego, 'a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole'.¹¹⁰ Here, however, the 'oceanic feeling' becomes an 'arid hope', and, in a deft ironical twist, the imaginary principle of integration is itself refused integration, has to 'stop short of any sea'. As is implied here, it is not that Oedipa moves from the imaginary to the symbolic in exclusive succession; for she is constantly tempted by imaginary lures and enticed by the prospect of making the world over in the ego's image, witnessed, for example, in the 'ageing night-watchman, nibbling at a bar of Ivory soap, who had trained his virtuoso stomach to accept also lotions, air fresheners, fabrics, tobaccos and waxes in a hopeless attempt to assimilate it all, all the promise, productivity, betrayal, ulcers, before it was too late'.¹¹¹ Rather, the novel admits of the co-existence and interpenetration of the two registers: 'Shall I

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.29.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.37.

¹¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, (1930), P.F.L., Volume 12, pp.243-340 (p.252).

¹¹¹ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.85.

project a world?' ponders Oedipa, or "'Verify my sources[?]'".¹¹² For Jameson this is the proper condition of the subject, as the 'Imaginary and Symbolic... are normally, in mature experience... inseparable'.¹¹³ The complexities of this nexus are, perhaps, most vividly realized in the novel's paranoia.

As a word 'paranoia' is mentioned over fifteen times in *The Crying of Lot 49*, yet as a concept it informs not only this text but Pynchon's entire *oeuvre*. It is essentially a speculative project: the 'reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible,' remarks the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow*, is 'also known as paranoia'.¹¹⁴ The difficulty for Pynchon's characters, however, lies in distinguishing between a healthy suspicion and 'the cold and sweatless meat-hooks of a psychosis'.¹¹⁵ It is a distinction neatly summarized by Teresa Brennan:

...if one were to offer a brief distinction between paranoid and non-paranoid speculation, it would be that the former is conducted from the standpoint of the ego: events and causes are speculated about in a self-referential way; any synthesis of the relation between those events and causes closes off knowledge of connections that jeopardize the ego's position. In non-paranoid speculation, this is not the case; speculation about the connections between things is open-ended. [...] These connections are made through the symbolic; we could say that they are made from the 'position' of the 'I', which is the reverse of that of the *moi*.¹¹⁶

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p.56 and p.116 respectively.

¹¹³ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1996, 1981), p.175.

¹¹⁴ *Gravity's Rainbow*, p.188.

¹¹⁵ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.91.

¹¹⁶ Teresa Brennan, *History After Lacan* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.33-34.

If Oedipa wonders whether her engagement with the Tristero condemns her to the imaginary defiles of the *moi*, the modality of ‘the true paranoid for whom all is organized in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself’¹¹⁷, it is an option which the novel itself finally, as it were, refuses. Finality, however, is what *The Crying of Lot 49* ultimately excludes. There is a clear opposition set up between the interregal present participle and the concretization of this as a noun. It can be seen most clearly in the wavering between ‘the cry that might abolish the night’¹¹⁸, which occurs at the centre of the novel, and the waiting for ‘the crying of lot 49’¹¹⁹ which ends it. The significance of this lies in the fact that to end with a present participle is, in effect, not to end at all, but, rather, to leave the narrative, as Brennan proposes, ‘open-ended’.

With this rough sketch of Oedipa’s symbolic assumption in mind, then, we might return to inspect the ‘starting point for it’ in the game of Strip Botticelli she enjoys with Metzger. In doing this we are following the operations of a narrative which, during an extraordinary passage, reinscribes the game within a more potent symbolic framework:

So began, for Oedipa, the languid sinister blooming of The Tristero. Or rather, her attendance at some unique performance, prolonged as if it were the last of the night, something a little extra for whoever’d stayed this late. As if the breakaway gowns, net bras, jewelled garters and G-strings of historical figuration that would fall away were layered dense as Oedipa’s own street-clothes in that game with Metzger in front of the Baby Igor movie; as if a plunge towards

¹¹⁷ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.89.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.81.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.126.

dawn indefinite black hours long would indeed be necessary before
The Tristero could be revealed in its terrible nakedness.¹²⁰

Perhaps the first point of note here is the depiction of history as a process of ‘de-insulating’, a kind of alethic striptease in which layers of representation are discarded in the seductive prospect of finally laying bare the truth. Such divestiture reminds us of Freud’s comments on the action of *Oedipus Rex* which ‘consists in nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement – a process that can be likened to the work of psycho-analysis’.¹²¹ If this also stands as a fair analogy of the structure of *The Crying of Lot 49*, with Oedipa peeling off layer after layer of American society, there is, however, one important difference to be remarked. The truth of this performance would appear to be the final exfoliation which discloses a ‘terrible nakedness’; likewise, in *Oedipus Rex*, the eponymous hero and the audience, robbed of the armature of repression, must finally confront ‘feelings of repulsion’ and ‘horror’¹²²: however, while the technologies of revision clearly and ultimately fail in the play, here, ‘the terrible nakedness’ is only to be *supposed* as the *telos* of the process of unclothing. In fact, the novel does not actually divest itself of this secret and its final paragraphs are concerned to vex the reader’s anticipation one last time by showing Oedipa waiting for a representative of the Tristero to ‘reveal [...] himself’ so she can ‘find out... who the man really was’.¹²³

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.36.

¹²¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, (1900), P.F.L., Volume 4, p.363.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p.366.

¹²³ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.126. Indeed, Louis Althusser argues that a metaphors of stripping which does not take into account the effects of representation is characteristic of empiricism: ‘The empiricist conception may be thought of as a variant of the conception of vision, with the mere

The Tristero, however, retains a kind of exaggerated modesty throughout the novel, its identity either obscured or disguised:

Suddenly, in lithe and terrible silence, with dancers' grace, three figures. Long-limbed, effeminate, dressed in black tights, leotards and gloves, black silk hose pulled over their faces, come capering onstage and stop.... Their faces behind the stockings are shadowy and deformed. They wait. The lights all go out.¹²⁴

The Tristero is, then, in a sense invisible, and it is this very invisibility which worries at Oedipa's proclivities for psychosis, gnawing 'the ganglia of her optimism'¹²⁵, because, as the narrator notes, in such a situation, the '[p]ossibilities for paranoia become abundant'.¹²⁶ The testimony of this paranoia points to the abiding characteristic of the Tristero: it is only disclosed in its effects. With this in mind, we may find a series of resonances begin to accrue to the figure of the striptease we are concerned to explicate. To begin with, we may observe that the truth of the Tristero, its 'terrible nakedness', can only be apprehended after a 'plunge towards dawn indefinite black hours long'. This, of course, is the period of night that conventionally plays host to the untrammelled raptures of the unconscious. Again, we might find it instructive to invoke Freud here and his

difference that *transparency* is not given from the beginning, but is separated from itself precisely by the *veil*, the dross of impurities, of the inessential which steals the essence from us, and which abstraction, by its techniques of separation and scouring, *sets aside*, in order to give us the real presence of the pure naked essence, knowledge of which is then merely sight'. Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1970, 1986), p.36.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.49.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.85.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.114.

observation that 'whenever we go to sleep we throw off our hard-won morality like a garment, and put it on again next morning. This stripping of ourselves is not, of course, dangerous, because we are paralysed, condemned to inactivity by the state of sleep.'¹²⁷ If the coincidence of figures in Freud's and Pynchon's works seems somewhat gratuitous, it attests, nevertheless, to the prevalence of a metaphors of disrobing in our understanding of the unconscious, one which finds the latter veiled, swathed and swaddled by the circumspection of culture. What we must be careful to distinguish here is that it is this very probity which realizes the indiscretions of the unconscious in the first place. If, to continue the analogy, clothing dramatizes the nakedness it seeks to cover, then, equally, we can only discern the unconscious in the disturbances registered by the rectitude that produced it. To put it another way, clothes are the effect of a nudity which does not otherwise exist, just as dreams and parapraxes are the effects of an unconscious we could not otherwise know. We can now, perhaps, begin to see the analogy that seems to be being drawn between the unconscious and the Tristero which, as we have already averred, is also only disclosed in its effects.

We may, moreover, press this analogy even further (provided, of course, that we acknowledge that the purely formal correspondences we are elaborating here are testified to by a content later on). Our reason for doing so lies in the technical precision with which the various discarded items of the striptease are implicitly compared to 'historical figuration' rather than, say, merely 'history'.

¹²⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death', (1915), P.F.L., Volume 12, pp.57-89 (p.73).

This would seem to suggest a certain conviction regarding our understanding of the latter, one in which we may concur with Jameson when he avers that ...

...history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious.¹²⁸

History, in other words, is only disclosed in its effects. Like the Lacanian real, with which Jameson associates it here, history is only ever manifest as a kind of cultural parapraxis, a cause that must be presupposed to exist in order to account for the way things are. In this it is of a piece with the fact that '[w]e only grasp the unconscious finally when it is explicated, in that part of it which is articulated by passing into words'.¹²⁹ It is as an effect, therefore, that we may understand that the 'unconscious is structured as a function of the symbolic'¹³⁰ and thus the way in which Jameson can attribute narrativizing powers to the political unconscious. In this regard, what seems to be being proposed in *The Crying of Lot 49* is that the Tristero functions as a kind of shorthand for the history of the unconscious, a history which Oedipa attempts to integrate within the symbolic network.

¹²⁸ *The Political Unconscious*, p.35.

¹²⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: Seminar VII – 1959-1960*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), p.32.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.12.

Before we take our leave of the figure of the striptease, however, we should address what may turn out to be its most important yield. There is a sense in which the postulation of an unconscious ‘displayed’ by the text was presupposed by the drama of Oedipa’s symbolic accession which we noted earlier. This is, of course, because Oedipalization exacts its price in terms of repression. The scene of the destruction of the imaginary’s sundry fascinations by the symbolic, that is, ‘the starting point for it’, is located by the narrator in the game of Strip Botticelli. We are now in a position to attest to this by adducing the change in narrative form from the original passage to its repetition, i.e., the re-writing of the game as a metaphor for historical figuration, its reproduction as a trope. That this transposition of the literal to the figural can be understood as testimony to the fact of Oedipalization may be determined by reference to the function of the Name-of-the-Father. As the abstractive designation ‘Name’ suggests, the Name-of-the-Father announces the substitutive economy of the symbolic order, which is itself, we may note with Jameson, a substitution for the imaginary:

...the passage from the Imaginary stage to the Symbolic Order is marked by the infant’s experience of... Name-of-the-Father, a formulation which unites the classical Freudian account of the Oedipus complex and the castration anxiety to the essentially linguistic discovery of the distinction between the paternal function itself – the term “father” – and that individual biological parent to whom he has hitherto related in a more properly Imaginary mode.¹³¹

¹³¹ *The Political Unconscious*, pp.175-176.

The Name-of-the-Father, in other words, signifies a movement from the literal to the metaphorical. The exigency of this transition is attested to by the prohibitory function which it affords, because without a sense of kinship networks, an understanding of the symbolic relations between persons, there could be no sense of who is father, mother, child, nephew, niece, uncle or aunt and therefore no interdiction of incest. We can therefore follow Lacan in his observation that '[i]t is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law'.¹³²

Probably the most striking articulation of this problematic in contemporary fiction is Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*, whose eponymous protagonist is no more than the function of his name, a feature which is merely underscored by his absurd literalization as a giant of '[o]verall length, 3,200 cubits'.¹³³ Here, as in other postmodern fictions, myth is inflected by the vernacular, rather than, as in the modernist paradigm, the vernacular being inflected by myth. The curious status this engenders is remarked by the narrator who notes that the Dead Father is '[d]ead, but still with us, still with us, but dead'.¹³⁴ Indeed, we may take this as a definition of the Name-of-the-Father in so far as it describes the paternal function in which the dead father lingers on by virtue of his absence. It is a paradox most concisely summarized by the novel's 'A Manual for Sons':

¹³² *Écrits*, p.67.

¹³³ Donald Barthelme, *The Dead Father* (New York: Penguin, 1986, 1975), p.4.

Fathers are like blocks of marbles, giant cubes, highly polished, with veins and seams, placed squarely in your path. They block your path. They cannot be climbed over, neither can they be slithered past. They are the “past”, and very likely the slither, if the slither is thought of as that accommodating maneuver you make to escape notice, or get by unscathed.¹³⁵

The dead father indexes a primal loss, a “past”, which is inscribed in every attempt to move beyond that loss, every meaning which might seem a new meaning. As such, the Name-of-the-Father persists in ubiquity:

Tell me, said Julie, did you ever want to paint or draw or etch? Yourself?

It was not necessary, said the Dead Father, because I am the Father. All lines my lines. All figure and all ground mine, out of my head. All colors mine. You take my meaning.

We had no choice, said Julie.¹³⁶

Similarly, of course, Pierce persists in everything that Oedipa encounters, leaving her trying to make ‘sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America’.¹³⁷ That this must be understood in symbolic terms is attested to by the literalization of the paternal metaphor in *The Dead Father*, where the eponymous ‘hero’ abandons himself to impossible acts of procreation:

I fathered upon her in those nights the poker chip, the cash register, the juice extractor, the kazoo, the rubber pretzel, the cuckoo

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.3.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.129.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.18-19.

¹³⁷ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.123.

clock, the key chain, the dime bank, the pantograph, the bubble pipe, the punching bag both light and heavy, the ink blot, the nose drop, the midget Bible, the slot-machine slug, and many other useful and humane cultural artefacts, as well as some thousands of children of the ordinary sort. I fathered as well upon her various institutions useful and humane such as the credit union, the dog pound, and parapsychology. I fathered as well various realms and territories all superior in terrain, climatology, laws and customs to this one.¹³⁸

As is clear here, then, the inheritance of the Name-of-the-Father, its progeny and lineage, is to be understood as the symbolic order itself, which is nothing other than the conditions of possibility for the meaning Oedipa seeks to produce.

If the metaphorization of the game of Strip Botticelli, and Oedipa's refusal of incestuous or imaginary relations subsequent to it, indexes the function of the Name-of-the-Father, we may perhaps witness its effects in the larger action of the narrative too, which may be said to consist of troping America itself. The figure for this in the novel is, of course, Oedipa's paranoia. Recalling the definition that Pynchon provides for this in *Gravity's Rainbow*, that is, as the 'reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible', we can see that paranoia functions as a form of substitution which always understands 'the visible' *locum tenens*. In a similar vein, Bersani argues that '[t]he paranoid sees the visible as a simulated double of the real; it deceptively repeats the real'.¹³⁹ The stress on simulation and repetition here, however, would seem to situate Bersani's concept within the rubric of the imaginary. Indeed, he goes on to propose that '[w]e must then begin to suspect the paranoid structure itself as a device by which

¹³⁸ *The Dead Father*, p.36.

consciousness maintains the polarity of self and nonself, thus preserving the concept of identity'.¹⁴⁰ Such a proposal allies Pynchon's paranoia to Lacan's definition of psychosis which turns on the subject's foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father and subsequent regression to a kind of artificial imaginary. However, we have already observed, as does Bersani, that Pynchon is more concerned to 'depathologiz[e] the paranoid structure of thought'¹⁴¹, and the way this is done, it may be suggested, is by articulating paranoia as a function of the Name-of-the-Father. For what Oedipa finds when she traces the path from the vehicle of America to its tenor is not identity but a differential relation. Indeed, it is a point the narrator of *The Crying of Lot 49* explicitly comments upon when Oedipa considers the variety of American who...

...all act in the same special relevance to the word, or whatever it is the word is there, buffering, to protect us from. 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.¹⁴²

Here, in what N. Katherine Hayles describes as 'one of the text's most enigmatic passages'¹⁴³, we can see a late manifestation of the metaphors of insulation. Indeed, we may understand with Oedipa that this insulation, or, more pertinently,

¹³⁹ *The Culture of Redemption*, p.189.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.189.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.181. Summing up the duality of the concept of paranoia in Lacan's work, Jerry Aline Flieger notes that 'paranoia is not always a psychosis but is also a mode of discovery'. Jerry Aline Flieger, 'The Listening Eye: Postmodernism, Paranoia and the Hypervisible', *Diacritics*, 26:1, (1996), 90-107, (p.103).

¹⁴² *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.89.

this ‘buffering’, indexes a division effected by ‘the word’. Oedipa, of course, has ‘lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night’¹⁴⁴ and that word is ‘America’ or at least that version of it which is sanctioned by her “‘Young Republican[ism]’”.¹⁴⁵ However, in troping ‘America’ (‘[t]he act of metaphor’), that is, in recognizing it as a vehicle which, for the purposes of ‘safe[ty]’, elides its tenor, Oedipa comes to perceive that there is a loss upon which the whole process is predicated. This lost tenor is represented in the novel by the Tristero, the vehicle’s unconscious we might say following our earlier discussion. The loss inherent to the process of substitution and the metaphorical economy of the symbolic, then, thus, formally corresponds to the ‘lost’, the disenfranchised Americans who are ‘in exile from somewhere else invisible yet congruent with the cheered land [Oedipa] lived in’.¹⁴⁶ Without the loss of the ‘lost’, America no longer makes sense to Oedipa:

For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia.¹⁴⁷

If, as Lacan maintains, it is in ‘the foreclosure of Name-of-the-Father in the place of the Other, and in the failure of the paternal metaphor, that [we may] designate

¹⁴³ N. Katherine Hayles, “‘A Metaphor of God Knew How Many Parts’: The Engine That Drives ‘*The Crying of Lot 49*’”, in *New Essays on ‘The Crying of Lot 49’*, Patrick O’Donnell, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.97-125, (p.115).

¹⁴⁴ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.81.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.51.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.125.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.126.

the defect that gives psychosis its essential condition'¹⁴⁸, then the possibility that Oedipa entertains of there being no other America, no lost tenor and ultimately therefore no loss at all would signify just such a foreclosure, precisely because the Name-of-the-Father is constitutive of this loss in the first place. We may thus profitably adduce Grant's analysis which reasons that this passage illustrates how Oedipa 'will be able to live in "just America" only if she can believe in the possibilities represented by the Tristero, which she must create for herself if it turns out that it has no independent existence'.¹⁴⁹ Inflecting this within the rubric of our exposition, we may understand 'some paranoia' here as a reference to psychosis, rather than to paranoia as a form of metaphoric cognition. In other words, Grant's injunction that 'she must create for herself' corresponds to the paranoid construction in psychosis which, as Žižek observes, we utilize 'to pull ourselves out of the real "illness", the "end of the world", the breakdown of the symbolic universe'.¹⁵⁰

It is, as Lacan points out, 'religion [which] has taught us to refer to... Name-of-the-Father'¹⁵¹ and, in this respect, *The Crying of Lot 49* more than honours its debts by deploying sacral references and allusions so complex and numerous that the novel has been interpreted variously as an account of either the Annunciation or the Pentecost, and even both at the same time.¹⁵² Overriding all

¹⁴⁸ *Écrits*, p.215.

¹⁴⁹ *A Companion to 'The Crying of Lot 49'*, p.139.

¹⁵⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (London: MIT Press, 1995, 1991), p.19.

¹⁵¹ *Écrits*, p.199.

¹⁵² The definitive account of the religious context of *The Crying of Lot 49* can be found in Edward Mendelson, 'The Sacred, the Profane, and *The Crying of Lot 49*', in *Pynchon: A Collection of*

these associations, however, is 'the name of God' with which the novel opens.¹⁵³ Indeed, there are, as Grant points out, thirty three name-checks for 'God' throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*.¹⁵⁴ As is implied here, it is the *name* of god that is invoked on these occasions, rent, as it were, from any specific sacral context, and its first invocation follows immediately on from the opening sentence's annunciation of Oedipa's nam[ing as] executor, or she supposes executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inverarity'.¹⁵⁵ The loose connection between God and Inverarity here may be firmed up by recalling that the latter, like the former, operates in the novel as a name only and it is, moreover, in his name that Oedipa acts, indeed, is prompted to act in the first place. We may say, then, that Pierce functions for Oedipa as the Name-of-the-Father – he is, after all, 'a founding father',¹⁵⁶ – and that his death instigates her accession to the symbolic order, for, as Lacan avers, 'the symbolic Father is... the dead Father'.¹⁵⁷ It comes as little surprise, therefore, to learn that Pierce's initial presence in the narrative is marked by absence; he is represented by a 'letter'¹⁵⁸ notarizing his death, a form in which

Critical Essays, Edward Mendelson, (Engelwood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1978), pp.97-111, (*passim*). The argument that the ending finds Oedipa as the centre of some (un)holy alliance of both the Annunciation and the Pentecost is proposed by Robert N. Watson: 'Oedipa's gestation of a new, Tristero self, the Annunciation of the meaning of that pregnancy, and her Pentecostal moment of finding unexpected foreign speech on her tongue, all culminate together when Oedipa finds herself bidding for the Tristero'. Robert N. Watson, 'Who Bids for Tristero? The Conversion of Pynchon's Oedipa Maas', *Southern Humanities Review*, 17, (1983), 55-75, (p.69).

¹⁵³ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.5.

¹⁵⁴ *A Companion to 'The Crying of Lot 49'*, p.9.

¹⁵⁵ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.5.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.16.

¹⁵⁷ *Écrits*, p.199. In the context of Mendelson's and Watson's arguments, it could be claimed that the intersubjective register of the symbolic resembles a kind of Pentecostal speaking in tongues. However, it is perhaps not insignificant here that Lacan reserves this kind of language for his discussion of psychosis, noting that, as regards the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father, there is a 'connection between the register of paternity and the blossoming of revelations, of annunciations regarding generation, namely, precisely what the subject is literally unable to conceive'. *The Psychoses*, p.306.

¹⁵⁸ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.5.

we may otherwise recognize the signifier and its registration in the symbolic. Indeed, if the onomastic economy of the symbolic finds Oedipa a place in the opening page, with her naming as ‘executrix’, then by the end of the novel she has experienced a wide range of positions across the network, including ‘Margo’, ‘Rapunzel’, ‘Barbie’, ‘Arnold Snarb’, ‘Edna Mosh’ and ‘Grace Bortz’.¹⁵⁹ Perhaps her most significant name in this respect is Mucho’s ultra-nominal ‘Oed’¹⁶⁰ which, for William Gleason, ‘suggest[s] the *OED* [and] highlights the book’s reliance on words and wordplay’.¹⁶¹ With these names in mind we may thus concur with François Regnault when he comments that...

...[w]hen you say “the Name-of-the-Father,” you can consider the “of” as either a subjective genitive – the names God goes by, the names you call God (the “divine names” are a well-known problem in theology) – or an objective genitive – the names a father gives his children.¹⁶²

Pierce, then, is the Name that gives birth to the many names of Oedipa and, in doing so, opens the up the field of signification for her. In this regard we may aver that such content finds its expression in the form of the novel, for there is a sense in which Pynchon stands in substantially the same relation to the reader as Pierce does in relation to Oedipa.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.6, p.12, p.27, p.76, p.96 and p.118 respectively.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.7.

¹⁶¹ William Gleason, ‘The Postmodern Labyrinths of *Lot 49*’, *Critique*, 3:2, (1993), 83-99, (p.92).

¹⁶² François Regnault, ‘The Name-of-the-Father’, in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan’s ‘Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis’*, ed. by Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp.65-74 (p.68).

Recalling our initial discussion we may now venture that Pynchon, or, more properly, 'Pynchon', is, in fact, the Name-of-the-Father and that it is precisely the function of his fabled absence to deliver the reader into a kind of novelistic symbolic. Such a notion finds its expression in Barthes' classical formulation: 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author'.¹⁶³ Indeed, it seems quite clear that Barthes' essential manoeuvre here is the regulation of the reading process by the Name-of-the-Father. The *corpus* of the author, as it were, enjoins us 'to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner'.¹⁶⁴ Haunting the text by his very absence...

...the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*: language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it.¹⁶⁵

The wealth and poverty of the onomastic economy of *The Crying of Lot 49* we noted earlier may thus be read as a function of the Name-of-the-Father. For the rags and robes with which these names may be decked out indexes their opacity as signs, that is the status we ascribed to them of being pure form – a form which Barthes finds here in pronouns – and one which may or may not find its content.

¹⁶³ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Longman, 1988), pp.167-172 (p.172).

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.168.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.169.

It is a plasticity which, as we have seen instanced by Joyce, Freud and now Lacan, finds its source in the 'mystical estate' of paternity:

...if the symbolic context requires it, paternity will nonetheless be attributed to the fact that the woman met a spirit at some fountain or some rock in which he is supposed to live. It is certainly this that demonstrates that the attribution of procreation to the father can only be the effect of a pure signifier, of a recognition, not of a real father, but of what religion has taught us to refer to as the Name-of-the-Father.¹⁶⁶

At the diegetic level of *The Crying of Lot 49*, it is Pierce's status as just such a 'pure signifier' that renders Oedipa's task of inventorying his estate so very difficult:

San Narciso at that moment lost..., gave up its residue of uniqueness for her; became a name again, was assumed back into the American community of crust and mantle. Pierce Inverarity was really dead. She walked down a stretch of railroad track next to the highway. Spurs ran off here and there into factory property. Pierce may have owned all these factories too. But did it matter now if he'd owned all of San Narciso? San Narciso was a name... There was the true continuity, San Narciso had no boundaries. No one knew yet how to draw them.¹⁶⁷

The rhetorical question here admits of the pure signifier's troubling ambivalence, its reckless superfluity which bespeaks a simultaneous inadequacy where everything just as easily means nothing. It is an ambiguity grimly illustrated by

¹⁶⁶ *Écrits*, p.199.

¹⁶⁷ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.123.

the various acronyms that Oedipa discovers throughout the novel, such as 'W.A.S.T.E.', 'D.E.A.T.H.' and 'N.A.D.A.'.¹⁶⁸

There is, of course, an analogous tension to be negotiated at the level of exegesis, one which accounts for the identifications Castillo discerns in the manner that 'Pynchon's critics... have delighted in taking Oedipa's role'.¹⁶⁹ We have already witnessed this tension in the paradoxical invocation of Pynchon's name, as though it were actually Pynchon, in order to substantiate readings that his very absence expedited in the first place. If, as Benjamin avers, '[d]eath is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell'¹⁷⁰, then the tales that are told, it seems, are always inflected by a grieving for that death. We may, perhaps, cast this problematic in a slightly different register. This depends on our understanding Barthes' 'death of the Author' as a kind of Oedipalization of the reading process, an understanding that is underscored by his insistence upon 'suppressing the author'.¹⁷¹ This 'suppression', we might say, constitutes the unconscious of the reader, or, more accurately of the text - for what Barthes is really describing is the birth of the text *qua* signifier ('If the Oedipus complex isn't the introduction of the signifier,' declares Lacan imperiously, 'then I ask to be shown any conception of it whatsoever.'¹⁷²) - which suggests that all subsequent encounters with the text will be predicated upon an unconscious

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.84, p.100 and p.116 respectively.

¹⁶⁹ 'Borges and Pynchon: The Tenuous Symmetries of Art', pp.27-28.

¹⁷⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973), pp.83-109 (p.94).

¹⁷¹ 'The Death of the Author', p.196.

¹⁷² *The Psychoses*, p.189.

desire to restore that mythical imaginary relationship of an unmediated contact between writer and reader.

In this regard, our exegeses are always laments that describe the originary lack by which they are constituted in the first place. The particular pleasure of Pynchon's *corpus* is its privileging of this backward glance, its role as a strop, or, even further back, a *strophe*, upon which the keen edge of desire is continually sharpened. For if his absence demands of us that we bury Pynchon, we must do so in the knowledge that he is henceforth entombed in every phoneme and phrase of his text, and that 'this death,' cautions Lacan, 'constitutes in the subject the eternalization of his desire'.¹⁷³ All our readings are thus ghosted by the knowledge of a primal felicity in the vain pursuit of which we can only ever, as it were, snatch at thin air, glimpsing the shadow of its retreat around the corner. Our compensation, however, is the exuberance of this chase, its staging of desire as such, in distinction to its satiation; for, as Žižek records, 'the realization of desire does not consist in its being "fulfilled", "fully satisfied", it coincides rather with the reproduction of desire as such, with its circular movement'.¹⁷⁴ Again, we may recall our earlier analysis of *Ulysses* here to serve as a useful counterpoint to *The Crying of Lot 49*, for, as Bersani discerns:

Compared to Pynchon's novel, Joyce's *Ulysses*, for all the work it requires, is play for a child-detective. Certainly Joyce wants us to suffer, but there will also be a term to our suffering. The puzzles of *Ulysses* are like stations of the cross; they are ritual

¹⁷³ *Écrits*, p.104.

¹⁷⁴ *Looking Awry*, p.7.

agonies through which we must pass in order finally to be at one, far above the consciousness of any character in the novel, with Joyce's remarkable cohesive consciousness. Nothing could be more different from [Pynchon's work].¹⁷⁵

This difference, we may suggest, is the one designated by Lacan as separating aim from goal, in which 'aim' itself conveniently expresses the ambivalence. Žižek summarizes the distinction noting that '[t]he goal is the final destination, while the aim is what we intend to do, i.e., the way itself'.¹⁷⁶ Thus, for Lacan, 'aim is simply [a] return into circuit'.¹⁷⁷ *The Crying of Lot 49* we may say, then, is predicated upon the signifier *qua* aim, while *Ulysses* is predicated upon the signified *qua* goal. If Pynchon is dead, therefore, Joyce is merely hiding and will spring from the cupboard when the game is up.

For our purposes, André Green offers an admirably terse definition of the Oedipal paradigm we have been attending to here when he claims that it 'aims less at finding the object than at finding it *again*'.¹⁷⁸ The implication of what we have seen so far is that what is found again, and again and again, is the Oedipal paradigm itself. As such, it recalls Barthes' comment that every story is ultimately that of Oedipus. If Pynchon is the constitutive repression for our accession to the reading symbolic, then equally Pierce is the constitutive repression for Oedipa's symbolization, just as the 'W.A.S.T.E.' embodied in the

¹⁷⁵ *The Culture of Redemption*, p.187.

¹⁷⁶ *Looking Awry*, p.5.

¹⁷⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1994, 1977), p.179.

¹⁷⁸ 'Oedipus, Freud, and Us', p.225.

Tristero is the constitutive repression for Oedipa's America. In this regard it is a structure which boldly refashions the meaning of Benjamin's contention that '[w]hat draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about'.¹⁷⁹ However, if there is a corpse, there is also a crime, for, as Lacan remarks, 'the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing'.¹⁸⁰ And if there is a crime there must be a detective too. There is a recognition of this in *Oedipus Rex* which is, for Tanner, 'one of the first great detective stories in Western literature'¹⁸¹, and, as such, enables Hannah Charney to argue 'the special relevance of Oedipus to detective fiction'.¹⁸² This recognition of the imperative of the detective indexes the role of recognition as such in the Oedipal drama. Commenting on this Shoshana Felman notes that 'the subject must – like Oedipus – *recognize* what he *misrecognizes*, namely, his desire, and his history, inasmuch as they are, both, unconscious (that is, insofar as his *life-history* differs from what he can know, or own, as his *life-story*)'.¹⁸³ The detective, we might say then, embodies the function of recognition, a function without which there is no crime in the first place. It is this function which is currently amiss, repressed as it were, in our interpretative schema, and it is to this and its attendant temporality which we must now turn.

¹⁷⁹ 'The Storyteller', p.101.

¹⁸⁰ *Écrits*, p.104.

¹⁸¹ *Thomas Pynchon*, p.60.

3: Ex Postal Facto

For David Seed, *The Crying of Lot 49* finds Pynchon 'drawing once again on the detective genre'¹⁸⁴; it is a point echoed by Geoffrey Lord, who claims that there is a 'clear link between *The Crying of Lot 49* and the detective story'.¹⁸⁵ This link resides in the invocation of 'the assumptions and methods of detective fiction but not the ultimate logic of its conclusion: in the end the mystery is not solved, and order is not restored'.¹⁸⁶ Oedipa, we might say, undertakes an investigation into the mysteries surrounding Pierce's estate, employing all the rational procedures associated with such a task (including questioning witnesses and maintaining forensic probity), only to fail in determining a solution. As readers, our identification with Oedipa is largely based on mimicking her role as a detective. We faithfully sift through the novel's clues with her in an attempt to re-assemble the meaning behind the mystery only to discover the vanity of our faith on the last page. The genre of detective fiction is thus apparently proposed only in the act of its refusal. Tanner has discerned in this refusal a form of reversal:

With a detective story you start with a mystery and move towards a final clarification, all the apparently disparate, suggestive bits of evidence finally being bound together in one illuminating pattern; whereas in Pynchon's novel we move from a state of degree-

¹⁸² Hannah Charney, 'Oedipal Patterns in the Detective Novel', in *Psychoanalytic Approaches to Literature and Film*, pp.238-243 (p.238).

¹⁸³ 'Beyond Oedipus: The Specimen Story of Psychoanalysis', p.82.

¹⁸⁴ David Seed, 'In Pursuit of the Receding Plot: Some American Postmodernists', in *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, ed. by Edmund J. Smyth, pp.36-53, (p.50).

¹⁸⁵ *Postmodernism and Notions of National Difference*, pp.63-64.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.65.

zero mystery – just the quotidian mixture of an average Californian day – to a condition of increasing mystery and dubiety.¹⁸⁷

We may perhaps infer from this the plot of *The Crying of Lot 49* signifies not just a difference from detective fiction in particular, but literature generally. For, as Jameson reports, ‘the detective story plot merely follows the basic tendency of all literary plots or intrigue in general, which is marked by the resolution of multiplicity back into some primal unity’.¹⁸⁸ It does, of course, more than ‘merely follow’ in the sense of ‘joining in’. Indeed, it may be suggested that one of the conditions of possibility for detective fiction is literature’s consciousness of its own formal conventions. These teleological conventions are then foregrounded as content in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie and perhaps find their most concise expression in the vocabulary of the solution – ‘unriddle’, ‘unlock’, ‘unravel’, ‘fathom’, ‘rationalize’, ‘decipher’, ‘get to the bottom of’, etc.. The reverence for narrative *telos* in these works can be read as an x-ray of traditional narrative forms, a glimpse behind the muscle and flesh of character and theme onto the skeletal structure which sustains them. In this respect, we may note with Tzvetan Todorov that ‘a tendency to description... remains entirely alien to the detective novel’¹⁸⁹ precisely because, if it did not, such excesses would obscure the genre’s most valuable property as a genre which is its purity of form. Following on from

¹⁸⁷ Thomas Pynchon, p.56.

¹⁸⁸ Fredric Jameson, ‘On Raymond Chandler’, in *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory*, ed. by Glen W. Most and William W. Stone (San Diego, New York; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), pp.122-148, (pp.145-146).

¹⁸⁹ Tzvetan Todorov, ‘The Typology of Detective Fiction’, in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. by David Lodge, trans. by Richard Howard, pp.158-165 (p.162).

this, then, Pynchon's refusal of the narrative chronology of detective fiction can be read as a problematization of the 'primal unity' of 'all literary plots'. Jameson's suggestive description here hints at the imaginary character of the *telos* in whose image the rest of the text is made over. Which is to say that the value and function of all elements of a story are normally determined by reference to its teleology, and that, of course, includes the combinations of material that are either incorporated or excluded in the first place. It is therefore unsurprising that, at the level of content, the moment of *telos* is usually represented by a gathering of suspects in to a drawing-room or other such confined place, for the temporal circularity of such narratives may be understood precisely as a spatial relation, an organization of parts in a synchronic whole, rather than as a diachrony. In refusing this (despite locking Oedipa in a room at the end of the novel), and, instead, starting with a 'primal unity' which fragments into 'multiplicity', *The Crying of Lot 49* dramatizes at the level of form the movement from imaginary to symbolic which have already witnessed in its content.

It may well prove useful at this stage to invoke Todorov's classic delineation of the typology of detective fiction, one which neatly articulates the distinctions made in other discussions of the form. To begin with, he notes that detective fiction is essentially a tale of two stories, the story proper and its plotting within the narrative:

The first, that of the crime, is in fact the story of an absence: its most accurate characteristic is that it cannot be immediately

present in the book. [...] The status of the second story is... just as excessive; it is a story which has no importance in itself, which serves only as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime. [...] We are concerned then in the whodunit with two stories of which one is absent but real, the other present but insignificant.¹⁹⁰

We will, of course, immediately recognize in this description the Oedipal paradigm which likewise consists in disclosing the repression upon which it is founded. *Oedipus Rex*, André Green reminds us, is predicated on 'a regressive proceeding toward the darkness of origin'.¹⁹¹ Indeed, this circling around a constitutive absence prompts Geoffrey H. Hartman to remark that '[i]nstead of a whodunit we get a whodonut, a story with a hole in it'.¹⁹² The insufficiency of the narrative in *The Crying of Lot 49* can thus be seen as an exaggeration of an already existing tendency, one which refuses the ultimate accommodation of the traditional form. In this case, the second story is never fully told; its goal of retelling the first story, to recall our earlier discussion, is never reached but remains at the level of aim. In this respect, the form of *The Crying of Lot 49* is closer to the second of Todorov's detective genres, the one most often associated with the United States, and which he terms the thriller:

...this kind of detective fiction fuses the two stories or in other words, suppresses the first and vitalizes the second. We are no longer told about a crime anterior to the moment of the narrative; the narrative coincides with the action. No thriller is presented in the form of memoirs: there is no point reached where the narrator

¹⁹⁰ 'The Typology of Detective Fiction', pp.160-161.

¹⁹¹ 'Oedipus, Freud, and Us', p.220.

¹⁹² Geoffrey H. Hartman, 'Literature High and Low; The Case of the Mystery Story', in *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory*, ed. by Glen W. Most and William W. Stone, pp.210-229 (p214).

comprehends all past events, we do not even know if he will reach the end of the story alive. Prospection takes the place of retrospection.¹⁹³

Several critics have argued for the special relevance of the American thriller genre to *The Crying of Lot 49*. Brian McHale, for example, notes that it ‘adheres rather faithfully to the conventions of the LA private-eye sub-genre’¹⁹⁴, while Tanner similarly proposes that ‘[t]he model for the story would seem to be the Californian detective story – an established tradition including the works of writers such as Raymond Chandler, Ross McDonald and Eric Stanley Gardner’.¹⁹⁵ Indeed, there is an explicit acknowledgement of this relation in *The Crying of Lot 49* when Oedipa is described as being ‘like the private eye in any long-ago radio drama, believing all you needed was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from hidebound cops’ rules, to solve any great mystery’.¹⁹⁶ The narrator even goes so far as to suggest with Todorov that ‘we do not even know if [s]he will reach the end of the story alive’ by alluding to this generic imperative in the statement that ‘the private eye sooner or later has to get beat up on’.¹⁹⁷

What is of interest in the thriller as a form is that in these novels ‘mystery... become[s] a pure pretext’ for the real work of ‘concentrat[ing] on the description of a milieu’.¹⁹⁸ While not actually picking up on Todorov here, it is

¹⁹³ ‘The Typology of Detective Fiction’, p.161.

¹⁹⁴ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), p.22.

¹⁹⁵ *Thomas Pynchon*, p.56.

¹⁹⁶ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.85.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.85.

¹⁹⁸ ‘The Typology of Detective Fiction’, pp.164-165.

this idea which largely informs Jameson's superb essay on the work of Raymond Chandler:

Since there is no longer any privileged experience in which the whole of the social structure can be grasped, a figure must be invented who can be superimposed on the society as a whole, whose routine and life pattern serve somehow to tie its separate and isolated parts together. [...] In doing this the detective in a sense once again fulfils the demands of the function of knowledge rather than that of lived experience: through him we are able to see, to know, the society as a whole.¹⁹⁹

We may recognize in this description the picaresque trajectory of Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49* (and also perhaps of Stencil and Benny Profane in *V.* and of Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*) who, like Marlowe, 'as an involuntary explorer of the society... visits either those places you don't look at or those places you can't look at: the anonymous or the wealthy and secretive'.²⁰⁰ If Pynchon's novel is primarily concerned to disclose the former (the 'preterite' as they become in *Gravity's Rainbow*) then this process is expedited by an intimacy with the latter (the 'elect') in the shape of Pierce's estate. In thus putting a face to the anonymous of America *The Crying of Lot 49* portrays what Jameson terms 'the converse, the darker concrete reality, of an abstract illusion about the United States'²⁰¹.

A kind of reverence attaches to the abstract, a disabused cynicism to the concrete. As in certain types of mental obsession and

¹⁹⁹ 'On Raymond Chandler', pp.127-128.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.128.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.129.

dissociation, the American is able to observe local injustice, racism, corruption, educational incompetence, with a practiced eye, while he continues to entertain boundless optimism as to the greatness of the country, taken as a whole.²⁰²

Recalling our earlier description of Oedipa's urban experience, where she was characterized as a 'driver', we can perhaps now understand her getting out of the car for any number of pedestrian excursions around the city as a move from the abstract to the concrete. In a similar vein, William Gleason notes that initially '[s]he views the city from above (as a designer) and sees it – for the moment – synchronically. But Oedipa will not remain a Daedalian observer; she will enter San Narciso's curving streets as a Thesean explorer, intent to discover meaning'.²⁰³ This meaning is expressed as a tenderness for detritus, one which finds its occasion in the sheer material density of Pynchon's descriptions. The awkward quiddity of this prose, which makes Pynchon such a reluctant read, offers its own reward in the expedition of a differential registering of delicacy; its bulk paradoxically affording a membrane-like sensitivity to the concrete detail, comparable with an ear cocked for a particular sound amidst the welter of white noise. Histories and prospects worthy of continents can thus be detected in the 'wrecked face' of an old man that Oedipa spies huddled in a doorway:

What voices overheard, flinders of luminescent gods glimpsed among the wallpaper's stained foliage, candlestubs lit to rotate in the air over him, prefiguring the cigarette he or a friend must fall asleep someday smoking, thus to end among the flaming, secret salts held all those years by the insatiable stuffing of a mattress that

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p.130.

²⁰³ 'The Postmodern Labyrinths of *Lot 49*', p.84.

could keep vestiges of every nightmare sweat, helpless overflowing bladder, viscerously tearfully consummated wet dream, like the memory bank to a computer of the lost? She was overcome all at once by a need to touch him, as if she could not believe in him, or would not remember him, without it.²⁰⁴

The struggles of the syntax here, like the distortions of a message over the tannoy system at a station, attest to the difficulty of Pynchon's task; for the force of this and other such passages proceeds from the manner in which its meaning must flicker in and out. A feeling for rubbish, in other words, needs to bear witness to its status as ephemera, to refer in its mode of testimony to its fragility amidst the brute textures of contemporary existence. In a similar vein, Jameson remarks on the literary representation of insignificance in daily experience, noting that 'it eludes the registering apparatus of great literature':

[M]ake of it some Joycean epiphany and the reader is obliged to take this moment as the center of his world, as something directly infused with symbolic meaning; and at once the most fragile and precious quality of the perception is irrevocably damaged, its slightness is lost, it can no longer be half glimpsed, half disregarded.²⁰⁵

However, Jameson goes on to observe that if we 'put such an experience in the framework of the detective story... everything changes: attention flows back onto the neglected perception and sees it in renewed, heightened form without damaging its structure'.²⁰⁶ What he means by this may be understood as a kind of

²⁰⁴ *The Crying of Lot 49*, pp.86-87.

²⁰⁵ 'On Raymond Chandler', p.125.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.125.

deliberation by sleight-of-hand. Detection demands a scrutiny of all available data, including, of course, what is habitually neglected; as long as this scrutiny is a function of detection, is its pretext to recall Todorov, then it is itself a form of neglect and therefore maintains a felicity to the quality of neglect. If, on the other hand, such a scrutiny is the end in itself, then it invests this neglect with a purpose which fundamentally alters the authenticity of its representation. The form of the thriller circumvents this by tricking spontaneity and self-consciousness into an otherwise impossible co-existence.²⁰⁷ The result of this is that even the more obviously schematic attentions to detritus in *The Crying of Lot 49*, such as ‘W.A.S.T.E.’ and ‘entropy’, are lent an authenticity they would not otherwise have if the novel was apparently predicated on them alone.

One of the more striking characteristics of the milieu or ‘crime scene’ that Oedipa’s investigations lead her to explore is its qualification by, or association with, dreams. References to this masterly inactivity exceed by far those of any other concept and occur on almost every page of the novel, to the extent that their prominence has, as far as I am aware, escaped critical notice, presumably by dint of the scale of such dissemination. We are informed, for example, that ‘everything she... dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero’; that fingers have owners who ‘were asleep and the moled, freckled hands out roaming dream-landscapes’; that Oedipa is ‘all alone in a nightmare’;

²⁰⁷ Of course, with a form whose primary injunction is to contextualize, this discloses certain inadequacies in the critical adduction of quotations. However, we may perhaps content ourselves here by noting in regard to the above extract from *The Crying of Lot 49* that Oedipa’s encounter with the old man is expedited by the conceit of detection, for she is captivated by the back of his

that she keeps waking from a nightmare about something in a mirror'; that '[i]n a Golden Gate Park she came on a circle of children in their nightclothes, who told her they were dreaming the gathering. But that the dream was really no different from being awake'; that she has 'stumbled indeed... on to a secret richness and concealed density of dream'; that San Narciso is 'an incident among our climactic records of dreams and what dreams became among our accumulated daylight'; and that, in consideration of all this, '[l]ater, possibly, she would have trouble sorting the night into real and dreamed'.²⁰⁸ In one respect, the description of the hidden interstices of San Narciso as a dream land can be understood as a function of the historical unconscious which we have already seen impinging upon Oedipa's urban symbolic; for, as the narrative declares, '[w]hat fragments of dreams came had to do with the post horn', that is, with the Tristero.²⁰⁹ In another respect, but one which, as we shall see, is bound to this function, such references to the dream state are endemic to the form of postmodern detective fiction. By this latter term we can designate a whole series of contemporary works that take as their chronotope various mutations of the generic paradigm of detective fiction. If we have already had occasion to observe that this is the common measure of all teleological texts, we might perhaps advance as examples some of the more avowedly detective-oriented fictions, novels such as Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*, Patrick Süskind's *Perfume*, Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, Graham Swift's *Waterland* and John Banville's *The Book of Evidence*.

left hand on which 'she made out the post horn, tattooed in old ink now beginning to blur and spread'. *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.86.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.56, p.57, p.61, p.69, p.81, p.117, p.123 and p.81 respectively.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.81.

In these narratives too we find that a dream state attends the scene of the crime. The discovery of Freddie Parr's body in *Waterland*, for example, occurs during 'the extra hour's sleep [Tom Crick] was allowed as a studious schoolboy'²¹⁰, and it is only later when he realizes that he has apprehended the boy (and the murderer) in a hypnopompic condition, 'that [he] came out of a dream'.²¹¹ Similarly, in *The Name of the Rose* the discovery of Venantius' body is coincidental with a state in which 'monks were nodding with sleepiness'.²¹² Finally, during the climactic murder scene of *Perfume*, Grenouille momentarily shuts his eyes:

When he opened them again, he saw Laure lying on her bed, naked and dead and shorn clean and sparkling white. It was like his nightmare, the one he had dreamt in Grasse the night before last and had forgotten again. Every detail came back to him now as if in a blazing flash. In that instant everything was exactly as it had been in the dream, only very much brighter.²¹³

The connection between dreams and crime scenes in these examples is only apparently arbitrary, and to understand it properly we must turn our attention to their analogous structures.

For psychoanalysis, the interpretation of dreams may be evinced as a conflict of aesthetic practices. On the one hand dreams display an organicism

²¹⁰ Graham Swift, *Waterland* (London: Picador, 1984, 1983), p.22.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.25.

²¹² Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Minerva, 1992, 1980), p.102.

²¹³ Patrick Süskind, *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, trans. by John E. Woods (London: Penguin, 1987, 1985), p.229.

which seemingly gathers up incommensurable details within its folds, and on the other hand, there remains a truculent particularism which constantly gives all totalities the slip. If the individual feature of a dream is, in one way, the lynchpin of the dream's seeming unity, it is, in another way, an embarrassing excess that threatens to topple the project of totalization which secondary revision has set for it. With the efficiency of a Joyce at the height of his allegorical hubris, secondary revision 'fills up the gaps in the dream structure with shreds and patches. As a result of its efforts, the dream loses its appearance of absurdity and disconnectedness and approximates to the model of an intelligible experience'.²¹⁴ The task of the psychoanalyst is then centred upon rearticulating the heterogeneity of a dream as it is occulted by secondary revision. It is thus akin to a practice of dismemberment.

Indeed, the unity upon which such a practice is performed operates as an imaginary lure, designed to seduce the unwary analyst and assuage the curiosity of his knife. It is in this sense, Žižek argues, that the crime scene may be considered analogous to the dream, for 'the scene of the crime with which the detective is confronted is also, as a rule, a false image put together by the murderer in order to efface the traces of his act'.²¹⁵ Inevitably, then, the process of detection, as with analysis, begins by fastening upon a detail or a clue structurally at odds with its *mise en scene*. It will be remembered that this is precisely the procedure adopted by Dupin in the first of his stories, 'The Murder

²¹⁴ *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p.630.

²¹⁵ *Looking Awry*, p.53

in the Rue Morgue', where the solution to the mystery dwells in the *outré* character of the 'peculiar voice, [the] unusual agility, and [the] startling absence of motive in a murder so singularly atrocious'.²¹⁶ Even with cases somewhat more mundane than those concerning the misadventures of a febrile orang-utan, it is still singularity which conspires against the imaginary machinations of the criminal, as Žižek notes:

What we have here is a detail that *in itself* is usually quite insignificant..., but which nonetheless *with regard to its structural position* denatures the scene of the crime and produces a quasi-Brechtian effect of estrangement – like the alteration of a small detail in a well-known picture that all of a sudden renders the whole picture strange and uncanny.²¹⁷

Such, of course, is the character of Tristero's "stamps that were almost kosher-looking but not quite".²¹⁸ All of these stamps feature details that, while inconspicuous in themselves, appear anomalous when situated within the orthodoxy of a U.S. Postage stamp. For example, '[i]n the 3c Mothers of America Issue, put out on Mother's Day, 1934, the flowers to the lower left of Whistler's Mother had been replaced by Venus's fly-trap, belladonna, poison sumac and a few others Oedipa had never seen'.²¹⁹

We might profitably address these structural aberrations in terms of anamorphosis. As a figure in painting, anamorphosis is that part of a picture

²¹⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, *Selected Tales* (London: Penguin Popular Classic, 1994), p.143.

²¹⁷ *Looking Awry*, p.53.

²¹⁸ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.120.

which sticks out from the rest of the representation, denaturing it and thereby propelling the production of a supplementary reading. The most celebrated example of this genre is Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* which depicts two noble emissaries disporting themselves before all the accoutrements of Renaissance culture. However, this display of accomplishments is offset by a disruptive stain in the foreground of the picture which, at an angle, presents itself as the distorted form of a skull. The effect of this on the meaning of the picture is, as Žižek observes, one of

rendering all its constituents "suspicious", and thus open[ing] up the abyss of the search for a meaning – nothing is what it seems to be, everything is to be interpreted, everything is supposed to possess some supplementary meaning. The ground of the established, familiar signification opens up; we find ourselves in a realm of total ambiguity, but this very lack propels us to produce ever new "hidden meanings": it is a driving force of endless compulsion.²²⁰

The function of the Tristero, as it is manifest in the stamps of lot 49 for example, lies in its generation of a suspicion about the banal topography of Oedipa's California. Initially harbouring '[n]o suspicion at all that it might have something to tell her', it is only when Oedipa has been 'sensitized' that she realizes '[m]uch of the revelation was to come through the stamp collection'.²²¹ Appropriately, '[i]t got seriously under way, this sensitizing', with a letter which, it is pointed

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.120.

²²⁰ *Looking Awry.*, p.91.

²²¹ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.29.

out, 'had nothing much to say'.²²² The fact that the letter is 'more or less devoid of significant content' leads J. Kerry Grant to suggest that 'the medium... is more important than the message'.²²³ If this is so, it is precisely because of the meaninglessness of the message, its very inexplicability, like the anamorphic stain. This then compels Oedipa to interrogate the medium, to 'look more closely at its outside' where she finds her first intimation of the Tristero in the apparently misspelled injunction to 'REPORT ALL OBSCENE MAIL TO YOUR POTSMATER'.²²⁴

That this first aberration sets in motion Oedipa's 'endless compulsion' to track down the Tristero is evinced by the anamorphic diction deployed throughout *The Crying of Lot 49* to delineate her encounters with the traces of this shadowy organization. We are told, for example, that she would 'see the world *refracted* through those tears, those specific tears'²²⁵, that a Mexican girl traces 'post horns... in the *haze* of her breath on the window'²²⁶, and that the sailor's post horn tattoo was now 'beginning to *blur* and spread'.²²⁷ Indeed, Oedipa's first moment of awareness of a supplementary meaning is precipitated by, and is articulated as a process of, 'looking awry':

She drove into San Narciso on a Sunday, in a rented Impala. Nothing was happening. She *looked down a slope, needing to squint* for the sunlight, on to a vast sprawl of houses.... The ordered swirl of houses and streets, *from this high angle*, sprang at her with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as [a] circuit card had. ...there were

²²² *Ibid.*, p.29.

²²³ *A Companion to 'The Crying of Lot 49'*, p.48.

²²⁴ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.30.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.13 (my italics).

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.84 (my italics).

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.86 (my italics).

to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning... As if, *on some other frequency*, or *out of the eye* of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken. *She suspected that much.*²²⁸

It is worth noting here that the whirlwind of her suspicion moves in a ‘centrifugal’ direction, pointing to the widening of the frame of reference occasioned by fastening upon the anamorphic detail. This is explicitly pointed out by the narrator when it is stated that ‘revelations... now seemed to come crowding in exponentially, as if the more she collected the more would come to her’.²²⁹

Indeed, we may perhaps argue that the epistemological topography of most detective fiction is predicated upon the centrifugal terrain of the anamorphosis. Returning to our earlier example of Poe’s ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, we may note that Dupin advocates just such an anamorphic hermeneutics of suspicion:

Truth is not always in a well. [...] To look at a star by glances – to view it in a sidelong way, by turning toward it the exterior portions of the *retina*... is to behold the star distinctly – is to have the best appreciation of its lustre – a lustre which grows dim just in proportion as we turn our vision *fully* upon it. ...it is possible to make even Venus herself vanish from the firmament by a scrutiny too sustained, too concentrated, or too direct.²³⁰

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.14-15 (my italics).

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.56.

²³⁰ *Selected Tales*, p.133.

If detection is here, in one of the very first example of the genre, rendered as a process of looking awry, then we may equally find such a paradigm at work in a recent winner of The Crime Writers' Association Silver Dagger Award and one of the most popular detective novels of the 1990s – Peter Høeg's *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*. In it the detective's suspicion is occasioned by her willingness and her ability to remark the differences articulated by footprints in the snow. This ability enables her to disclose a supplementary knowledge in the face of seemingly neutral signification:

In a big city you adopt a particular way of regarding the world. A focused, sporadically selective view. When you scan a desert or an ice floe, you see with different eyes. You let the details slip out of focus in favour of the whole. This way of seeing reveals a different reality. If you look at someone's face in this manner, it starts to dissolve into a shifting series of masks.²³¹

We may note here that the anamorphic gaze heralds a process of dissolution in the object under scrutiny as its apparent organicism decoagulates, like dream work under analysis, into its constituent elements.

However, in revealing a 'different reality' the anamorphic gaze also fosters an all consuming suspicion, for, as Lacan comments, '[d]istortion may lend itself... to all the paranoiac ambiguities'.²³² In this respect, as we have already noted, many critics concur with Jameson that *The Crying of Lot 49* 'wants

²³¹ Peter Høeg, *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, trans. by Farrar Strauss & Giroux Inc. and Harvill (London: Flamingo, 1994, 1992), p.220.

to contaminate its readers and beyond them to endow the present age itself with an impalpable but omnipresent culture of paranoia'.²³³ This paranoia, as a function of anamorphosis, may be understood as a radical mistrust of denotative meaning. Such mistrust then finds expression in the ascription of 'quiet ambiguity'²³⁴ or 'fierce ambivalence'²³⁵ to the object world and thus a general feeling that things are 'not too clear'.²³⁶ Borrowing from Hitchcock studies we may perhaps elaborate the anamorphic generation of suspicion more explicitly. What, Pascal Bonitzer wonders, is 'required to turn a Lumière brothers' sketch into a Hitchcockian fiction?'²³⁷ The object of Bonitzer's speculation is, in other words, the difference obtaining between the innocence of early cinema and the paranoiac, crime-stained universe of Hitchcock. Taking as his example a short film depicting a soldier courting a nanny engaged in pushing a pram around a park, he concludes that it is enough merely to inform the audience 'a priori that the nanny has decided to drown the baby'.²³⁸ This surplus knowledge then undermines the meaning of the whole sequence even if everything is filmed as before:

When one sees the baby babbling in its pram, the soldier clowning around in an attempt to seduce the nanny, and the latter

²³² *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.87.

²³³ Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington and Indianapolis; London: Indiana University Press; British Film Institute, 1992), p.17.

²³⁴ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.6.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.11.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.32.

²³⁷ Pascal Bonitzer, 'Hitchcockian Suspense' in *Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Lacan, But Were Afraid To Ask Hitchcock*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1992), pp.15-30 (p.19).

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.19.

simpering and shaking her rear, an underlying sense of horror serves to destroy the apparent meaning – what semiologists would call the ‘denotated’ meaning – of the scene, and distorts all its signs.... The first ‘impression of reality’ shifts to a secondary level, that of connotation. For the camera is no longer saying to us: ‘Look at this baby, how sweet it is’, but rather: ‘Look at this baby, how sweet it is, it has only a few minutes to live, unless the soldier understands what is going on’.²³⁹

What is required in filmic terms to produce this effect is merely the juxtaposition of two shots: one where we learn of the nanny’s murderous intent and another where we see the apparently innocent scene armed with the knowledge gleaned from the first shot. This, of course, is nothing more than dramatic irony. However, commenting upon Bonitzer’s article, Mladen Dolar argues that this surplus knowledge is precisely the designation of the anamorphic stain. To understand this we must situate the latter not in the field of the visible but in the field of the gaze.

In other words, anamorphosis exists as a condition of suspicion inhabiting the gaze and therefore does not have to exist as a visible blot. Thus, for example, Grant’s endless consternation at Oedipa’s nervousness – (‘An odd response’²⁴⁰, ‘a rather gratuitous, “Twilight Zone” kind of aside’²⁴¹) – in the face of an apparently unthreatening environment fails to distinguish between the ‘threat’ contained in the gaze as a surplus knowledge and the visible ‘threat’ of the Tristero stamps which function as the positive correlate of the former. The fact

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.19-20.

²⁴⁰ *A Companion to ‘The Crying of Lot 49’*, p.67.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.108.

that she is continually nervous, even in the absence of a visible stimulus, attests to the manner in which her gaze is stained or skewed by what she already knows. This is perhaps most clearly emblemized in the exchange of ‘Significant Looks’²⁴² accompanying the subject of the Tristero, the kind of ‘knowing look you get in your dreams from a certain unpleasant figure’.²⁴³ A ‘knowing look’, of course, is precisely a gaze that disables the neutrality of its occasion without denoting a referent that might justify it positively. The ‘lithe and terrible silence’²⁴⁴ attending the unforeseen deed which fosters these looks then comes to inform Oedipa’s gaze, such as when she finds ‘panic growing inside her head’ at Yoyodyne because ‘nobody spoke to her’.²⁴⁵ Indeed, what this example discloses is that the surplus knowledge of the paranoid gaze is equally troubled by a lack that manifests itself in uncertainty, as Dolar notes:

...surplus-knowledge also produces lack of knowledge, it confronts the spectator with his/her ignorance: if the initial setting was well known and predictable, then the surplus knowledge makes it opaque and uncertain, the outcome becomes entirely unpredictable, beyond the reach of knowledge – it becomes the place where the subject is torn between his/her surplus and lack of knowledge; the surplus turns in to lack. The objects lose their functionality, they become secret signs that have lost their (usual) meaning and are therefore open to a multiplicity of significations. So the function of the blot is finally nothing but the developed form and the reflected expression of the function of the gaze which is structured by the oscillation between the surplus and the lack.²⁴⁶

²⁴² *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.48.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.53.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.49.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.58.

²⁴⁶ Mladen Dolar, ‘The Spectator Who Knew Too Much’, in *Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Lacan, But Were Afraid To Ask Hitchcock*, pp.129-136 (p.134).

What is interesting here is how the opacity of the anamorphic gaze institutes the production of a certain temporality which may be termed suspense.

Indeed, we may follow Dolar in his designation of 'the zero degree of suspense'²⁴⁷ as the minimal loss of transparency in the gaze. Suspense may be understood in these terms as the temporal correlate of the more spatially oriented paranoia. If, like the latter term, suspense betokens an uncertainty and a suspicion, it also announces a temporal viscosity, a stretching and compression of time that Roland Barthes has properly identified as dilation:

...between question and answer there is a whole dilatory area whose emblem might be named "reticence", the rhetorical figure which interrupts the sentence, suspends it, turns it aside.... Whence, in the hermeneutic code, in comparison to those extreme terms (question and answer), the abundance of dilatory morphemes: the *snare*..., the *equivocation*..., the *partial answer*..., the *suspended answer*..., and *jamming*.... The variety of these terms (their inventive range) attests to the considerable labour the discourse must accomplish if it hopes to *arrest* the enigma, to keep it open.²⁴⁸

In the light of this, we may understand the detective story as a narrative engorged with delay and distended by 'many demurs'²⁴⁹, always, as it were, 'in retreat'.²⁵⁰ It is, in fact, just such an aposiopetic discourse that the Tristero gives rise to:

...a gentle chill, an ambiguity, begins to creep in among the words. Heretofore the naming of names has gone on either literally or

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.134.

²⁴⁸ *S/Z*, p.75.

²⁴⁹ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.62.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.68.

as a metaphor. But now, as the duke gives his fatal command, a new mode of expression takes over. It can only be called a kind of ritual reluctance. Certain things, it is made clear, will not be spoken aloud; certain events will not be shown onstage....²⁵¹

The 'ritual reluctance' identified here, which ultimately disables Oedipa's interrogative procedures, may be profitably delineated as the elision of the signified in favour of the signifier. This latter may then be considered as a kind of promissory note that both Oedipa and the reader hope to exchange for the signified once the 'ritual' has been successfully completed, because, as Barthes attests, the aposiopetic story 'brings narrative very close to the rite of initiation (a long path marked with pitfalls, obscurities, steps, suddenly comes out into the light)'.²⁵²

At this juncture we might profitably finish our consideration of Todorov's typology of detective fiction. The differences between the whodunit and the thriller are, for him, primarily an effect of 'two entirely different forms of interest':

The first can be called *curiosity*; it proceeds from effect to cause: starting from a certain effect (a corpse and certain clues) we must find its cause (the culprit and his motive). The second form is *suspense*, and here the movement is from cause to effect: we are first shown the causes, the initial *donnés* (gangsters preparing a heist), and our interest is sustained by the expectation of what will happen, that is, certain effects (corpses, crimes, fights).²⁵³

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.48.

²⁵² *S/Z*, pp.75-76.

²⁵³ 'The Typology of Detective Fiction', p.161.

It would seem, then, that the anamorphic narrative of *The Crying of Lot 49* is constituted in accordance with laws of suspense which are characteristic of the thriller. However, it may be argued that anamorphosis invokes both orders of temporality and that Pynchon's novel therefore does likewise. In so doing it can be considered as part off Todorov's third form of the detective story, one he rather unhelpfully terms 'the suspense novel' and where the reader 'wonders as much about the future as about the past'.²⁵⁴ We have already seen how the anamorphic blot initiates a type of suspense, but it also fosters a sense of curiosity in the sense that Todorov describes it. This is because interpretation is founded upon a constitutive delay; it can never be coexistent with its object of enquiry. In other words, our analysis of the latter is always of the nature of a return, a doubling back, or, more precisely, a repetition. We may even term this the temporality of anamorphosis because, in apprehending it or, rather, it apprehending us, we are compelled to return to the picture to interpret it. The stain, proposes Žižek, 'thus opens up the abyss of the search for a meaning – nothing is what it seems to be, everything is to be interpreted'.²⁵⁵

The anamorphic gaze is, then, one structured by repetition. To illustrate this we can return to our earlier analysis of the theme of detritus in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Grubbing amongst the ruins of society, we may recall that Oedipa initially sees the sailor in a door way; she then spots the anamorphic post horn

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.164.

²⁵⁵ *Looking Awry*, p.91.

‘tattooed in old ink now beginning to blur and spread’ and, immediately, ‘[f]ascinated, she came into the shadows and ascended creaking steps, hesitating on each one’²⁵⁶; following which she and the narrative undertake a lengthy analysis of the sailor’s face and life, from which we have already quoted. Thus we can say that Oedipa initially just sees him without apprehending him, but then, ‘fascinated’ by the post horn *qua* anamorphosis, she both sees him and apprehends him. In other words, her anamorphic gaze sees him for the first time by seeing him again. We can also witness this retroactive temporality in Jameson’s comments on detritus when he notes that ‘attention *flows back* onto the neglected perception and sees it in renewed, heightened form without damaging its structure’.²⁵⁷ What is particularly revealing in this context is the manner in which Jameson goes on to characterize this retroversion, arguing that ‘there are certain moments in life which are accessible only at the price of a certain lack of intellectual focus: like objects at the edge of my field of vision which disappear when I turn to stare at them head on’.²⁵⁸ We may read those ‘moments in life’ as being anamorphic, for it is in the nature of the stain that it cannot be seen head on but can only be apprehended by looking awry. This askance vision then sees its original object of perception for the first time again – a paradox which is here indexed by Jameson’s use of the tautological ‘renewed’.

We are now in a position which will allow us to draw together a number of points. The detective story, we have already noted, is an encounter with the

²⁵⁶ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.86.

²⁵⁷ ‘On Raymond Chandler’, p.125 (my italics).

unnarrated, the story of the murder, (in the case of *The Crying of Lot 49*, the murder, as it were, of the father). For the story of the murder to be told for the first time then, it must be told again by the detective. This is the logic underpinning one of the conclusions to Barbara Johnson's masterly study of Poe, Derrida and Lacan, where she notes that 'Dupin finds the letter "in" the symbolic order not because he knows where to look, but because he knows *what to repeat*'.²⁵⁹ The beginning of a detective story is thus reached only at the end of the narrative when the story of the murder can be told for the first time by the detective. Reference to this convention is made in the very last words of Pynchon's novel – 'the crying of lot 49'²⁶⁰ – which are, of course, also the first words we encounter on reading it. The narrative, in one sense then, neither begins nor ends but, rather, describes a recursive trajectory. Indeed, the difficulty of locating origins is constantly foregrounded throughout the text, particularly, and not coincidentally, in relation to the disclosure of the Tristero. For example, we are informed that Oedipa's 'night's infidelity with Metzger would logically be the starting point for it'; that with meeting Mike Fallopian '[s]o began, for Oedipa, the languid sinister blooming of The Tristero'; and that '[t]he beginning of that performance was clear enough. It was while she and Metzger were waiting for the ancillary letters to be granted... out at Fangoso Lagoons'.²⁶¹ It is little

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.125.

²⁵⁹ Barbara Johnson, 'The Frame of reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida', in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. by John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1993, 1988), pp.213-251 (p.245).

²⁶⁰ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.127.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.29, p.36 and p.36 respectively. Hanjo Berressem also notes the difficulty of pinning the Tristero down and uses their naming in *The Courier's Tragedy* to illustrate this: '[i]n the performance of the play, the only mention of the Tristero occurs in the following line: "No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow, /Who's once been set his tryst with Tristero". The

wonder then that '[l]ooking back she forgot which had come first'.²⁶² There is clearly more to this than mere narrative trickery, for what is at stake is symbolization as such. In this respect we may concur with Žižek when he comments that

[a]t the beginning, there is the murder – a traumatic shock, an event that cannot be integrated into symbolic reality because it appears to interrupt the “normal” causal chain. From the moment of this eruption, even the most ordinary events of life seem loaded with threatening possibilities; everyday reality becomes a nightmarish dream as the “normal” link between cause and effect is suspended. This radical opening, this dissolution of symbolic reality, entails the transformation of the lawlike succession of events into a kind of “lawless sequence” and therefore bears witness to an encounter with the “impossible” real, resisting symbolization.²⁶³

We can see here that the ‘original’ crime in detective narratives functions as an anamorphosis, disrupting the symbolic network until, with its repetition, it can be integrated within it, that is apprehended for the first time. As Žižek notes elsewhere, ‘the repetition announces the advent of the Law, of the Name-of-the-Father in place of the dead, assassinated father: the event which repeats itself receives its law retroactively, through repetition’.²⁶⁴ The detective’s act of interpretation is thus not really cognitive but performative, because it constructs a narrative sequence which did not previously exist.

subsequent burglaries of this line underscore the unreliability of the signifying chain. When Oedipa buys the text of the tragedy to find out more about the Trystero, she finds another version at the specific passage: “*No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow [...] Who once has crossed the lusts of Angelo*”. And in a footnote, based on the “Whitechapel version”, yet another one: “This tryst or odious awry, O Niccolò”....’ Hanjo Berressem, *Pynchon’s Poetics: Interfacing Theory and Text* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p.96.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p.29.

²⁶³ *Looking Awry*, p.58.

If this, briefly, is the form of detective fiction, its importance in *The Crying of Lot 49* proceeds from its playing host to and thereby expediting a particular conception of historicity. To understand this we must attend to the narrative's own intra-diegetic anamorphosis – *The Courier's Tragedy*. This generic imitation of a Jacobean revenge play forms the centrepiece of both Oedipa's and the reader's attempts at collocation. As she says of the history of the play – “I think of nothing but”.²⁶⁵ Indeed, Oedipa almost immediately identifies with the world of the play:

[She] found herself after five minutes sucked utterly into the landscape evil Richard Wharfinger had fashioned for his seventeenth-century audiences, so preapocalyptic, death-wishful, sensually fatigued, unprepared, a little poignantly, for that abyss of civil war... only a few years ahead of them.²⁶⁶

What is so striking about this description is how, as one of the characters remarks, it bears “a most bizarre resemblance” to the twentieth century audience of the play, which is, as the narrator describes it, also preapocalyptic, death-wishful and sensually fatigued.²⁶⁷ One of the most startling images of this is the ‘Negro woman... who kept going through rituals of miscarriage each for a different reason, deliberately as others might the ritual of birth, dedicated not to

²⁶⁴ *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p.62.

²⁶⁵ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.77.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.43.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.42.

continuity but to some kind of interregnum'.²⁶⁸ In so doing she is registering an affinity with discontinuity and the destruction of lineage which is borne witness to by the form of Jacobean tragedy. Right from the beginning, then, the specific representation of *The Courier's Tragedy* seems to encourage an analogy between itself and the rest of *The Crying of Lot 49*. At the level of content it is possible, for example, to trace a connection between the play's author – Wharfinger, which literally means 'the owner of a wharf or harbour – and Pierce Inverarity who owns the wharves of Fangoso Lagoons where we first hear about the play. This lagoon contains the bones of the GIs originally "harvested... from the bottom of Lago di Pietà"²⁶⁹, presumably the same 'Lake of Pity'²⁷⁰ that in the seventeenth century saw the massacre of the Torre and Tassis couriers by the Trystero, Diocletian Blobb's account of which bears a strong resemblance to the slaughter of the 'Faggian Lost Guard' next to a lake by Trystero-like characters in *The Courier's Tragedy*. Furthermore, the Lost Guard, like the GIs, like the cemetery dead removed for the "East San Narciso Freeway"²⁷¹, have their bones reconstituted as charcoal and then ink and cigarette filters or fertiliser respectively. In the play, Niccolò survives the early threat to turn him into fertiliser²⁷² only to succumb to what we assume is the Trystero, stuttering as he goes 'what may be the shortest line ever written in blank verse: "T-t-t-t-t"²⁷³. In turn, this apocopatic gasp finds an echo in the 'chopped-off prayers of dying

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.85.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.41.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.108.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.41.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p.44.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.49.

infantry' during *Cashiered*²⁷⁴, as well as in the sign traced in the dust by one of the Wells Fargo employees butchered (or so a plaque commemorates)²⁷⁵ on the banks of Lake Inverarity at Fangoso Lagoons by assailants answering the description of the Tristero.

This complex network of repetitions and resonances between the play and the rest of the narrative, of which this is just a small example, is part of what John Johnstone identifies as *The Crying of Lot 49*'s economy of the uncanny, in which 'something familiar repeats itself, but with a noticeable difference, deviation or deformation'.²⁷⁶ If this is so at the level of content, we may also observe such doubling at work in the form of the novel and the play. In so doing we can rely on Franco Moretti's excellent analysis of the genre of Jacobean tragedy in which, he argues, compared to its Elizabethan predecessor, '[n]o-one manages to control the plot, or even to understand much about it. The play now lacks a privileged point of observation, a centre such as the tragic hero had previously furnished'.²⁷⁷ If this is the case in *The Courtier's Tragedy*, it also holds for the main narrative in which, although Oedipa figures as the dominant centre of consciousness, there is no one character who is able to claim an Olympian summit from which to confer meaning. Partly this is due to the baroque complexities of intrigue and counter-intrigue which the characters in the play and the novel have to negotiate, for

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.24.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.62.

²⁷⁶ John Johnstone, 'Towards the Schizo-Text: Paranoia as Semiotic regime in *The Crying of Lot 49*', in *New Essays on 'The Crying of Lot 49'*, ed. by Patrick O'Donnell, pp.47-78 (p.49).

²⁷⁷ Franco Moretti, 'The Great Eclipse: Tragic Form as the Deconsecration of Sovereignty', in *Shakespearean Tragedy*, John Drakakis (London and New York: Longman, 1992), pp.45-84 (p.71).

‘there are now *too many plots*, overlapping and undoing one another incessantly’.²⁷⁸ It is also partly due to the fact that, as Moretti argues:

[M]eaning does not deceive, but rather dissolves: into appearance..., indeterminacy..., and inexplicable detail.... Nor is the problem even how to interpret such signs, but, more basically, to determine whether or not they are in fact signs.²⁷⁹

Again, in both cases, then, there is a manifest difficulty in comprehending a signifying excess, in making sense of signs that actually make no sense at all. This, it may be proposed, is precisely the status of the anamorphic stain: it is a signifier that initially means nothing, ‘the element that,’ Žižek avers, ‘when viewed straightforwardly, remains a meaningless stain, but which, as soon as we look at the picture from a precisely determined lateral perspective, all of a sudden acquires well-known contours’.²⁸⁰ It is, of course, the ‘precisely determined lateral perspective’ of the English civil war which enables Moretti to read in the stain of Jacobean tragedy the ‘well-known contours’ of a rehearsal for revolution. His interpretation is thus necessarily retroactive, for, at the time, the signs in the play only had meaning in the future; they are addressed to a historical rupture which had not yet come but, rather, will have been. As such, it is entirely appropriate that

[t]he unique ‘solution’ of dramatic complications, the only ‘meeting place’ of the dramatic agents, now consists in the reduction

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.71.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.76.

²⁸⁰ *Looking Awry*, p.90.

of everything to ‘nothing’, a word that frequently recurs in this drama. We no longer have even Shakespeare’s bloodless heirs to give the illusion of historical continuity, as virtually the entire court expires under our eyes.²⁸¹

Indeed, just as in *The Courier’s Tragedy* ‘the only character left alive in a stage dense with corpses is the colorless administrator, Gennaro’²⁸², so Oedipa, the anodyne auditor, is the only character left at the end of the novel with some measure of sanity, all the others being either ‘on something, mad, possible enemies, dead’.²⁸³ Like the woman ‘dedicated not to continuity but to some kind of interregnum’, the novel and the play within it are both curiously pledged to a dead-end, to replaying the same motifs over and over again in a kind of listless refrain that appears to mean nothing to no-one. Given our earlier comments, this could be said to bear witness to the operations of the commodity form. Indeed, in playing host to a nexus of content and form between two genres several hundred years apart, *The Crying of Lot 49* would seem to be offering a distinctly ahistorical vision which only serves to bolster the criticisms directed at postmodern fiction. However, there is perhaps another angle, another ‘precisely determined lateral perspective’ as it were, in and from which to understand this.

Indeed, the perceptive from which we may understand this narrative strategy is precisely that – a perspective, an interested or subjective position and one, it might be proposed, which expedites the apprehension of such a

²⁸¹ ‘The Great Eclipse’, p.71.

²⁸² *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.51.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.118.

perspective in the first place. By this is meant the invocation of Benjamin's distinction between types of history. For him '[h]istory is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]'.²⁸⁴ The former time is the temporality of historicism, the latter that of historical materialism. The former unfolds continuously and is motivated by a certain conception of progress – that is the 'progress of mankind itself, ...something boundless, ...something that automatically pursue[s] a straight course'.²⁸⁵ Such a conception of progress clearly articulates its prejudice, as Benjamin notes when he 'asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize':

The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all the rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. [...] Historical materialists know what that means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures.... They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.²⁸⁶

In the light of this we may say that *The Crying of Lot 49* is predicated precisely on the disclosure of the barbarism constitutively repressed by civilization and, as such, it belongs fully on the side of historical materialism. For the latter, history

²⁸⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn, pp.255-266 (p.263).

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.263.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.258.

is populated by oppression and failure, and to grasp this necessitates being prepared ‘to blast open the continuum of history’:

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. [...] In this structure [the historical materialist] recognizes... a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history – blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework.²⁸⁷

In other words, the monad is a short-circuit of history, an immobilization of continuity in which disparate historical moments are placed in conjunction. As such, the monad announces the action of retroactivity: ‘it is literally,’ as Žižek argues, ‘the point of “suspended dialectics”, of pure repetition where historical movement is placed within parentheses’.²⁸⁸ Recalling our earlier discussion, we may say that for historicism historiography is a cognitive procedure, whereas for historical materialism it is performative, as Benjamin avers:

The class struggle, which is always present to a historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the form of the spoils which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humour, cunning, and fortitude. They have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.264-265.

²⁸⁸ *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p.140.

²⁸⁹ ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, pp.256-257.

This ‘calling into question’ is a form of symbolic redemption in which ‘what really was’ is actually ‘what will have been’; in which, in other words, history’s failures, those which are constitutively repressed by historicism and the historiography of the victors, are narrated for the first time by virtue of their repetition. As Žižek comments in this regard, ‘the revolution accomplishes a “tiger’s leap into the past” not because it is in search of a kind of support in the past, in tradition, but in so far as this past which repeats itself in the revolution “comes from the future” – was already in itself pregnant with the open dimension of the future’.²⁹⁰

In *The Crying of Lot 49* we have already seen this structure of repetition and retroactivity rehearsed in the form of the detective story. This form thereby provides the co-ordinates with which the novel is able to map out its larger historical and political concern to elaborate the preterite, specifically in the monadic conjunction of the Jacobean and the postmodern. The monad *qua* stasis finds a kind of literal expression throughout *The Crying of Lot 49* in Oedipa’s loss of temporality; for example, we are informed ‘[s]he looked at her watch, but it had stopped’; that she and Metzger ‘had found a way to make itself slow down’; and that on seeing the W.A.S.T.E. symbol she is left ‘wondering how much time had gone by’.²⁹¹ As the latter suggests here, what comes to be retroactively symbolized in this conjunction is the Tristero in their role as what

²⁹⁰ *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, pp.141-142.

the Scurvhamites term “the brute Other”, with their ‘constant theme, disinheritance’.²⁹² In other words, Oedipa is eventually ‘able to piece together [an] account of how the organization began’ and to read it from ‘the precisely determined lateral perspective’ of those ‘in exile from somewhere else invisible yet congruent with the cheered land she lived in’.²⁹³ That this symbolization ‘comes from the future’, as Žižek argues, is borne witness to by the novel’s most expressive acronym – W.A.S.T.E. or ‘WE AWAIT SILENT TRISTERO’S EMPIRE’.²⁹⁴ Here, history’s waste products, its repressed, self-consciously admits of a time when it will mean, when, in other words, it will have been. This, at another level, is precisely what the Jacobean-postmodern monad ultimately discloses – the possibility of a retroactive redemption at all. For, in utilizing a pre-revolutionary period (the Jacobean) as the time of inflection, the narrative recalls a time of historical possibility in which the social order was destabilized and had yet to reconstitute as it did following the revolution. There is thus a process of abstraction at work here, because what is redeemed is the point of rupture itself, the cracking of a continuity by which a retroactive redemption is actually enabled in the first place.²⁹⁵

²⁹¹ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.22, p.27 and p.66 respectively.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, p.108 and p.110 respectively.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.109 and p.125 respectively.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.116.

²⁹⁵ In this respect *The Crying of Lot 49*’s redemption to the second power is at one with Benjamin’s own project, for what the latter’s monadic historiography represents is an attempt to disinter a radical temporality from the socio-temporal forms of modernity, a modernity which on his own pessimistic analysis is thoroughly alien to the older traditions of remembrance. Similarly, *The Crying of Lot 49* seeks its form of remembrance within the incontinent imaginary of capital, inhabiting and refashioning that form for the purposes of releasing a ‘tradition’ antipathetic to it.

Of course, the Jacobean period is presented as such because that is the position of the present, or at least the present of the novel. We can, for example, see something of this prospect for change intimated in the description of Oedipa's trip to Berkley campus:

She moved through it carrying her fat book, attracted, unsure, a stranger, wanting to feel relevant but knowing how much of a search among alternate universes it would take. For she had undergone her own educating at a time of nerves, blandness and retreat among not only her fellow students but also most of the visible structure around and ahead of them, this having been a national reflex to certain pathologies in high places only death had had the power to cure, and this Berkley was like no somnolent Siwash out of her own past at all, but more akin to those Far Eastern or Latin American universities you read about, those autonomous culture media where the most beloved of folklores may be brought into doubt, cataclysmic of dissents voiced, suicidal of commitments chosen – the sort that bring governments down.²⁹⁶

In the light of this, or, rather, from this angle, the Jacobean period, like the 1960s, can be redeemed as a period in which the possibilities for a reconfiguration of history as a tradition of the oppressed will have been opened up; that is, in which continuity will have been interrupted, not sadly confirmed. As such, this accounts for the tension in the form of the novel between stasis and continuity, because if the former indexes, in Benjamin's terms, a revolutionary consciousness, then the latter allows that it has yet to come. The inflection of the Jacobean age within the present, then, redeems the potential that was lost in the continuing oppression of post-revolutionary England. We may perhaps characterize this as a hindsight that recognizes its own contingency. This, of

course, is also the structure of the narrative which, while it is written in the past tense and peppered with imperatives ('her next move *should* have been', [s]he *should* have left then'²⁹⁷) that designate a point of accomplished symbolization, an end of history, also qualifies its hindsight by the many ways that we have identified in which the narrative does not end, in which it is still waiting to be finished.

Perhaps the most pertinent example of the latter in this respect is the figure which ends the novel, for, as Tanner notes, '49 is the pentecostal number (the Sunday seven weeks after Easter), but Pentecost derives from the Greek for "fifty"'.²⁹⁸ The revelation of a 'gift of tongues', which we might characterize here as the giving of a voice to the oppressed, is thus articulated as an imminent possibility at the same time that it is not actually realized. Indeed, the conditions of possibility for re-symbolization are everywhere granted in *The Crying of Lot 49*: from the names of the characters right up to the name of Pynchon himself, every signifier is pregnant with future signifieds, with a contingency which may be realized in some other historical monad. What remains, wisely, unaffirmed is the 'precisely determined lateral perspective' from which this resymbolization will have taken place. It is an ambiguity appropriately figured in the Tristero, the novel's totemic representatives of the oppressed. The latter, of course, are an organization whose ostensive function is the dissemination of meaning in the form of letters or mail. In contradistinction to other couriers, they are acclaimed

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.71.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.69 and p.76 respectively.

for their reliability, falling in with whomsoever will aid their deliveries, '[t]heir entire emphasis... towards silence, impersonation, opposition masquerading as allegiance'.²⁹⁹ In other words, they are there throughout history ferrying the mail, but their visibility is consistently mitigated by the conditions in which they operate. We therefore only know of their existence upon receiving a letter. We might say, then, that they are ultimately an instantiation of the principle we have, it seems, clearly been attending to all along – the principle that 'a letter,' as Lacan proposes, 'always arrives at its destination'.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ Thomas Pynchon, p.68.

²⁹⁹ *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.120.

³⁰⁰ Jacques Lacan, 'The Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. by John P. Muller and William J Richardson, pp.28-54 (p.53).

Chapter Three – Future Shock:

Style and the Temporality of Trauma in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*

1: Post-Stylistic Stress Recorder

At the root of much that is characterized as postmodern theory lies the fact of brutalization. Never before have so many human beings been subject to so much cruelty and death at such levels of intensity for such an extended period of time. It has been, declares Eric Hobsbawm, 'without doubt the most murderous century of which we have record, both by the scale, frequency and length of the warfare which filled it, barely ceasing for a moment in the 1920s, but also by the unparalleled scale of human catastrophes it produced, from the greatest famines in history to systematic genocide'.¹ Such widespread slaughter necessarily impacts upon any general assessment of humanity's sense of itself. In particular, it problematizes the evaluation of our 'progress' and, indeed, has come to taint the very concept itself. Summing up the argument, Zygmunt Bauman contends that progress has now come to 'mean paring off the *functionless* sufferings, the

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century – 1914-1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), p.13. Something of this never-ending barbarism is captured in the sorrowful history of Cephallonia as it is delineated in Louis de Bernières' *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. Invaded by both the Italians and the Germans during World War Two, it soon after succumbs to an internecine conflict between the Royalists and Communists. As Pelagia, one of the novel's central characters, laments: 'She saw no future except the succession of one type of Fascism by another, on an island seemingly accursed and destined forever to be a part of someone else's game, a game whose cynical players changed but whose counters were fashioned out of bone and

relentless passage from a meaningless to the meaningful suffering: it means making the world more *rational*'.² This seemingly oxymoronic coupling of rationality and sufferance presents the contemporary author with an uncomfortable set of 'raw' materials from which to fashion a work. As J.G. Ballard, one of the more illustrious survivors of 'progress', comments, '[t]he marriage of reason and nightmare that has dominated the 20th century has given birth to an ever more ambiguous world'.³ Amongst the more pertinent effects of this 'marriage', Ballard proposes that 'the past, in social and psychological terms, became a casualty of Hiroshima and the nuclear age'.⁴ In such a situation, 'what,' he asks, 'is the main task facing the writer?'

Can he, any longer, make use of the techniques and perspectives of the traditional 19th century novel, with its linear narrative, its measured chronology, its consular characters grandly inhabiting their domains within an ample time and space? Is his subject matter the sources of characters and personality sunk deep in the past, the unhurried inspection of roots, the examination of the most subtle nuances of social behaviour and personal relationships? Can he leave out anything he prefers not to understand, including his own motives, prejudices and psychopathology?⁵

blood, the flesh of all the innocent and weak'. Louis de Bernières, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (London: Minerva, 1995, 1994), pp.361-362.

² Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p.226. Bauman continues, noting that '[w]ith one stone of rationality, modernity killed two birds. It managed to recast as inferior and doomed all those forms of life which did not harness their own pains to the chariot of Reason. And it obtained a safe conduct for the pains it was about to inflict itself.' *Ibid.*, p.226. It is worth pointing out that this view is by no means uncontested. Terry Eagleton, for example, berates those theorists who naively conflate all reason with its instrumental manifestations: 'Nazism, for Lyotard as for some other postmodern thinkers, is one lethal destination of the Enlightenment's *grandes récits*, the tragic consummation of a terroristic Reason and totality. He does not understand it as the upshot of a barbarous anti-Enlightenment irrationalism which, like certain aspects of postmodernism, junked history, refused argumentation, aestheticized politics and staked all on the charisma of those who told the stories.' Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p.396.

³ J.G. Ballard, 'Introduction' (1995), in *Crash*, by J.G. Ballard (London: Vintage, 1995, 1973), pp.4-6 (p.4).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.5.

In other words, given the ubiquitous effects of the 'marriage of nightmare and reason', how is the contemporary author supposed to register these effects and what techniques must be employed to do so?

One of the most striking attempts to address these issues in recent years is *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut's sixth novel. *Slaughterhouse-Five* narrates the story of Billy Pilgrim's experience as a Prisoner of War in Germany at the end of World War Two. During this imprisonment he 'witnesses' the destruction of Dresden by Allied bombing. Pilgrim is joined in this by Vonnegut himself, who has made the experience an explicit topic of at least four of his books, including *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It was, he declares, 'the largest massacre in European history', or, at the very least 'the fastest killing of large numbers of people in a matter of hours'.⁶ As Dresden was a city of no strategic importance, the only person to gain from its destruction has been Vonnegut himself who has, he claims, 'so far received about five bucks for every corpse created by the firestorm'.⁷ Such royalties have mainly been earned from sales of *Slaughterhouse-Five* which, as Jerome Klinkowitz points out, 'turned out to be his first best-seller, catapulted him to sudden national fame, and brought his writing into serious intellectual esteem'.⁸

⁶ Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968, 1961), p.x, and Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* (London: Vintage, 1994, 1981), p.406 respectively.

⁷ Kurt Vonnegut, *Fates Worse Than Death: An Autobiographical Collage of the 1980s* (London: Vintage, 1992, 1991), p.101.

⁸ Jerome Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), p.63. It is worth pointing out that, for Robert Merrill, 'Klinkowitz's book is perhaps the best single study of

Undoubtedly one of the main reasons for the popularity of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is Vonnegut's style of writing.⁹ In sharp contrast to the dense, convoluted style of Thomas Pynchon, Vonnegut's writing, in the majority of his works, is characterized by a simplicity that is suggestive of the colloquial where it is not actually banal. At the level of form, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, for example, is seemingly composed of equally weighted paragraphs that occupy interchangeable positions in the 'narrative'. In turn, such petrified paragraphs find their counterpart in the clauseless, self-contained statements which constitute the greater proportion of the sentences in the novel.¹⁰ This simplicity of form is joined at the level of diction by an apparently unpretentious vernacularism, the tone of which is initiated with the very first paragraph:

All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really *was* shot in Dresden for taking a pot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really *did* threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I've changed all the names.¹¹

There is an almost studied informality about the diction and syntax here that betokens the prelude to an intimate recounting of a story. Vague qualifications, like 'more or less', and colloquial word use, such as 'pretty much true', are joined

Vonnegut'. Robert Merrill, 'Introduction', in *Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. by Robert Merrill (Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall, 1990), pp.1-27 (p.13).

⁹ Of his popularity, Vonnegut notes simply that '[m]y books are probably more widely used in schools than those of any other living American fiction writer'. *Palm Sunday*, p.318.

¹⁰ As Klinkowitz, Vonnegut's most ardent critic, testifies, the latter's style is predicated upon 'short sentences (sometimes just one word long), abbreviated paragraphs (of just a few sentences or less), [and] chapters so minuscule that more than a hundred of them can be packed into a 200-page book'. *Kurt Vonnegut*, p.46.

by informal emphases, ‘really *was*’, ‘really *did*’, and elisions, ‘I’ve changed all the names’. Hovering somewhere in an easy niche between argot and *belles-lettres* there is very little that is either specifically literary or otherwise designed to appeal to a linguistic coterie. Indeed, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is almost invariably written in the simple past tense, often just of the verb ‘to be’, and its sentences are generally bereft of the kind of extended metaphors, motifs and diction usually associated with a literary idiom. Even what conjunctives there are hint at a significance unsolicited by the solipsism of the sentences, in whose ration-book language commas are a luxury and colons a positive indulgence. It is, we might say, a certain kind of parataxis, one that apparently finds its matrix in the casual exigencies of quotidian speech.

In his first autobiography, *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut displays a suitably disingenuous cognizance of the vernacular stamp of his style:

I trust my own writing most and others seem to trust it, too,
when I sound most like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I
am.¹²

Of course, the accent on the simile here – (‘*like* a person from Indianapolis’) – betrays a degree of artistic calculation that is far from the aleatory registers of common speech with its redundant terms, habituated phrasing and local idioms. In this it is fully of a piece with the carefully fashioned structures of expression to

¹¹ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five, or, The Children's Crusade: A Duty Dance with Death* (London: Triad Paladin, 1989, 1969), p.9.

be found throughout the Vonnegutian *oeuvre*. For Vonnegut's style is, in fact, composed of a patterned contradiction which its wholesome simplicity only ostensibly seeks to occlude. In contradistinction to the self-professed vernacularism of his work, we may say that his novels bear mute witness to the history of Literature itself. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, even at the level of content, there are repeated gestures towards a literary heritage. This is most clearly manifest in the fact that there are, as Tony Tanner bluntly notes, 'a lot of books in this novel':

They range from low fiction (*Valley of the Dolls*), to criticism (*Céline and His Vision*), to documentary studies (*The Bombing of Dresden*, *The Execution of Private Slovik*, *Extraordinary Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*), to high-level realistic fiction (*The Red Badge of Courage*), to poetry (Blake is mentioned, Roethke is quoted).¹³

In addition to this cursory list, we may add that many of the novel's central characters, including Kilgore Trout, Howard Campbell, Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, and Vonnegut himself, are authors of different types of monograph.¹⁴ However, Literature also persists much less obviously in the very amodal form of the Vonnegutian idiom; that is, persists in the negative imprint of

¹² *Palm Sunday*, p.368.

¹³ Tony Tanner, 'The Uncertain Messenger: A Reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five*', in *Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*, pp.125-130 (p.127).

¹⁴ I say 'cursory' here, because, as Charles B. Harris advises, to this list could be added 'light opera (*The Pirates of Penzance*), movie scripts, prayers, hymns, professional journals, newspapers, the Bible, drama, classical odes, dirty limericks, past popular songs ("That Old Gang of Mine", "Leven Cent cotton"), speeches, political propaganda (Campbell's monograph), pornographic magazines, forewords to books, six Kilgore Trout novels, and references to writers of various ages and genres (Blake, Goethe, Scheherazade, Darwin)'. Charles B. Harris, 'Time,

Slaughterhouse-Five's stylish stylelessness. It is, to use a term proposed by Roland Barthes, 'writing at the degree zero'.¹⁵ Caught between the subjunctive and imperative moods, writing at the degree zero ostensibly belongs to the domain of the indicative:

The aim here is to go beyond Literature by entrusting one's fate to a sort of basic speech, equally far from living languages and from literary language proper. This transparent form of speech, initiated by Camus's *Outsider*, achieves a style of absence which is almost an ideal absence of style, writing is then reduced to a sort of negative mood in which the social or mythical characters of a language are abolished in favour of a neutral and inert state of form.¹⁶

In its arid discipline and its apparent disdain for the traditional trappings and ornamentation of Literature – what we might call style itself – context is bleached from the text and history is thus seemingly discernible only by its absence. Indeed, we might say the latter returns precisely as the absence of that style. For what the blank features of Vonnegut's prose refuse to acknowledge is inscribed in that refusal as the style's agonistic pedigree. Only now, in other words, in this specific period of the history of Literature, could style itself be discarded and thus, in the act of discarding, bear witness to its specific history.

We may perhaps go further than this, as does Barthes, and propose that such a style is a kind of return to origins. Barthes argues that 'neutral writing in

Uncertainty, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.: A Reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five*', *The Centennial Review*, 20:3, (1976), 228-243, (p.237).

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p.76.

fact rediscovers the primary condition of classical art: instrumentality'.¹⁷ In stating this Barthes is aligning writing at the degree zero with the practice of rhetoric. Such a practice may be defined, according to Fredric Jameson, as 'that ensemble of techniques through which a writer or orator may achieve expressiveness or high style, conceived of as a relatively fixed class standard, as an institution in which the most diverse temperaments are able to participate'.¹⁸ If rhetoric therefore pretends to a kind of universalism by furnishing the individual with a common language, then style, in contrast, 'is the very element of individuality itself, that mode through which the individual consciousness seeks to distinguish itself, to affirm its incomparable originality'.¹⁹

This, of course, presents a fresh set of problems for the postmodern author. Faced with what Jameson describes as 'the explosion of modern literature into a host of distinct private styles and mannerisms', the contemporary writer is forced into a minor confrontation with the paradox of the 'new'.²⁰ If fashioning another new style amounts to no more than a perpetuation of the old order, while retrieving an old style clearly marks a kind of regression, then Vonnegut's solution to this problematic in *Slaughterhouse-Five* constitutes a shrewd negotiation between the two. For what Vonnegut does is to seize the very form of style itself and deploy it as content. Style here may be defined in its historical

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.77.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.77-78.

¹⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p.334.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.334.

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p.17.

mode, with Jameson, 'as language which deliberately calls attention to itself and "foregrounds" itself as a key element in the work'.²¹ The nature of such foregrounding, however, is a kind of accidental ostentation., or, rather, it is crafted to appear accidental by evidently being contingent upon its subject. Thus we might say that whilst a particular style presents itself as the objective correlative of its 'raw' material, it simultaneously seeks in its own right to appeal to what Barthes calls 'a sixth, purely literary, sense, the private property of producers and consumers of Literature'.²² The most notorious example of this schizophrenic style for Barthes is '[t]he writing of Realism', which 'far from being neutral, [...] is on the contrary loaded with the most spectacular signs of fabrication'.²³ In such a situation, the evaluation of Literature develops in accordance with the quantity of artistic sweat that a fiction bears, as Barthes contends:

[T]he value of a text is assessed by the obvious signs of the labour it has cost. Now nothing is more spectacular than attempting to combine predicates, as a workman adjusts some delicate mechanism. What pedants admire in the writing of a Maupassant or a Daudet is a literary sign at last detached from its content, which posits Literature unambiguously as a category without any relation to other languages, and in so doing establishes an ideal intelligibility of things.²⁴

If we think of style here as the signifier, and of content as the signified, then the value of the former rises directly in proportion to the ease with which the two can

²¹ *Marxism and Form*, p.335.

²² *Writing Degree Zero*, p.65.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp.67-68.

be disengaged and the latter discarded. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, however, signifier and signified, or style and content, are seemingly indivisible. This is because 'the obvious signs of the labour it has cost' are explicit at the level of the signified, rather than implicit at the level of the signifier. In fact, the first chapter is dedicated to narrating the literal difficulties Vonnegut had in producing the novel; as he states, 'I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time'.²⁵ He then goes on to detail how '[a]s a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations' he outlined the best narrative structure for *Slaughterhouse-Five* 'on the back of a roll of wallpaper'.²⁶ Such open declarations of the labour of writing are, of course, characteristic of a certain type of postmodernist fiction. In John Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse', for example, the narrator consistently foregrounds the techniques being used to shape the story and seduce the reader. As with Vonnegut, however, much of this metafictional commentary is concerned to elaborate quite how badly the tale is being told, such as when the narrator notes despairingly that '[t]o say that Ambrose's and Peter's mother was *pretty* is to accomplish nothing; the reader may acknowledge the proposition, but his imagination is not engaged'.²⁷ In such cases, then, the fetishizing work of Barthes' 'pedant' is forestalled at source because, as Mark Currie points out, 'the literary object itself performs a critical function'.²⁸ Thus freed from the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.69.

²⁵ *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p.9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.12.

²⁷ John Barth, 'Lost in the Funhouse', in *The Heath Introduction to Fiction*, 5th edn., ed. by John J. Clayton (Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1996), pp.618-635 (p.620).

²⁸ Mark Currie, 'Introduction', in *Metafiction*, ed. by Mark Currie (London and New York: Longman, 1995), pp.1-18 (p.1).

obligation to appeal to the 'literary sense', individual style becomes a historical category to be replaced by the styleless style of Vonnegut. As Morris Dickstein comments, '[w]hat died in the sixties was not the novel but the mystique of the novel'.²⁹

For Barthes, writing at the degree zero bespeaks a new kind of universalism, one which, like a kind of mathematical purity, 'reaches the state of a pure equation, which is no more tangible than an algebra when it confronts the innermost part of man'.³⁰ Superseding Jameson's 'explosion of modern literature into a host of distinct private styles and mannerisms', such algebraic clarity thereby also transcends the relativism of individual styles. The effect of this is to describe an escape from what Barthes terms the 'tragic predicament peculiar to Literature' in which the writer's 'consciousness no longer accounts for the whole of his condition'.³¹ With neutral writing, then, 'Literature is vanquished, the problematics of mankind is uncovered and presented without elaboration, the writer becomes irretrievably honest'.³²

While we must be careful to distinguish between the universality of a style and of an ideology, the former characteristic may in some measure account for Vonnegut's apparent universalism, his critically lauded ability to face, what Charles B. Harris calls, 'the absurdity of the human condition without losing his

²⁹ Morris Dickstein, 'Black Humor and History: Fiction in the Sixties', *Partisan Review*, 43:2, (1976), 185-211, (p.186).

³⁰ *Writing Degree Zero*, p.78.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.60.

concern for humanity'.³³ However, if this rather benign scenario seems to suggest that neutral writing is both historically specific and, in some way, transcendent to that specificity, Barthes indicates that the latter is but a momentary flicker across the otherwise contingent:

Unfortunately, nothing is more fickle than a colourless writing; mechanical habits are developed in the very place where freedom existed, a network of set forms hem in more and more the pristine freshness of discourse, a mode of writing appears afresh in lieu of an indefinite language. The writer, taking his place as a "classic", becomes the slavish imitator of his original creation, society demotes his writing to a mere manner, and returns him a prisoner to his own formal myths.³⁴

At one level, this describes the historical situation of Vonnegut and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. As Robert Merrill comments in an overview of Vonnegut's work, 'recent evidence suggests that people are neither talking about nor reading Kurt Vonnegut as much as they did in the year immediately following his first great popular and critical success with *Slaughterhouse-Five*'.³⁵ At another level, however, it also points to a further contradiction at work in Vonnegut's style.

This contradiction is perhaps best encapsulated in *Slaughterhouse-Five* by the phrase 'So it goes'. On the one hand this phrase connotes a kind of

³² *Ibid.*, p.78.

³³ Charles B. Harris, 'Illusion and Absurdity: The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut', in *Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. by Robert Merrill, pp.131-141 (p.140).

³⁴ *Writing Degree Zero*, p.78.

³⁵ 'Introduction', p.1. Vonnegut is not averse to admitting this apathy either: 'Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, a *New York Times* daily book reviewer, told me at a party maybe five years ago that he couldn't stand to read me anymore, so that makes two of us'. *Fates Worse Than Death*, p.110.

carelessness or adolescent *laissez-faire*; on the other hand it functions very precisely in the novel as a signification of death. Occurring one hundred and three times, the phrase's very repetitiveness undermines its apparent insouciance. The aleatory and the instrumental thus contaminate each other to the point of undecidability, as David Punter argues:

The uniqueness of Kurt Vonnegut's style has been summarised in many different ways. One of the principal distinctions seems to me to be the continuous holding together of different poles: high technology and human eccentricity, the manipulative and repetitive languages of commerce and the faltering expression of love, intense patterning and emphatic inconsequentiality.³⁶

This cohabitation of the fleeting and the functional succeeds because of what Harris describes as '[t]he detached tone of Vonnegut's novels'.³⁷ For the latter's style seems to deliberately void itself of any sensory apprehension of the objects it touches, encasing them within an insensible *epoche* as if to render a prose that best approximates to a phenomenology-in-aspic. Everything in the novel, from the vibrating bed to the firebombing of Dresden, is adumbrated in the same flat, bloodless register, perhaps indicating that this is the only way to register anything at all. Indeed, this would seem to be very much the point. The ubiquity of 'So it goes' indexes the persistence of death in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which, quite apart from the references to the bombing of Dresden, is, as Robert Merrill and Peter A.

³⁶ David Punter, *The Hidden Script: Writing and the Unconscious* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p.78.

³⁷ 'Illusion and Absurdity: The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut', p.139. This, according to Harris, 'is the primary device by which he suggests the hopelessness of the human condition and the resignation he feels is necessary to that hopelessness'. *Ibid.*, p.139.

Scholl point out, 'filled with allusions to such post-war disasters as Vietnam, the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the riots in American ghettos'.³⁸ Vonnegut's prose is, we might say, shell-shocked, stung by the intensity of accumulative experiences it can only register at arm's length. As the narrator comments, '[e]verything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds'.³⁹ Vonnegut's prose is comparable to that birdsong, for it is ultimately the very style of trauma itself – reluctant, repetitious and recursive.

2: Making a Trauma Out of a Stylus

Many critics have quite properly identified trauma and/or the writing of trauma as the subject of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Tony Tanner, for example, argues that '[i]t is a novel about a novelist who has been unable to erase the memory of his wartime experience and the Dresden fire-storm'.⁴⁰ Pressing this point even further, Harris proposes that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is concerned to elaborate the effects of trauma as such, rather than a specific trauma, for 'the novel is less about Dresden than about the psychological impact of time, death, and uncertainty on its main character'.⁴¹ Dickstein, however, finds that such weighty concerns are too onerous for the fragile fictional structure within which they are

³⁸ Robert Merrill and Peter A. Scholl, 'Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*: The Requirements of Chaos', in *Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. by Robert Merrill, pp.142-151 (p.149).

³⁹ *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p.21.

articulated. This is particularly so because Pilgrim's traumatic experience resonates so overtly with that of Vonnegut's, and thus 'faced with the firebombing of Dresden, where he himself had been a helpless bystander, a stunned survivor, he lets the intensity of his feelings overshadow the fable that tries to express them'.⁴² The failure of the novel is, for Dickstein, coded testimony to the strength of the trauma it delineates. However, it is Vonnegut himself who perhaps comes closest to the contention argued here, when he notes of *Slaughterhouse-Five* that '[t]his thin book is about what it's like to write a book about a thing like [the destruction of Dresden]'.⁴³ Perhaps even more pertinently, he goes on to say that '[t]he book is a process of this sort of living with Dresden and the aftermath'.⁴⁴ The inference we may draw from these statements is that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not so much about both trauma and the writing of it; rather it is about the fact that trauma and the writing of trauma are the same process.

In order to pursue this line of thought we must turn to the most persuasive theorization of trauma, that to be found in psychoanalytical discourse. Trauma is, of course, a term that finds its incipience in the disciplines of surgery and medicine, and in adopting it, as J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis propose, 'psychoanalysis carries the three ideas implicit in it over on to the psychical level:

⁴⁰ Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (London and New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p.194.

⁴¹ 'Time, Uncertainty, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.', p.228.

⁴² 'Black Humor and History: Fiction in the Sixties', p.190.

⁴³ Joe David Bellamy and John Casey, 'Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.', in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. by William Rodney Allen (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), pp.156-167 (p.163).

the idea of a violent shock, the idea of a wound and the idea of consequences affecting the whole organization'.⁴⁵ One of the most compelling delineations of its psychical manifestations, and one that borrows heavily from the model of its organic matrix, is to be found in Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. This text, for Peter Brooks, 'constitutes Freud's own masterplot, the essay where he lays out most fully a total scheme of how life proceeds from beginning to end'.⁴⁶ A central characteristic of this 'total scheme' is trauma, particularly that suffered by combat victims of shell-shock. Indeed, their experiences disclose the central problematic upon which *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is predicated. Of particular concern here is the exhibition by the shell-shocked of a compulsion to repeat the initial moment of shock in dreams, or, rather nightmares. Such a compulsion contradicts the accepted function of dreams as wish-fulfilling scenarios. Therefore, as Freud argues, '[a]nyone who accepts it as something self-evident that their dreams should put them back at night into the situation that caused them to fall ill has misunderstood the nature of dreams'.⁴⁷ As is well known, Freud's solution to this apparent paradox is to relativize the hitherto existing monopoly of the pleasure principle by postulating the existence of a death drive.⁴⁸ The compulsion to repeat produced by trauma can thus be seen as a small act in the larger drama of the instincts which cling conservatively to what

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.163.

⁴⁵ J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 1988, 1973), p.466.

⁴⁶ Peter Brooks, 'Freud's Masterplot', in *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reader*, ed. by Sue Vice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), pp.30-37 (p.30).

⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, (1920), in *The Penguin Freud Library* (hereafter *P.F.L.*), Volume 11, ed. by Angela Richards and Albert Dickson, trans. by James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1973-1991), pp.269-338 (pp.282-283).

they have already known, determined to return to that ‘initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads’.⁴⁹

The pertinence of this theory to a reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is immediately apparent, and it depends upon our understanding the novel as being ‘somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore’.⁵⁰ What is meant by this statement becomes clear when the Tralfamadorians explain to Billy that in their literature “[t]here is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no cause, no effects”.⁵¹ There is, in other words, no time at all; there is only inertness:

“All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply *is*. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I’ve said before, bugs in amber.”⁵²

As a ‘bug in amber’, Billy constantly re-lives every moment in his life, ‘[h]e has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between’.⁵³ He is, we might say, in a state of repetition, accustomizing himself to everything that happens in his life by experiencing it over and over again. Specifically, he is able to domesticate the terror and shock of death, as he

⁴⁸ ‘[W]e shall be compelled to say,’ comments Freud, with a suitably melodramatic flourish, ‘that “the aim of all life is death”’. *Ibid.*, p.311.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.310.

⁵⁰ *Slaughterhouse-Five.*, p.3 (title page).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.71.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.68.

notes when describing the origin of the refrain that accompanies death in the novel:

“When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in a bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is so it goes’.”⁵⁴

In the atemporal circuit of Tralfamadore, life and death become meaninglessly interchangeable terms, shorn of their differential relation.⁵⁵ All traumas are equally converted to the store of existing conditions, becoming part of the rhythm of existence rather than devastating ruptures inflicted upon it. Tamed and tied up by repetition, shock is redeployed as one more edifying instance of the homogeneity it now appears that it only meekly tried to splinter.

Such conservatism is also seemingly at work in the structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. As we have already noted, this is not the first novel in which Vonnegut essays a description of the firebombing of Dresden and thus it is, for his more avid readers, a repeat experience, particularly as he deploys very similar descriptions in both instances.⁵⁶ Equally, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not the

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.25.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.27-28.

⁵⁵ This is not to deny, of course, that for Billy ‘life’ carries with it connotations of shock which cause him to avow a more explicit death wish, such as, for example, when it is noted that ‘Billy really didn’t like life at all’, or when he is described as being ‘bleakly ready for death’. *Ibid.*, p.81 and p.31 respectively.

⁵⁶ Compare, for example, ‘[w]e heard the bombs walking around up there’, with ‘[t]here were sounds like giant footsteps above Those were sticks of high explosive bombs. The giants walked

first time we encounter many of the characters in the novel. The Tralfamadorians, for example, first appear in *The Sirens of Titan*, Howard W. Campbell, Jr. finds his inaugural appearance in *Mother Night*, and Kilgore Trout returns from *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater*. Even Billy's fictional home town of Ilium is a reprise of its initial deployment in *Player Piano*. There are, then, few surprises in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, either in terms of character, style and, ultimately, plot.⁵⁷ In regard to the latter, Tanner points out that, in *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater*,

Eliot Rosewater's last breakdown is triggered off by his conviction that he can see Indianapolis in the grip of a fire-storm. This illusion is partly a recapitulation of his own war experiences, and partly a projection of a description of the fire-storm in Dresden which he has re-read repeatedly. This is the vision of sudden and unbelievable annihilation which has been somewhere behind all Vonnegut's work, and which [is] finally brought in to the centre of a novel in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.⁵⁸

Slaughterhouse-Five, we might say, is every novel Vonnegut had written up until that point; when we read it we are simultaneously reading all his other novels too,

and walked.' *Mother Night*, p.x and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p.133 respectively. Equally, there is very little difference between '[n]ow and then there would be a gentle shower of calcimine', and '[a]ll that happened down there was an occasional shower of calcimine'. *Mother Night*, p.x and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p.133 respectively.

⁵⁷ In this respect, the recursive song that Vonnegut quotes near the beginning of the novel, and one which for him is associated with writing about Dresden, comes to seem emblematic of his project as a whole:

'My name is Yon Yonson,
I work in Wisconsin,
I work in a lumbermill there,
The people I meet when I walk down the street,
They say, "What's your name?"
And I say,
"My name is Yon Yonson,
I work in Wisconsin...."' *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p.10.

in much the same way that the images in a Tralfamadorian novel are ““seen all at once””.⁵⁹ Within the ambit of such repetition, we are, as it were, inured to the trauma of *Slaughterhouse-Five* because we have experienced all its component parts so many times before.

Within the novel itself, a similar reading experience is produced by the random time-shifts of the narrative. As we track the adventures of Billy through time, we are deprived of the traditional narrative qualities of cause and effect. All we encounter are continual surprises, a kind of rhythm of shock in which we are unable to maintain any stable sense of plot, jumping with Billy from episode to episode, from paragraph to paragraph, already partially habituated to the unexpected by Vonnegut’s deadpan prose style. It is a paradox summed up by the spectacularly useless gesture of disclosing the secret of the novel’s start and finish before it has even begun:

I’ve finished my war book now. [...] It begins like this:
Listen:
Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.
It ends like this:
*Poo-tee-weet?*⁶⁰

At one level, this information tells us nothing, for it fails to divulge the process through which the beginning becomes the end; at another level, nevertheless, it does gesture towards a poetics of the death drive, because we will still be

⁵⁸ ‘The Uncertain Messenger’, p.125.

⁵⁹ *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p.71.

repeating the beginning and the end when we read them and will therefore be accustomed to their surprise.⁶¹ At yet another level, however, this forewarning is completely misplaced because it comes at the end of Chapter One: the novel itself, in other words, is already *in medias res* and there is, therefore, a significant portion of the narrative that remains unaccounted for by reading it solely in terms of the death-drive. In order to understand the import of this we must turn to another theory of trauma from the one we have so far been discussing.

This other theory of trauma is the one associated with Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* or 'deferred action'. The most famous articulation of this retroactive causality can be found in the case history of the so-called 'Wolf Man'. Here, Freud describes what he terms 'another instance of deferred action':

At the age of one and a half the child receives an impression to which he is unable to react adequately; he is only able to understand it and to be moved by it when the impression is revived in him at the age of four; and only twenty years later, during the analysis, is he able to grasp with his conscious mental processes what was then going on in him.⁶²

The inability of the 'Wolf Man' to 'react adequately' indexes the excessive character of that 'original' impression, or 'primal scene'. All the Russian's later symptom-formations, detailed by Freud, attest to the intemperance of this scene

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁶¹ Peter Brooks has given one of the fullest elaborations of a poetics of the death-drive, particularly in regard to the fact that '[n]arrative always makes the implicit claim to be in a state of repetition, as a going over again of a ground already covered'. 'Freud's Masterplot', p.30.

⁶² Sigmund Freud, *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, (1918), in *P.F.L.*, Volume 9, pp.227-366 (p.278).

and of his inability to reintegrate it fully within the symbolic order. The primacy of the primal scene, however, is undercut not only by the fact that Freud remains unconvinced it ever took place but also, and more importantly, by the fact that it is the Wolf Man's successive attempts to reintegrate the scene in the symbolic which accords it that primacy in the first place. The primal scene, in other words, is elaborated retrospectively; it acquires its significance only as the consequence of its inscription within the field of another event, as Slavoj Žižek argues:

In the case of the Wolf Man... the Cause of course, was the traumatic scene of the parental *coitus a tergo* – this scene was the non-symbolizable kernel around which all later successive symbolization whirled. This Cause, however, not only exerted its efficiency after a certain time lag; it literally *became* trauma – that is, Cause – through delay: when the Wolf Man, at age two, witnessed the *coitus a tergo*, nothing traumatic marked this scene; the scene acquired traumatic features only in retrospect, with the later development of the child's infantile sexual theories when it became impossible to integrate the scene within the newly emerged horizon of narrativization-historicization-symbolization.⁶³

There is a sense here, then, in which two disparate temporal events are yoked together, not in order that their differences may be resolved in synthesis, for, as Jean Laplanche reminds us,, 'Freud insists upon the tension between the old scene and the recent scenario', but, rather, in order to reinvigorate their field of meaning.⁶⁴ The latter event thus comes to be restructured as the effect that precedes its cause, whilst the first event will have been the cause of an effect only

⁶³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994), p.31.

⁶⁴ Jean Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, trans. by David Macey (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, 1987), p.118.

as a repetition which takes place for the first time. We may say, therefore, that what *Nachträglichkeit* designates is the privileging of synchrony over diachrony, for, as Jacques Lacan contends,

[Freud] asserts that he holds it legitimate in the analysis of processes to elide the time intervals in which the event remains latent in the subject. That is to say, he annuls the *times for understanding* in favour of the *moments of concluding* which precipitate the meditation of the subject towards deciding the meaning to attach to the original event.⁶⁵

This elision of the ‘time intervals’ is perhaps best represented by those topological models, such as the Möbius strip and the Klein bottle with which Lacan became fascinated towards the end of his career. If, for example, we trace a finger around the band of a Möbius strip we arrive back where we started but on the other side of that band. Time curves back on itself, as it were, and by synchronically effacing the conditions of both genesis and nemesis, fosters the production of new meaning.

To sum up, then, we may say that the trauma of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is a positivized economic experience in which the moment off shock can be identified in itself at the level of affect. The trauma adumbrated in Freud’s analysis of the Wolf Man, however, is only identifiable as the product of a differential relation between two events in the field of meaning. The second kind of trauma is, therefore, we may venture, more in keeping with the Freudian

project as a whole because it attests to the materiality of the signifier, as Laplanche and Pontalis point out:

Although Freud calls the first scene traumatic, it is plain that, from the strict economic point of view, this quality is only ascribed to it after the fact; or to put it another way: it is only *as a memory* that the first scene becomes pathogenic by deferred action, in so far as it sparks off an influx of internal excitation.⁶⁶

It is, as it were, the rewriting of the first scene by the second scene which not only establishes the primacy of the first scene, but its traumatic character too. Paradoxically, the form of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* appears to vouchsafe the validity of retroactive trauma over and above the decisive trauma that is its content. This is because Freud's text is predicated upon an attempt to integrate the problematic of the compulsion to repeat within the existing economic model of psychoanalysis. Indeed, we might say that the compulsion to repeat functions as the trauma of Freudian psychoanalysis here. It is unsymbolized as until Freud re-contextualizes it within the ambit of the death-drive; a re-writing that is prompted, after the fact, by the non-tautological character of the compulsion to repeat. Thus, for example, when Freud states before introducing the death-drive that '[w]hat follows is speculation... an attempt to follow out an idea consistently, out of curiosity to see where it will lead', he is openly gesturing toward the process of rewriting by and through which a trauma is registered.⁶⁷ In

⁶⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1997, 1977), p.48.

⁶⁶ *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, p.467.

⁶⁷ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p.467.

so doing he is admitting of a kind of metafictional strategy that articulates the boundaries of a narrative, the borderline between what is written and what is left unwritten, and how that boundary is contingent upon its historical moment.

If we turn back now to *Slaughterhouse-Five* we may see how this *Nachträglichkeit* informs both the content and the form of the novel. What is of particular interest here is Vonnegut's delineation of the moment of trauma, or, rather, his difficulty in writing it. For what the first chapter rehearses are the many problems Vonnegut had in narrating the firebombing of Dresden at all:

I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen. And I thought, too, that it would be a masterpiece or at least make me a lot of money, since the subject was so big.

But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then.... And not many words come now either.⁶⁸

There are two important points of note here. The first is that the destruction of Dresden was and remains for Vonnegut an essentially unsymbolizable experience; he is literally unable to write his Dresden and, in fact, comments 'how useless the Dresden part of my memory has been'.⁶⁹ Described in this way, Vonnegut's memory of Dresden comes to seem like a withered limb disrupting the organic harmony of his imaginary self. It is, as it were, a pathological excess, ineffably trumping the solace of the stories which would otherwise tame it. In fact, secondly, there is a very real sense in which Vonnegut is unable to 'report

⁶⁸ *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p.10.

what [he] had seen' because all he *saw* were the effects of the firebombing. For Vonnegut, the firebombing itself is a calculated inference that can only be made because he was locked up in Slaughterhouse-Five, the unsymbolizable part of the destruction of Dresden, we might say, the part of the historical memory of that city which was unassimilable to its re-writing as 'the moon'.⁷⁰

The resistance of the Dresden massacre to narrativization was not merely Vonnegut's personal problem, for, as he points out, it was a public trauma too and 'information [about it] was top secret'.⁷¹ Finding that little had been written about the bombing, he even decided that 'this really was the most minor sort of detail in World War II'.⁷² As he claims, he 'had no idea of the scale of the thing': he had no conception, in other words, that it was a trauma.⁷³ It was only with the publication of David Irving's *The Destruction of Dresden* in 1963 that Vonnegut realized, 'By God, I saw something after all!'⁷⁴ What Vonnegut saw was the same thing, but how he saw it, and thus what its effects were, differed radically over the course of time.

If this is Vonnegut's own experience of the retroactivity of trauma, it also bears a certain similarity with experience of Billy. For Billy finds that his present

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.133. When Vonnegut comments that '[e]verybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again' after a massacre, he is speaking from the point of view of the massacre's trauma. *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁷² *Palm Sunday*, p.404.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.404.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.404.

is also arrested by the past, that he too 'had a great big secret somewhere inside'⁷⁵, one that is disclosed by the presence of a barbershop quartet:

Billy thought hard about the effect the quartet had had on him, and then found an association with an experience he had had long ago. He did not travel in time to the experience. He remembered it shimmeringly.⁷⁶

The 'association' that Billy is forced to deal with is, of course, the firebombing of Dresden. What is important to note here is that this memory is the product of a synchronization between two chronologically disparate events: it is 'his memory of the future', a return to the trauma of Dresden for the first time.⁷⁷ It is what traumatizes the event and causes him to feel 'as though he really were stretched on the torture engine called the *rack*'.⁷⁸ Furthermore, this is the first and only time in the novel that Billy does not time-travel to an event but, rather, remembers it. If, as we have seen, time-travel figures in the novel as a fantasy in the imaginary service of the death-drive, then memory is thus explicitly counterposed as an instantiation of the temporality of *Nachträglichkeit*. Memory here is self-divisive, sundering the egoistic comforts of repetition by confronting the subject with a trauma that is fully as much of the present as it is of the past.

The connection between the two is forged at the level of the novel's form by a series of arrested motifs. These connect both Billy's present and past and

⁷⁵ *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p.130.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.132.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.82.

Vonnegut's own past and present as it is realized in the writing of the novel, that is, in writing Billy's present and past. We find, for example, that Vonnegut admits to having 'a ceremonial Luftwaffe saber', just as Billy 'had a saber too'.⁷⁹ The 'Three Musketeers Candy Bar' that Nancy eats in Vonnegut's newspaper office is the same one that Billy's fiancée devours, and it is also the name that Weary fantasizes his fellow fugitives are called.⁸⁰ Vonnegut agrees to call his novel "*The Children's Crusade*", which is exactly what the English colonel terms Billy and his fellow American prisoners of war.⁸¹ Equally, Vonnegut drives his 'wife away with a breath like mustard gas and roses', whilst Billy, when answering the telephone to a drunk, 'could almost smell his breath – mustard gas and roses'.⁸² This last example perhaps comes closest to disclosing the function of these motifs – which otherwise seem to be repeated at random, neither aiding the development of character nor theme – for the smell, it transpires, finds its incipience in the corpse mines of Dresden:

There were hundreds of corpse mines operating by and by. They didn't smell bad at first, were wax museums. But the bodies rotted and liquefied, and the stink was like roses and mustard gas.⁸³

In the light of this revelation at the end of the novel, the smell of mustard gas and roses take on the status of a traumatic echo, a mnemonic trace which disturbs the present and takes it back into the past. These motifs therefore enact a kind of

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.129.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.12 and p.146 respectively.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.15, p.86 and p.38 respectively.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.19 and p.83 respectively.

temporal short-circuit through which the first scene is established as traumatic by virtue of its relation with the second scene. If the first scene here is quite clearly Dresden, then the second scene is that of 1960s America, the present off the writing of the novel and the resent of Billy Pilgrim. Thus, for example, we find that the narrative describes the locomotives carrying prisoners of war as being ‘marked with a striped banner of orange and black’, which finds a resonance in the fact that the ‘gaily striped tent in Billy’s backyard [was] orange and black’, which in turn surfaces as an echo in the ‘vertical band of orange cross-hatching’ that Vonnegut uses to represent the destruction of Dresden in one of his outlines for *Slaughterhouse-Five*.⁸⁴ It is, as it were, the trauma of postmodern America, particularly for Vonnegut *qua* narrator of the writing present, that precipitates the trauma of the destruction of Dresden and vice versa, each inhabiting and overdetermining the other in a manner that agitates any purely linear conception of the historical past.⁸⁵

With the structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut elaborates this process quite literally, for the novel narrates the story of Billy Pilgrim’s experiences in the war in a linear form, beginning with his training and ending

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.11 and p.60 respectively.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.160.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.57, p.59 and p.12 respectively.

⁸⁵ There are, in fact, a series of chronological discrepancies in *Slaughterhouse-Five* which serve to bolster this interpretation. For Harris, who provides by far the most exhaustive list of these seemingly deliberate errors, this means that Vonnegut ‘does not merely deny the *relevance* of chronological order..., he denies its very *existence*. ‘Time, Uncertainty, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.’, pp.239-241. Bo Pettersson, however, argues that the novel’s chronological inconsistencies ‘*do not alter the linear order* of the scenes’ and, as if by way of a rebuttal to Harris, provides the most fantastic tabulation of these scenes in an act worthy of gracing Vonnegut’s notorious wallpaper itself. Bo Pettersson, *The World According to Kurt Vonnegut: Moral Paradox and Narrative Form* (Åbo: Åkademi University Press, 194), pp.255-256.

with his release. This linear story, however, is consistently punctuated by seemingly random incidents which make up the story of the rest of Billy's life to the point where it is no longer clear which has priority over which, both occupying the history of the other.⁸⁶ It is, moreover, Chapter One which provides the framework for this problematization of linearity. As Harris rightly points out, 'Chapter One is entitled "Chapter One", after all, not "Foreword" or "Introduction"', and is therefore an integral part of the novel.⁸⁷ Its integrity stems from the manner in which it foregrounds the act of narration itself:

I had outlined the Dresden story many times. The best outline I ever made, or anyway the prettiest one, was on the back of a roll of wallpaper.

I used my daughter's crayons, a different color for each main character. One end of the wallpaper was the beginning of the story, and the other end was the end, and then there was all that middle part, which was the middle.⁸⁸

Character and plot here are straight lines that proceed from *arch* to *telos* untroubled by 'all that middle part' which, as its offhand description suggests, is merely the formal device linking the two. Vonnegut, however, is troubled and the whole of Chapter One admits of the slow process by which he came to write the bombing of Dresden, not as a straight line, but as something 'jumbled and jangled', as if, we might say, he had rolled up the wallpaper chart and written it

⁸⁶ Vonnegut's own comments on this are interesting: 'I guarantee you that no modern story scheme, even plotlessness, will give a reader genuine satisfaction unless one of those old fashioned plots is smuggled in there somewhere. I don't praise plots as accurate representations of life, but as ways to keep readers reading.' *Palm Sunday*, p.422.

⁸⁷ 'Time, Uncertainty, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.', p.228.

⁸⁸ *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p.12.

like that.⁸⁹ There is an analogy here with the way in which, as Jameson points out, ‘in the moment of the emergence of capitalism the present could be intensified, and prepared for individual perception, by the construction of a historical past from which as a process it could be felt to issue slowly forth, like the growth of an organism’.⁹⁰ The shock of capitalism is absorbed in the mediation of a narrative which retrospectively mobilizes the trope of organicism. Similarly, we might say that the writing of shock is itself ‘organicized’ in the first chapter by Vonnegut’s articulation of a meta-narrational history which collapses the synchronic back onto the diachronic, arcing the body of the narrative, as it were, in order to minimize the impact of the approaching trauma. Such organicism, however, is, as we noted, offset by both the temporal punctuations of the novel and by the authorial prolepses which forestall any sense of development.⁹¹ Indeed, the narrator provides an appropriate metaphor for this narrative of trauma when noting, during the description of the destruction of Dresden, that ‘[t]he one flame ate everything organic’.⁹²

Finally, it is perhaps the destruction of organicism which forms the subject matter of not only *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but Vonnegut’s entire *oeuvre*, and for which the destruction of Dresden stands as its most striking figure, while

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁹⁰ Fredric Jameson, ‘Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?’, in *Science Fiction Studies*, 9:2, (1982), 147-158 (p.152).

⁹¹ We are informed, for example, of Billy’s entire life-story on the opening two pages of Chapter Two, just as we are appraised by Vonnegut that “the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby”. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p.11. In fact, this climax is related so many times in the novel that when we actually reach it, the incident no longer functions as a *dénouement* at all.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.133.

the destruction of the extended family provides its most ubiquitous instance.⁹³ In this respect, therefore, it is unsurprising that the second scene which precipitates Billy's traumatic memory of Dresden is one centred around the barbershop quartet singing 'That Old Gang of Mine'. For although '[h]e had never had an old gang, old sweethearts and pals... he missed one anyway'.⁹⁴ It is a lament described on almost every page of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, from Weary's invocation of The Three Musketeers to the fact that Billy and his German guard, Werner Gluck, were 'distant cousins, something they never found out', and from the 'urban renewal' after the race riots which 'looked like Dresden after it was fire bombed – like the surface of the moon' to Billy's daughter, who is given pills 'so she could function, even though her father was broken and her mother dead'.⁹⁵ The constant redeployment of characters from Vonnegut's other novels also speaks of this lament for a lost family, as if, as he has the President of the United States do in *Slapstick, or, Lonesome No More*, Vonnegut is furnishing his readers with an artificial family.⁹⁶ The use of a repertory of characters by an author is not, of course, limited to Vonnegut. On a smaller scale, Thomas Pynchon, for example, reincarnates Much Mass in *Vineland*, significantly 'after a divorce remarkable even in that innocent time for its geniality'.⁹⁷ The seven

⁹³ Vonnegut's comments on his family are instructive here: 'What is my favorite among all the works of art my children have so far produced? It is perhaps a letter written by my youngest daughter Nanette. It is so *organic*!' *Palm Sunday*, p.565.

⁹⁴ *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p.129.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.119-120, p.50 and p.141 respectively.

⁹⁶ Asked why the Chinese have withdrawn from the United States, Eliza comments, "'What civilized country could be interested in a hell-hole like America where everybody takes such lousy care of their own relatives?'" Kurt Vonnegut, *Slapstick, or, Lonesome No More* (London: Vintage, 1991, 1976), p.82.

⁹⁷ Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (London: Minerva, 1991, 1990), p.309. Maintaining the connections, *the Crying of Lot 49* also marks the return of the Vivaldi Kazoo Concerto and the Yoyodyne plant from *V*.

correspondents in John Barth's *LETTERS*, meanwhile are all reprisals of characters from his earlier work, whilst Patrick Bateman not only returns from Bret Easton Ellis's *The Rules of Attraction* to star in *American Psycho*, he also works at 'Pierce and Pierce', the investment company of Sherman McCoy in Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Surpassing all these examples, however, Christine Brook-rose's *Textermination* describes a conference of all the most famous literary characters who have ever been written or read, including both Billy Pilgrim and Oedipa Maas.⁹⁸ In a further step, we may perhaps take these examples as figures for the larger problematic of co-ordination in the totality of postmodernity. The lament here is not so much for the totality as such, but for knowledge of the individual's organic relation to it which does not entirely collapse into a kind of monadic relativism. There obtains as Jameson proposes, an incommensurability between the existential experience of the individual and the structural co-ordinates within which that experience is played out:

[T]he phenomenological experience of the individual subject becomes limited to a tiny corner of the social world, a fixed-camera view of a certain section of London or the countryside or whatever. But the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual's subjective life. Yet those structural

⁹⁸ Brook-Rose also provides an important corrective to the androcentrism prevailing in the work of many of the older postmodern authors, specifically here Pynchon and Vonnegut. Oedipa in particular, gives voice to a feminism utterly lacking in *The Crying of Lot 49*, noting, for example, that 'male authors are so macho, and even more the so-called Postmoderns who think they're so avantgarde'. Christine Brook-Rose, *Textermination* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997, 1991), p.142. When asked to talk about the female characters in his novels, Vonnegut's response is self-explanatory: 'There aren't any. No real women, no love.' *Palm Sunday*, p.417.

co-ordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people.⁹⁹

The indicative mode of Vonnegut's writing degree zero here offers itself up as a compromise formation, neither quite resigned to the solipsism of the imaginary, nor quite clearly committed to a conceptualization of the totality, it effaces both for the common ground of the 'facts'. Divorced from both the existential and the conceptual, these 'facts', like Vonnegut's style itself, come to seem strangely unsettling, for they are both disembowelled and shorn of ideation, registering only as faint impressions of either, like uncanny symptoms of a problematic they can articulate indirectly but never overcome.

There is, then, clearly a sense in which the content of *Slaughterhouse-Five* achieves its expression in the form of the novel, or, more particularly, in its style. For I both there is inscribed a kind of nostalgia for the organic whole, a regret at the passing of, and an attempt to restore a common language and a common bond. Even to describe Vonnegut's novels as fragmented in form is secretly to disclose a hidden integrity, a unity of which the fragment is but a syntactical unit. The narrative collops of *Slaughterhouse-Five* thus bespeak a completeness, an imaginary unity to which Vonnegut's *corpus morcelé* is a necessary counterpart. This is the conservative instinct of the text, its yearning for repletion which, like Freud's fabled organism, progresses towards a sufficiency unto itself and, ultimately, unto death. It is offset, however, by its inflection within the

⁹⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso,

temporality of *Nachträglichkeit* where integrity becomes merely what will have been. Unity in this temporal mode can only be achieved at the cost of a contingency to which it too must succumb: the perfect future of the future perfect.

3: Coda

As was suggested earlier, we may consider *Slaughterhouse-Five* as exemplary of a certain type of postmodern novel which centres upon narrativization *qua* trauma. Perhaps the most pertinent example of such a novel is Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*, which, as Amis Acknowledges, owes a structural debt to 'a certain paragraph – a famous one by Kurt Vonnegut'.¹⁰⁰ This paragraph is the one in which Billy sees 'the late movie backwards'.¹⁰¹ It is a film about an American bombing raid over a German city in the Second World War, and, seen backwards, '[t]he bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers and lifted the containers into the bellies of planes'.¹⁰² This reversal of empirical cause and effect is employed by Amis throughout *Time's Arrow* as the novel's narrative principal. The effect of this is to render a proximate realization of the temporality of *Nachträglichkeit* in which the past comes from the future. For the action of the novel begins with Tod's death and

1991), p.411.

¹⁰⁰ Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow, or, The Nature of the Offence* (London: Penguin, 1992, 1991), p.75.

¹⁰¹ *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p.60.

ends with his birth, proceeding like a movie in which, as the narrator, Tod's 'voice of conscience', points out, 'the film is running backwards'.¹⁰³ Like Billy Pilgrim, Tod has a secret towards and around which the narrative inexorably moves:

He is travelling towards his secret. [...] It will be bad, and not intelligible. [...] I will know the nature of the offence. Already I know this. I know that it is to do with trash and shit, and that it is wrong in time.¹⁰⁴

The 'nature of the offence' concerns Tod's role as a camp doctor in Auschwitz, and it is 'wrong in time' because '[t]he world, after all here in Auschwitz has a new habit. It makes sense.'¹⁰⁵ Which is to say that Auschwitz is the only thing that makes sense going backward with the narrative (for it produces endless new life), whereas, conversely, it is the one thing that does not make sense going forward. Such a temporal disjunction indexes the unsymbolizable, or 'unintelligible', nature of not only Auschwitz, but trauma generally. For, as

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p.60.

¹⁰³ *Time's Arrow*, p.56 and p.16 respectively. Although it is unacknowledged by Amis, the negative narration he employs is also something of a return to the technique utilized by C.H. Sisson in his excellent novel *Christopher Homm*. While this narrative form is not as foregrounded as it is in *Time's Arrow*, there are still some moments of pithy self-reflexivity, such as when the narrator notes of Mr Wilson, one of Homm's rhetorical victims, that '[h]e was apt to be entranced by anyone who talked to him in terms of foregone conclusions'. C.H. Sisson, *Christopher Homm* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997, 1965), p.104. In this respect, it is also worth pointing out that *Time's Arrow* constitutes a return to tone of Amis's earlier novels – *London Fields* – both in terms of the theme of retroactivity and the title itself: 'A word about the title Several alternatives suggested themselves. For a while I toyed with *Time's Arrow*.' Martin Amis, *London Fields* (London: Penguin, 1990, 1989), p.vi.

¹⁰⁴ *Time's Arrow*, pp.72-73.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.138.

Lacan asserts, 'there is cause only in something that doesn't work'.¹⁰⁶ What he means by this is the designation of a certain relationship between the orders of the real and the symbolic in which, as with trauma, the latter circles around and is rendered inconsistent by the former. It is when the holes and inconsistencies in the symbolic network become apparent that we are made aware of the real *qua* cause. The real is therefore only indirectly discernible as an excess as 'something that doesn't work' in the symbolic order. Hence we may, with Žižek, understand that 'the real is the absent cause of the symbolic' and that, moreover, '[t]he Freudian and Lacanian name for this cause is, of course, *trauma*'.¹⁰⁷

The traumatized subject is thus always self-divided, split between the symbolic and real times of an event. In *Time's Arrow*, like *American Psycho*, this is represented by the delineation of Tod continuously from both the first and third person perspectives, with the narrator in the former role occupying the position of the latter but never being quite coeval with it. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, however, the ego-shattering effects of a traumatic history are given more material form in the shape of the eponymous revenant. Indeed, the forceful dislocations of trauma are given full play in the character of Beloved, for she is both a ghost and a person, as well as both Sethe's daughter and an anonymous African slave condemned to the Middle Passage, and also both an adult and a baby pregnant inside Sethe. The return to and of the real traumas of slavery are thus represented

¹⁰⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1994, 1977), p.22.

as perpetuating material effects in the symbolic. In other words, it is only with the breakdown of the symbolic – here in the impossible co-existence of so many Beloveds – that the efficacy of a trauma is realized. As Sethe acknowledges, ‘she knew that the words she did not understand hadn’t any more power than she had to explain’, for if they had then her memories would not be traumatic at all.¹⁰⁸ In Janice Galloway’s *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* the disjunctive effects of trauma in the symbolic are given typographical form by phrases that literally spill over, and break onto, the edges of the page:

Sometime
Presentim
Tell us to
It’s too lat

He had ink on his finger, just above his wedding ring.
I said, It’s nice of you to ask me. I appreciate being
asked.¹⁰⁹

Joy, the novel’s protagonist, cannot and is not allowed to forget the death of her lover, for these fragments of memory continuously impinge themselves upon her, connecting moments in the past with the present. It is unsurprising therefore, that *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* and *Beloved* utilize circles as common motifs, for both novels are concerned to articulate a temporality that turns back on itself to account for a hole in the symbolic, an absence outside of the narrative which effects ruptures within it.

¹⁰⁷ Slavoj Žižek, ‘Hegel with Lacan, or the Subject and its Cause’, in */reading Seminars I and II: Lacan’s Return to Freud*, ed. by Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp.397-413 (p.398).

¹⁰⁸ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Picador, 1988, 1987), p.161.

¹⁰⁹ Janice Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (London: Minerva, 1991, 1989), p.73.

Circles, of course, are also figures of repetition – a repetition that we have identified in association with the trauma of the death-drive – and as such, they are exemplary symbols of the conflict that all these novels stage between the synchrony produced by the habituation of the death-drive and the synchrony produced by the shock conjunction of two events inflected within the rubric of the future perfect. That the latter is finally privileged over the former here points to a mutation in the received definition of narrative, and one that finds its conditions of possibility in those of the postmodern itself. Indeed, our very understanding of the postmodern as a periodizing concept is predicated upon a temporal nexus of different events within the one ‘moment’. As Jameson contends, ‘[t]his moment is itself less a matter of chronology than it is of a well-nigh Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*, or retroactivity: people become aware of the dynamics of some new system, in which they are themselves seized, only later on’.¹¹⁰ This is what, following Alvin Toffler, we may term ‘future shock’ – a kind of traumatic cultural memory. For ‘[f]uture shock is a time phenomenon’ and ‘[i]t arises from the superimposition of a new culture on an old one’.¹¹¹ As postmoderns we are all, as it were, subject to the temporality of trauma, all, like the narrator of *Time’s Arrow*, ‘at the wrong time – either too soon, or... too late’.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.xix.

¹¹¹ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (London and Sydney: Pan, 1971, 1970), p.20.

¹¹² *Time’s Arrow*, p.173.

Chapter Four – The Eccentric Canon: Of a Vanishing Mediator and the Metaphorics of the Pleonasm in John Banville's *Doctor Copernicus*

1: The Dawning of a New Error

As with the novels of Kurt Vonnegut, what strikes the reader first about John Banville's work is always his style. Most of the reviews of his novels mention, if they do not actually concentrate upon, the character of his prose. This prose, in sharp contrast to the Vonnegutian idiolect, 'aspire[s],' as Rüdiger Imhof proposes, 'to the condition of poetry.'¹ Indeed, as one *Observer* critic notes, 'Banville must be fed up being told how beautifully he writes'.² It is certainly a poetic prose and one that probably finds its apotheosis in the fictions of F. Scott Fitzgerald. In Banville, however, it lacks an economy of suggestion, a sometimes embarrassing surety of nerve, as if in the flush of stylistic failure there is an attempt to compensate through a superabundance of techniques and adjectives.³ The following passage from *Doctor Copernicus* is a typical example:

¹ Rüdiger Imhof, *John Banville: A Critical Introduction* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1997, 1989), p.19.

² Cited on the sleeve-jacket of John Banville, *The Book of Evidence* (London: Minerva, 1990, 1989).

³ Francis C. Molloy, for example, notes of Banville's style in *Nightspawn* that '[i]t is difficult not to conclude that the linguistic richness, the elaborate parody and the inventiveness of the book are somehow pointless and that the result does not justify the literary effort.' Francis C. Molloy, 'The

Andreas was handsomely made, very tall and slender, dark, fastidious, cold. Running or walking he moved with a languorous negligent grace, but it was in repose that he appeared most lovely, standing by a window lost in a blue dream, with his pale thin face lifted up to the light like a perfect vase, or a shell out of the sea, some exquisite fragile thing.⁴

Here Banville's attempt to pin down the irreducible quality of Andreas results in a procession of adjectives, each one a qualification of its predecessor, but at the same time an admission of a general failure to render the object in question. A similar pattern of insufficiency can be found at work in the similes employed here to describe Andreas' face, which is first like one thing, then another and then something else – this last being a broader conceptualization of the first two and therefore even further removed from the specificity of his face. In such a situation, the hackneyed expression 'lost in a blue dream' takes on an emblematic status, for its stale phrasing announces the last recourse of a prose style unable to make the object accessible on its own terms. It is, as it were, a writing gluttoned on itself, feasting on a banquet of signifiers while the signified quietly starves.

As an Irish writer it is tempting to attribute this feature of Banville's prose to what the character Hugh, from Brian Friel's *Translations*, describes as the manner in which "certain cultures expend on their vocabularies and syntax

Search for Truth: The Fiction of John Banville', *Irish University Review*, 11:1, (1981), 29-51, (p.37).

⁴ John Banville, *Doctor Copernicus* (London: Minerva, 1990, 1976), p.9.

acquisitive energies and ostentations entirely lacking in their material lives”⁵. Banville, however, belongs to that tradition of Irish writers (whose most notable exponents are James Joyce and Samuel Beckett) which is defined, paradoxically, by its very rootlessness. In fact, as Banville himself claims, ‘if I were to look about for a stream to be part of I would certainly look to America or Europe’.⁶ Such a ‘stream’ inevitably recalls Roland Barthes’ historicization of the category of style discussed in the previous chapter. In particular, Banville’s style might remind us of Barthes’ comments on the French socialist realist Garaudy:

We see that nothing here is given without metaphor, for it must be laboriously borne home to the reader that “it is well written”. These metaphors, which seize the very slightest verb, in no way indicate the intention of an individual Humour trying to convey the singularity of a sensation, but only a literary stamp which “places” a language, just as a label tells us the price of an article.⁷

The excessive poeticization of Banville’s style, however, is written in the wake not only of such a style itself, but also of its attendant criticisms. It is, to return to the passage already cited, a seemingly deliberate intemperance; one which, whilst not quite gratuitous, does actively flaunt the failures of its diction. This, we may venture, represents the elevation of the rhetorical figure of the pleonasm to the defining characteristic of a whole style. For the pleonasm designates a surfeit of

⁵ Brian Friel, *Selected Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p.418.

⁶ *John Banville: A Critical Introduction*, p.10. It is Imhof who provides the most extensive analysis of Banville’s relationship to contemporary Irish literature and he also finds little connection between the two, noting that ‘as a conscientious artist in the second half of the twentieth century he must not write in the moribund modes of narrative discourse in which the greater part of what is being written in Ireland, but likewise in England, today presents itself’. *Ibid.*, p.10.

language, a prodigality of signification unaccounted for by the means, as it were, of the referent. It denotes, in other words (and as its etymology in *pleonasmos* suggests), an excess. It is this excessive character of Banville's style which promotes within the reader a sense of its failure; a failure, that is, to remain within the proprieties of established poetic fiction (such as we find in the work of F. Scott Fitzgerald). For, ultimately, what the pleonasm connotes is redundancy; it is, quite literally, a waste of words.

In this sense, as we shall see, the style of *Doctor Copernicus* offers itself as a paradigm and instance of the actual concerns of the novel – science and historiography – and can therefore be seen as one of the ways in which the logic of the content generates its own form. What these three themes have in common in *Doctor Copernicus* is their presentation as processes of emplotment. Emplotment here has a wider meaning than merely a specific concatenation of events, as I intend to mean by it also both the narrativization of events – that is their articulation and selection for insertion into narrative – and the type of narrative into which these events are inserted – which might broadly be conceived of as the discursive formation within which these will mean. Clearly these three functions impinge upon each other to greater or lesser degrees and thus, although it is necessary to distinguish between them, using the term 'emplotment' in this collective sense avoids advertizing an autonomy of function which is misleading.

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p.71.

The scientific tetralogy of which *Doctor Copernicus* is the first part (the others being *Kepler*, *The Newton Letter* and *Mefisto*) are all concerned with the operations of emplotment. In *The Newton Letter*, for example, the misemplotment of events leads the protagonist to admit at its end that he 'dreamed up a horrid drama, and failed to see the commonplace tragedy that was playing itself out in real life'.⁸ Similarly, in *Mefisto* the reader is refused the sanction of the text for the necessary emplotment of events and thus the processes of a normally unconscious transaction are laid bare, caught mid-dialogue, as it were, between the reader and the read. Characteristically, then, *Doctor Copernicus* begins with the most fundamental moment of emplotment, which is the entry of the subject into language itself and the symbolic order proper:

At first it had no name. It was the thing itself, the vivid thing....

Tree. That was its name. And also: the linden.... They did not mean themselves, they were nothing in themselves, they meant the dancing singing thing outside.⁹

Language, of course, proves to be something of a self-undoing device, a vacuity that can only seek plenitude outside of itself or in some provisional fuddle between the sign and the signifying system. Here such a fuddle consists of the infantile appropriation of nouns as proper names, with the child Copernicus attempting to dissect the flux of the real by using the resources of the symbolic as his instruments of precision. This precision, however, is achievable neither in the

⁸ John Banville, *The Newton Letter* (London: Minerva, 1992, 1982), p.79.

⁹ *Doctor Copernicus*, p.3.

real nor the symbolic, as the latter mode fosters an infinity – the ‘And also...’ – which always undermines any attempt to rescue ‘the vivid thing’ from the former. The shaky compromise effected by the young Copernicus here thus prefigures the equally shaky quest for absolutism throughout the rest of the novel, as the nascent discipline of science wrestles with the dialectics of concept and object.

Banville explicitly emplots Copernicus’ biography within the terms of this agonistic relationship, as if to indicate that the *Book of the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* is a working out at the level of theory of a subjectivity stricken by the refusal of identity. Thus, from the very beginning we find that the formation of Copernicus’ subjectivity is founded upon a process of evacuation, an emptying out of the particular self by the generality of concept:

The voice addressing him was a hollow booming noise directed less at him than at an idea in Uncle Lucas’s mind called vaguely Child, or Nephew, or Responsibility, and Nicolas could distinguish only the meaning of the words and not the sense of what was being said. [...] He gazed intently upward through the window, and a part of him detached itself and floated free, out into the blue and golden air. *Włocławek*. It was the sound of some living thing being torn asunder...¹⁰

Here, Bishop Lucas (who quite literally assumes the mantle of the Name of the Father) fashions a symbolic mandate for Copernicus, crafting a place for him in the network of signifying relations. He does so by enacting a kind of conceptual violence upon Copernicus, slicing off those idiosyncrasies of the child that do not

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.14.

correspond to his own ideation. As such, this scene is paradigmatic of all emplotment, for it describes a process of legitimation by exclusion, and one whose result, as the last sentence suggests, is not merely discursive, in a reductive sense of the word, but fully impinges upon the material conditions of its subject.

If, in this instance, the surplus of the object refused accommodation in the concept is seen to wither ethereally away in the moment of neglect, Banville is keen to show elsewhere that such surplus is apt to re-emerge bristling with the violence of its own repression:

It was the Vistula, the same that washed in vain the ineradicable mire of Torun – that is, the name was the same, but the name meant nothing. Here the river was young, as it were, a bright swift stream, while there it was old and weary. Yet it was at once here and there, young and old at once, and its youth and age were separated not by years but leagues. He murmured aloud the river's name and heard in that word suddenly the concepts of space and time fractured.¹¹

Here the process of homogenization effected by the conceptual machinery of the name is foregrounded as a form of violence. The equivalencing power of 'Vistula' (that is, its very function as a name) is shown to be predicated upon an obdurate indifference, against which the specifics of time and space crash and break like minor tectonic plates subject to the exigencies of a global design. This play of lack and surplus, the torsion and give between language and its referents, is precisely the organizing principle of the dynamic that sustains the narrative of

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.20.

Doctor Copernicus. Which is to say that throughout the novel there persists an irresolvable tension between concept and object in which the lack of the object, its incommensurability to the concept, is matched in another moment by the lack in the concept, the Procrustean culpabilities of which miss the singularity of the object. Both sides of this equation are thus haunted by a surplus for which they are unable to account, a surplus that, we might say, returns as a symptom in the pleonastic character of Banville's style. For in the rush not to miss anything out, everything is included and nothing, finally, is said.¹²

This seeking after repletion, however, propels the narrative forward, both at the level of form and, as we shall see, at the level of content. Indeed, the extent to which *Doctor Copernicus* inherently ministers to this diachronic compulsion is given emblematic form by the initials 'D.C.' which end the text of the novel.¹³ These, of course, are the initials of Doctor Copernicus, but equally they signal an initialization – *da capo* – which returns us to the beginning of the text.¹⁴ In so doing, these initials designate the unresolved condition of the narrative, both its lack of an ending and a surplus which cannot be accounted for. By directing us, as readers, to describe a recursive trajectory in which we come at the same narrative again, Banville is gently coercing us into mimicking the paradigmatic action of his own prose style which likewise tropes the 'same' object again and

¹² This finds an echo in Rheticus' comment that '[a]ll that mattered to [Copernicus] was the saying, not what was said; words were the empty rituals with which he held the world at bay'. *Ibid.*, p.176.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.242.

¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon has also commented on this feature of the text, noting that 'Banville's *Doctor Copernicus* ends with "DC" – both the protagonist's initials and the (initiating/reiterating) *da*

again. 'Sameness' here is, however, a species of difference, because the object in question (be it Andreas' face or *Doctor Copernicus* itself) is never more than the expression of a relationship between the parts of its description, what we might term a constellationary yield. Each new adjective added to qualify the previous ones, each re-reading of the narrative thus begets a difference in that constellation, a re-concatenation of its parts which effectively re-emplots the object and thereby changes it. By foregrounding this problematic at the level of form, Banville is directing our attention to the very conditions of language which so trouble the protagonists of almost all his novels¹⁵, for, as Fredric Jameson points out, 'language can never really express any *thing*: only relationships or sheer absence'.¹⁶ It is, he proposes, 'itself a substitute, it must replace that empty center of content with something else, and it does so either by saying what the content is *like* (metaphor), or describing its context and the contours of its absence, listing the things that border around it (metonymy)'.¹⁷

Copernicus, of course, provides a striking example of the substitutive process of language, because his name, in its adjectival form, refers to an epoch as much as it designates a man. Indeed, history has continued the process of conceptualizing the signifier by disembowelling the original referent, the

capo which refuses closure'. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), p.59.

¹⁵ Joseph McMinn, for example, notes that '[a]ll of Banville's main characters, like their author, are writers looking to impose some convincing pattern on their experience of the world'. Joseph McMinn, 'An Exalted Naming: The Poetical Fictions of John Banville', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 14:1, (1988), 17-27, (p.17).

¹⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974, 1972), p.122.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.122-123.

incipience of which Banville delineates in the novel. This process finds its most succinct expression in the successive stages of the narrative of *Doctor Copernicus*. In the first part, '*Orbitas Lumenque*', the narrator always refers to Copernicus as 'Nicolas'; in the second part, '*Magister Ludi*', he is referred to as 'Canon Koppernigk'; while in the third part, '*Cantus Mundi*', now at one remove from the novel's narrator, he is mostly named merely as 'the Canon'. By the fourth and final part of the novel, '*Magnum Miraculum*', Copernicus is refused any title at all by the narrator and merely assumes the personal pronoun 'he', leaving history to appropriate the signifier of his name for other signifieds. It is little wonder, then, that throughout the novel Copernicus is frequently beset by anxieties concerning the misadventures of his title to the point where he is no longer 'prepared to lend his name to the causing of such a disturbance'.¹⁸ This is because, as he realizes, it no longer is *his* name, that he is no longer merely himself, 'the vivid thing', but that he, or rather, his name, refers to a concept for which the quiddity of the man Copernicus is a redundant accessory. Ironically, there is something of this in the Gothan word (coined from Copernicus' name) '*koeppernekesch*', which Arthur Koestler describes as meaning 'a far-fetched, cockeyed proposition', or, in other words, a concept that is incommensurable with its object.¹⁹

One of the most pertinent manifestations of this incommensurability can be found in the other popular spin on Copernicus' name which is its signification

¹⁸ *Doctor Copernicus*, p.185.

of revolution. There is a certain appositeness to this connotation, because the dialectic of concept and object that underwrites the narrative of *Doctor Copernicus* finds an analogy in the dialectic informing the definition of a Marxist revolution:

At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or - ... - with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turns into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.²⁰

Form is not the passive receptacle of matter here but is the generation of a content restlessly seeking to realize itself in identity or *Mass*. It is precisely this restlessness that begets revolution. As Terry Eagleton notes, it is a question 'of grasping form no longer as the symbolic mould into which... substance is poured, but as the "form of the content", as the structure of a ceaseless self-production'.²¹ In the light of this, an interregnum may be defined as a period in which content has outgrown its old form and has yet to find a new one: it is, we may say, an historical pleonasm. Copernicus' *The Book of the Revolutions of the Heavenly*

¹⁹ Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Universe* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1968, 1959), p.187.

²⁰ Karl Marx, 'Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*', in *Early Writings*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin/New Left Review, 1992, 1859), pp.424-428 (pp.425-426).

²¹ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991, 1990), p.215. See also Marx's almost literary analysis of the revolutions of 1848 where he notes that '[t]he revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury the dead in order to realise its own content. There phrase transcended content, here content transcends phrase.' Karl Marx, *The*

Spheres is one of the cultural touchstones of the interregal period between the medieval and modern epochs, and throughout *Doctor Copernicus* there is a marked attention to the pleonastic character of its matrix:

The physical world was expanding. In their quest for a sea route to the Indies the Portuguese had revealed the frightening immensity of Africa. Rumours from Spain spoke of a vast new world beyond the ocean to the west. Men were voyaging out to all points of the compass, thrusting back the frontiers everywhere. All Europe was in the grip of an inspired sickness whose symptoms were avarice and monumental curiosity, and something more, less easily defined, a kind of irresistible gaiety. Nicolas too was marked by the rosy tumours of that plague.²²

The objective excess of Renaissance Europe, the way it spilled over its borders into the rest of the world, gorging on the productive surpluses of these mental and physical pursuits, is here given a subjective correlative in that 'something more' which is an exuberance of spirit. Both these, in turn, find an adequate representational form in the pleonastic character of Banville's style which, we might say in this respect, corresponds to an interregal writing – that is, a style with an eye to the future, pre-figuring a time when plenitude will be restored to

Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, in *Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. by Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1886, 1852), pp.31-127 (p.34).

²² *Doctor Copernicus*, p.27. It is worthwhile noting that this passage goes on to mention that '[i]n the writings of antiquity he glimpsed the blue and gold of Greece... and was allowed briefly to believe that there had been times when the world had known an almost divine unity of spirit and matter, of purpose and consequence'. This, of course, is the 'blue and gold' to which the surplus of the infant Copernicus flew when subject to the conceptual machinery of Uncle Lucas (see note ¹⁰). However, as Marx points out, the *Mass* or identity of Ancient Greece arises from an unrecapturable immaturity and therefore '[t]he charm of their art for us is not in contradiction to the undeveloped stage of society on which it grew'. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. by Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin/New Left Review, 1973, 1953), p.111.

its signifying system and its impoverished surplus will come to have meaning.

Banville's style, in other words, awaits emplotment.

Indeed, we may say that the function of Copernicus *qua* the subject matter of Banville's novel is to dramatize the disciplines of the emplotment process. Specifically, by situating Copernicus at the *arche* of the Enlightenment narrative we risk erasing the surplus of that narrative and thus its very conditions of possibility.²³ In this respect, the contradictory character and history of Copernicus' work makes it an emblematic instance of the impoverishment effected by the strictures of emplotment.²⁴ It is in order to describe the contours of the absence produced by the narrativization of Copernicus and his work that Banville gives full play to these contradictions (of which Copernicus himself could be said to be the most striking exemplum):

He said:

"The Ptolemaic astronomy is nothing, so far as existence is concerned, but it is convenient for computing the inexistent."

But having said it, he recollected himself, and pretended, by assuming an expression meant to indicate bland innocence but which merely made him look a halfwit, that he was unaware of having put forward a notion which, if he believed it to be true, made nonsense of his life's work (for, remember, whatever they say about it now, his theory was based entirely upon the Ptolemaic astronomy – was indeed, as he pointed out himself, no more than a revision of Ptolemy, at least in its beginnings).²⁵

²³ Bertrand Russell's comment is typical when he states that '[f]our great men – Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton – are pre-eminent in the creation of science'. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1995, 1946), p.512.

²⁴ Concerned with tracing the historical fidelity of Banville's account of Copernicus, Wini Warren opines that he subsequently found it difficult 'to tell what is accurate in any historical account, fictional or otherwise'. Wini Warren, 'The Search for Copernicus in History and Fiction', *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 76:2-3, (1993), 383-406, (p.384).

²⁵ *Doctor Copernicus*, p.186.

As Rheticus (himself an emarginated figure) informs the reader here, the Copernican theory of the universe is essentially a reading of Ptolemy, rather than a radical departure from it, despite the fact that the former is heliocentric and the latter geocentric in conception. This is because Copernicus was firmly located in the residual Middle Ages' tradition of Aristotelianism and hence of Ptolemaic wheel-geometry which, during his life-time, was under interrogation by the emergent strain of Pythagorean Platonism. The dominance of either culture was to some extent geographical (with Italy favouring the latter and Northern Europe the former), as well as institutionally based (with Catholicism at first fostering the new Platonism and then, in response to the Reformation, slowly refusing it, just as the Protestant countries, freed up by weaker national churches, had no option but to let it flower). One of the results of this cultural ecumenicalism was that parts of the ancient tradition hitherto refused emplotment in the narrative of that tradition, such as Aristarchus (who was probably the first to propose the 'Copernican' system), were henceforth accommodated in an open dialogue with the more established ancients. Thus, in Copernicus' time heliocentric theories had established themselves as something of an undertow below the Ptolemaic current, as Koestler notes:

It is highly unlikely, though, that Copernicus should have stumbled on his ideas simply by browsing through the ancient philosophers. Talk of a moving earth, of the earth as a planet or a star, was becoming increasingly frequent in the days of his youth.²⁶

²⁶ *Sleepwalkers*, p.205.

Of course, the curious publication by hearsay of the *Book of the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* described in *Doctor Copernicus* contributed to this heliocentric structure of feeling. However, the impulse behind this epoch-making book was essentially conservative, as the character of Doctor Copernicus reveals:

Thus, when I put it to him that he had a duty to publish, if only to demonstrate the errors in Ptolemy, he shook a trembling finger at me and cried:

“We must follow the methods of the ancients! Anyone who thinks they are not to be trusted will squat forever in the wilderness outside the locked gates of our science, dreaming the dreams of the deranged about the motions of the spheres – and he will get what he deserves for thinking he can support his own ravings by slandering the ancients!”²⁷

Clearly, then, Copernicus wished to save the Ptolemaic tradition, in much the same way that he wished to ‘save the phenomena’, to the point where, as Koestler memorably proposes, ‘[i]f Aristotle had stated that God created only birds, Canon Koppernigk would have described *homo sapiens* as a bird without feathers and wings who hatches his eggs before laying them’.²⁸ Far from facilitating its delivery, therefore, one of the ‘fathers’ of modern science did all he could to abort it.

²⁷ *Doctor Copernicus*, p.184. This is an approximation of a letter written by Copernicus and quoted in *Sleepwalkers*, p.200.

²⁸ *Sleepwalkers*, p.212.

In order to understand this apparent paradox, we might profitably take a detour through Jameson's analysis of Max Weber's critique of historical materialism. Briefly, this critique consists in the claim that Protestantism was the condition of possibility for the emergence of capitalism. Such a claim, of course, inverts the traditional Marxist hierarchy in which the base gives rise to the superstructure. Thus, rather than submitting to the vulgar Marxist thesis that 'life is made less religious by a new theological doctrine (Protestantism) that systematically dismantles the traditional medieval religious structures and allows wholly secular ones to take their place', Weber contends that Protestantism was the universalization of a hitherto localized religious way of life.²⁹ Subjecting Weber's argument to a narratological exposition, Jameson proposes that we distinguish between 'two distinct moments of Protestantism, the theology of Luther and that of Calvin'.³⁰ If Calvin brought new content to theology, Luther's contribution to the universalization of this theology was no less decisive when, by shutting down the monasteries, he liberated the monks' fledgling instrumentality and allowed it to spread throughout all areas of a hitherto secular life. Protestantism, conceived in this way, effectively rationalized the *Lebenswelt* and prepared it for the advent of wholesale capitalism. In so doing, of course, it expedited its own obsolescence. The pertinence of this theory to *Doctor Copernicus* proceeds not from its content-level diagnosis (although it has no small bearing on this) but, rather, the manner in which it articulates Protestantism

²⁹ Fredric Jameson, 'The Vanishing Mediator; or, Max Weber as Storyteller', in *The Ideologies of Theory – 1971-1986: Volume 2 – Syntax of History*, Fredric Jameson (London: Routledge, 1988), pp.3-34 (p.23).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.23.

at the level of form as a 'vanishing mediator'. In other words, Jameson understands Weber to have emplotted Protestantism as the vehicle of transformation within the narrative which charts the trajectory from the medieval to the modern:

It is thus in the strictest sense of the word a catalytic agent that permits an exchange between two otherwise mutually exclusive terms; and we may say that... the whole institution of religion itself (in other words, what is here designated as "Protestantism") serves in its turn as a kind of overall bracket or framework within which change takes place and which can be dismantled and removed when its usefulness is over.³¹

On a lesser scale, but in the same mould, Copernicus too is something of a vanishing mediator. Harried all over Europe, he is a scandalous excess to both the old and new orders in Banville's novel, for he commits the error of taking Ptolemy seriously. Indeed, rather than heeding Professor Brudzewski's advice to '*save the phenomena*', he attempts to save astronomy itself.³² To this end, his perpetuation of the Ptolemaic system to its absolute limits, like Calvin's religionalization of everyday life, ironically, of course, paved the way for its obsolescence.

What is crucial to recognize here is that a vanishing mediator is produced by the asymmetry of content and form. As with Marx's analysis of revolution, form lags behind content here, in the sense that content changes within the

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.25.

³² *Doctor Copernicus*, p.29.

parameters of an existing form, until the logic of that content works its way out to the latter and throws off its husk, revealing a new form in its stead. Commenting on Jameson's essay, Slavoj Žižek proposes a similar distinction:

[T]he passage from feudalism to Protestantism is not of the same nature as the passage from Protestantism to bourgeois everyday life with its privatized religion. The first passage concerns "content" (under the guise of preserving the religious form or even its strengthening, the crucial shift – the assertion of the ascetic-acquisitive stance in economic activity as the domain of the manifestation of Grace – takes place), whereas the second passage is a purely formal act, a change of form (as soon as Protestantism is realized as the ascetic-acquisitive stance, it can fall off as form).³³

The contradictory character and history of the Copernican theory, then, stems from a similar lack of correspondence between content and form. It is, in the first moment, the working out of a new content (heliocentrism) within an old form (geocentrism); in the second moment, however, the old form outlives its utility and falls away. Copernicus' theory is thus neither the *telos* of medieval science, nor the *arche* of modern science, but the vanishing mediator between the two. Banville's fictional biography of Copernicus can therefore be understood as a testament to this status because it is the person of Copernicus himself who most clearly embodies this contradiction. He is, as it were, the old form within which the new content takes shape. In other words, he is the surplus of the narrative of modern science, the excess which fails to find emplotment within that story but yet which is necessary to its telling. The pleonastic form of *Doctor Copernicus* is

³³ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment As A Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), p.185.

thus, paradoxically, the form most suited to narrating the biography of its redundant subject.

2: Just A Phrase We're Going Through

If Copernicus' aim in writing *The Book of the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* was essentially to apply a corrective measure to the work of Ptolemy, his rubric for this task was an aesthetic one. In the opening pages of the *Commentariolus* he outlines the absolute standards against which any astronomical system may be adjudged:

Our ancestors assumed a large number of celestial spheres for a special reason: to explain the apparent motion of the planets by the principle of regularity. For they thought it altogether absurd that a heavenly body should not always move with uniform velocity in a perfect circle.³⁴

For Copernicus, the problem with Ptolemy's system was that although the circles were perfect their velocity was, in fact, irregular and could only be made to seem otherwise by utilizing *punctum equans* – an astronomical sleight-of-hand that required the observer to assume a point in space in relation to the motion of a particular planet. As Copernicus laments, 'a system of this sort seemed neither sufficiently absolute nor sufficiently pleasing to the mind'.³⁵ Indeed, it was

³⁴ *Sleepwalkers*, p.202.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.202.

precisely this insufficiency, the lack of correspondence obtaining between concept and object, that set Copernicus on his epoch-making venture:

Having become aware of these defects, I often considered whether there could not perhaps be found a more reasonable arrangement of circles... in which everything would move uniformly about its proper centre, as the rule of absolute motion requires.³⁶

What strikes the reader about this statement is not so much the inaccuracies upon which it is based (that the planets move on epicycles of epicycles rather than Ptolemy's beloved circles), but that the criterion for Copernicus's judgement is aesthetic as opposed to scientific. He is not concerned, as we might expect, to elaborate evidential procedures but, instead to formulate a theory whose rubric is the uniformity of the circle.

Indeed, to be specific, we might observe that the concept of the beautiful, rather than sublimity, constitutes the organizing principle of Copernicus' science; for in his obsession with uniformity, perfection and the absolute, he is registering a desire for order and finality, unity and harmony which are the central characteristic of the beautiful. This desire finds its most intimate expression in *Doctor Copernicus* through the feelings of embarrassment that crowd in on Copernicus during the novel, as the revenant of his brother reminds him:

³⁶*Ibid.*, p.203.

It was always your stormiest emotion, that fastidious, that panic-stricken embarrassment in the face of the disorder and vulgarity of the commonplace, which you despised.³⁷

As is implied here, embarrassment is the coming to consciousness of disorder; it is a laying bare of the compulsion to order or emplot the chaos and flux of the apparent world within the imaginary confines of a narrative. In other words, embarrassment constitutes a moment of fracture of the beautiful, a dehiscence, manifest in the moment, of the sublimity chafing at the edges and boundaries of that narrative. In this sense, the beautiful could be said to be emplotted within the sublime and therefore be contained by it, as is expressed by the etymology of 'embarrassment', a word that finds its matrix in the Italian verb '*imbarrare*', meaning 'to confine within bars'. This succinctly expresses the insularity of Copernicus's Ptolemaic vision (a feature represented in the novel by his own personal hermetic existence), yet at the same time reveals how its very definition depended upon what it decried and, ultimately, could not ignore.

We may develop this analysis further by noting that embarrassment is also a disclosure of an ex-centric determination, for in the anxiety of the embarrassed subject there is an implicit recognition of his/her constitution as a subject by the gaze of the Other. Which is to say that, in this instance, Copernicus is caught ('confined within bars') by the gaze of Andreas, the placeholder of the symbolic, and thus subjected he is forced to acknowledge his lack of autonomy in the form of embarrassment. Copernicus' quest for a non-alienated identity runs throughout

³⁷ *Doctor Copernicus*, p.238.

the novel, but the processes of introjection (ensuing from the polyvalent gaze that always indexes the proximity of the Other) are shown to out-run it at every turn:

However much he tried not to be, Nicolas was glad of his brother's going; now perhaps at last, relieved of the burden of Andreas's intolerable presence, he would be permitted to become the real self he had all his life wished to be.

But what was that mysterious self that had eluded him always? He could not say.³⁸

Copernicus 'cannot say' here because subjectivity is not a self-grounding *cogito* but, rather, an ex-centric determination which is always Other (or other) to itself. Such Otherness is given material form in the death-bed scene at the end of the novel when Andreas re-appears to Copernicus as an hallucination and remarks of 'the thing itself' that, 'You glimpsed it briefly in our father, in sister Barbara, in Fracastaro, in Anna Schillings, in all the others, and even, yes, in me'.³⁹ The ex-centric truth of Copernicus, in other words, is disclosed ex-centrally: as Andreas points out, 'It is not I who have said all these things today, but you'.⁴⁰

This paradigm of ex-centricity, upon which we might say the whole of Banville's novel turns, finds a cosmological manifestation in Copernicus' discovery of elliptical orbits. However, this discovery itself takes on an elliptical form in *The Book of the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*:

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.65-66.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.241.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.241.

It should be noticed, by the way, that if the two circles have different diameters, other conditions remaining unchanged, then the resulting movement will not be a straight line but... an ellipse.⁴¹

Elliptical circles are, of course, the actual forms of all planetary orbits but, as Koestler notes, this passage was crossed out on the original manuscript and was never published. It thus became an ellipsis (from which 'ellipse' is a back formation), an omission from the text that is indexed by the very ellipsis ('...an ellipse') that precedes its presentation. An ellipse is that most unnatural of forms for Copernicus, a non-concentric orbit; which is to say that it is ex-centric, it is an orbit around nothing, for there is no stabilizing centre. This is precisely the condition of the *Book of the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* which omits the moment of absolution, or correspondence that Copernicus sought between concept and object for one of inadequation that leaves a lack at the very heart, or centre, of his work. The irony of this may be said to lie in the fact that the conscious disavowal of the elliptical form of the orbit is a ventriloquizing of his refusal of the elliptical, or ex-centric, constitution of his subjectivity. Thus, his life-work is disabled by its enabling conditions (in other words, his subjectivity) just at the point when a correspondence between the two would have yielded a realization of the truth of those conditions.

This interesting possibility is re-articulated in a different form by Banville when he makes Rheticus the agency of ellipsis:

⁴¹ *Sleepwalkers*, p.21.

[T]here was little more for me in this scribbling than aching knuckles, and the occasional, malicious pleasure of correcting his slips (I crossed out that nonsensical line in which he speculated on the possibility of elliptical orbits – *elliptical orbits*, for God's sake!⁴²

Here the amanuensis ('the slave at hand') displaces his master, Copernicus, literally making him ex-centric to his own work and thus the absent cause of it. The elliptical presence of Copernicus within his elliptical text is fully ironized by Banville, ex-centrally as it were, in the novel *Kepler* where Copernicus' theory on elliptical orbits reappears in disembodied form ('[W]as it a premonition glimpsed in some forgotten dream?' wonders Kepler) as the value 0.00429.⁴³ This is the ratio of the radius of an ellipse to the circle that contains it at the thickest point of the overlap, which, for our purposes, expresses the absence at the heart of the circles that obsessed Copernicus and represented the truth of the planetary orbit he attempted, but failed, to disclose.⁴⁴

Clearly, then, there is a level in *Doctor Copernicus* at which the economy of surplus and lack informs both the subject and the theory of Copernicus. Indeed, Banville is keen to demonstrate that this rubric of ex-centricity finds its deftest expression in the most celebrated aspect of Copernicus' work which is the over-arching architecture of his cosmos:

⁴² *Doctor Copernicus*, p.202.

⁴³ John Banville, *Kepler* (London: Minerva, 1990, 1981), p.151.

⁴⁴ For a more detailed account of the mathematical relationship obtaining between elliptical and circular orbits see *Sleepwalkers*, pp.331-332.

You imagine that Koppernigk set the sun at the centre of the universe, don't you? He did not. The centre of the universe according to his theory is not the sun, *but the centre of Earth's orbit*, which as the great, the mighty, the all-explaining *Book of Revolutions* admits, is situated at a point in space some three times the Sun's diameter distant from the Sun! All the hypotheses, all the calculations, the star tables and diagrams, the entire ragbag of lies and half truths and self-deceptions which is *De revolutionibus orbium mundi...* was assembled simply in order to prove that at the centre of all there is nothing, that the world turns upon chaos.⁴⁵

If *doxa* maintains that the Copernican system is heliocentric, then Banville is keen to foreground the fact here that it is rather more vacuo-centric.⁴⁶ By contrasting the received conviction about Copernicus' theory ('You imagine... don't you?') with its actuality, Banville succeeds in adding yet another layer of ex-centricity to those we have already seen at work in the text. The fact that the concept of the theory is not equivalent to the theory itself, exemplifies the manner in which an astigmatic content finds its own form.

As *doxa* also maintains, the most important result of Copernicus' theorization (in relation to its ex-centric organization) is that implicit in this vacuo-centric topology is the re-settling of humanity on the margins of the universe. Indeed, not only is humanity unable to assume any anthropocentric status in relation to its known environment, but also, in charting the course of the world upon chaos, Copernicus effectively obviated any stable notion of hierarchy

⁴⁵ *Doctor Copernicus*, pp.217-218.

⁴⁶ As an example of such *doxa* we may take the following which defines the Copernican system as the theory 'which stated that the earth and the planets rotated around the sun and which opposed the Ptolemaic system'. Patrick Hanks, ed. *The Collins English Dictionary* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1986, 1979). This is, of course, inaccurate on both counts.

at all. As Koestler argues, [t]he Copernican universe... has no natural centre of orientation to which everything else can be referred'.⁴⁷ The subjective effects of such a polycentric universe manifest themselves, for Rheticus, in a form of collective anxiety analogous to the embarrassment felt by Copernicus:

What was it he said to me? – *first they will laugh, and then weep, seeing their Earth diminished, spinning upon the void...* He knew, he knew. They are weeping now, bowed down under the burden of despair with which he loaded them. I am weeping. I believe in nothing. The mirror is shattered. The chaos⁴⁸

It is difficult not to detect in the penultimate image of the shattered mirror here the fracturing of an imaginary universe, as the ego is expelled from its seat at the centre of the cosmos.⁴⁹ No longer able to view the universe in terms of itself, the Copernican subject is threatened by an infinity which is by definition always beyond it. Re-articulating this within the rubric employed earlier, we may note that where once the cosmos was beautiful, after Copernicus it became sublime.⁵⁰ Thus, despite Copernicus' attempt to subsume the cosmos within a narrative of

⁴⁷ *Sleepwalkers*, p.217.

⁴⁸ *Doctor Copernicus*, p.218. It is perhaps worthwhile noting that in my edition and in every other edition I have consulted, the last full-stop is missing from this passage. If it is not a printing error (or, indeed, even if it is) this absence finds a thematic resonance in the void under discussion.

⁴⁹ This imaginary motif is given full play throughout the novel, such as when Copernicus laments that "you make a mirror, thinking that in it shall be reflected the reality of the world; but then you understand that the mirror reflects only appearances, and that reality is somewhere else, off behind the mirror; and then you remember that behind the mirror there is only the chaos". *Ibid.*, p.209. In the light of this it is perhaps instructive to invoke Jameson's description of Lacan's work as a 'Copernican attempt to assign to the subject an ec-centric position with respect to language as a whole'. Fredric Jameson, 'Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan', in *The Ideologies of Theory – 1971-1986: Volume 1 – Situations of Theory*, Fredric Jameson (London: Routledge, 1988), pp.75-115 (p.95).

⁵⁰ This is a point echoed by Koestler when he notes that 'once the apparent daily round of the firmament was explained by the earth's rotation, the stars could recede to any distance.... The sky no longer had a limit, infinity opened its gaping jaws, and Pascal's "libertin" seized by cosmic

the beautiful, it was actually the sublimity that was liminal to that emplotment which came to define his enterprise.

What is clear, then, is that it is not so much Copernicus' success but his failure which has the fullest implications for the history that follows. What is meant by this may be understood, as we noted earlier, in terms of the position assigned to Copernicus by that history as the *arche* of modern science. Banville's Copernicus, however, is less sure, not only of his own position but of the narrative as a whole when he declares: 'My book is not science – it is a dream. I am not even sure if science is possible.'⁵¹ This is because the possibility of science for Copernicus is always mitigated by the fact of mediation, whereas for him it should be a project predicated upon the adequation of concept to object. Indeed, throughout the novel the narrator makes constant recourse to the fact that '[h]e was after the thing itself now, the unadorned, the stony thing'.⁵² However, as the adjective 'stony' implicitly acknowledges, Copernicus's endeavour in trying to arrest the slippage of surplus and lack is always-already forestalled at the level of mediation. We may observe this problematic im-mediation more clearly when it is articulated as a simile, such as in the phrase 'the true thing, a cold brilliant object like a diamond'.⁵³ As we can see here, there is, of course, no way of accessing the 'true' thing other than ex-centrally, for how can it be the 'true' thing if it is also like a diamond at the same time that it is not a diamond.

agoraphobia, was to cry out a century later: "*Le silence eternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie!*" *Sleepwalkers*, pp.216-217.

⁵¹ *Doctor Copernicus*, p.207.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.110.

Copernicus' despair towards the end of the novel can thus be accounted for precisely in terms of his failure to excavate the thing-in-itself, that is, the noumenal cosmos.

When Copernicus cries out from his death-bed delirium, then, for the 'Word! O word! Thou word that I lack!', he is appealing for the transcendental signifier which would cut through the mediation that bridles the possibility of his conception of science. It is only recently that scientific discourse has relented in accommodating this fact by way of acknowledging that it is precisely that – a discourse. Notable variants upon this theme include Gödel's theorem, which may be summarized as the '*il n'y a pas hors de texte*' of mathematics, and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which avers that mediation is inherent to observation. Of more particular concern here is the significant stream of work produced over the last couple of decades which has sought to delineate the necessitous practice of emplotting scientific fact within a narrative form which thus contaminates it with the very modes of aesthetic representation its cognitive procedures are meant to disable. Indeed, much of this work (such as that proposed by Evelyn Fox Keller and Roald Hoffman) has tended to register this latter point as the scotoma of a discursive regime keen to privilege its practices above others and that it is therefor a constitutive blindness.⁵⁴ For example, as B. Latour and S. Woolgar note, the objectivity of scientific research is fostered by a

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.169.

⁵⁴ As Jon Turney notes, '[s]ome scientists seem to regard cultural analysis as criticism only in the pejorative sense. Tell them that they use metaphors to ground their theorising, for example, and

process of what they term 'deindexicalisation' in which repeated utilizations of a piece of research will bleach away all deictic markers, such as authors, dates, places and even pronouns, until it is rendered utterly decontextualized as a free-standing fact.⁵⁵

Clearly, then, while the terms 'beauty' and 'sublimity' have so far been utilized as analogues of scientific reasoning there is also a sense in which this betokens the imbrication of reason and aesthetics within science in a far more literal manner. Thus, if at one level Copernicus' work is a negotiation with what is sublime to its own conceptualization (in other words, what is symptomatic in Ptolemy's *Almagest*) it serves as an instance of the kind of narrative refinement that is exigent upon the modern natural sciences of which he is apparently a founder. For what Banville adumbrates in *Doctor Copernicus* are precisely the aesthetic foundations of science that have been expunged from its official discourse. In a more literal sense, these foundations are (as Copernicus is) the vanishing mediators of science. In recent years this idea has been given expression by Thomas Kuhn's influential analysis, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn argues that paradigm shifts have only occurred at certain receptive historical moments, not just when the 'facts' have been known, and that, furthermore, a condition of such receptivity is largely aesthetic:

they take it as a slight rather than as an observation about how theorising is possible.' *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 9 February 1996, p.16.

⁵⁵ B. Latour and S. Woolgar, *Laboratory Life* (Los Angeles: Sage, 1979), *passim*.

There must also be a basis, though it need be neither rational nor ultimately correct, for faith in the particular candidate chosen. Something must make at least a few scientists feel that the new proposal is on the right track, and sometimes it is only personal and inarticulate aesthetic considerations that can do that. Men have been converted by them at times when most of the articulable technical arguments pointed the other way. When first introduced, neither Copernicus' astronomical theory nor De Broglie's theory of matter had many other significant grounds of appeal.⁵⁶

What seems to be at stake in Kuhn's description here is the privileging of taste and trust over tests and truth.⁵⁷ Of course, any fiduciary bond struck upon the anvil of personal worth is as equally warped by the aesthetics of representation as it is by the ex-centricity of the subject. The value of Kuhn's work proceeds from its laying bare the device, as it were; its highlighting of the fact that the subsequent operations of deindexicalization stand in stark contrast to the initial processes of validation that scientific research is subject to.⁵⁸ *Doctor Copernicus*, as a fictional biography, would thus seem to offer itself as the pre-eminent medium for reindexicalizing the vanishing mediators of science, both because it

⁵⁶ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edn. (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, 1962), p.158.

⁵⁷ On the matter of taste in the sciences, Eric Hobsbawm notes that 'in the conceptual debris on which the twentieth century sciences were built one basic and essentially aesthetic assumption was not challenged. Indeed, as uncertainty clouded all the others, it became increasingly central to scientists. Like the poet Keats, they believed that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty", although their criterion was not his. A beautiful theory, which was in itself a presumption of truth, must be elegant, economical and general. It must unify and simplify, as the great triumphs of scientific theory had hitherto done.' Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century – 1914-1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), p.540.

⁵⁸ Rom Harré has characterized these initial processes as test of personal worth, where character assumes the status of an epistemological proof: 'When philosophers carry on their discussions of science in terms of the official or strict system they are not describing either the cognitive or the material practices of the scientific community, even in ideal form. They are describing a rhetoric and an associated set of narrative conventions for presenting a story in which rival teams of scientists appear as heroes and villains.' Rom Harré, 'Some Narrative Conventions of Scientific Discourse', in *Narrative in Culture: The Uses of Storytelling in the Sciences, Philosophy, and Literature*, Christopher Nash (London: Routledge, 1994, 1990), pp.81-101 (p.95).

foregrounds its status as narrative, and because it reinvigorates the subjective matrix of scientific truth.

Doctor Copernicus, we might say then, enacts a return to the conditions of possibility of science, both in the sense that it elaborates the hidden assumptions upon which it is based and in the sense that it articulates the contradictions of the hidden founder of its discourse. At a diegetic level the figure for this return in the novel is the circle, a motif which Rheticus ultimately ascribes to Copernicus:

If he believed that Man could redeem himself, he saw in – how shall I say – in *immobility* the only possible means toward that end. His world moved in circles, endlessly, and each circuit was a repetition exactly of all the others, past and future, to the extremities of time: which is no movement at all.⁵⁹

This, clearly enough, represents the imaginary time of self-replication. However, Copernicus (whom we have already noted as an ‘old form’) is contrasted with Rheticus here for whom the past always comes from the future. As he boasts of his symbolic temporality, ‘when I speak of the present, I am as it were looking backward, into what is, for me, already the past’.⁶⁰ The significance of this lies in the fact that Rheticus is also a narrator in the novel, and indeed, the temporal framework he outlines is particular to all narrators of the past tense. In this respect we may say that the novel sets up a distinction between the temporality of Copernicus and that of the narrator. Specifically, it may be proposed that this

⁵⁹ *Doctor Copernicus*, p.204.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.204.

distinction finds expression in the contrasting figures of return maintained at the diegetic and exegetic levels of the text. If the figure for the former level is that of the circle, then the figure for the latter level is that of the anachronism.⁶¹

On one plane, this figure finds expression in the anachronistic facts of the portrayal of Copernicus in Banville's novel. Copernicus' Aristotelianism belonged to a residual medievalism, while his heliocentrism formed part of the emergent culture of the Renaissance and has since been recuperated as the *arche* of Enlightenment science. If the theory of heliocentricity enacted a kind of topographical violence upon the Earth (that is, relocated it out of place), then this anachorism is matched on the temporal plane by a similar dislocation which finds Copernicus out of time. Torn asunder from their matrix and re-emplotted in the narrative of modernity, Copernicus and his theory are made to mean, ex-centrally as it were, in another time. The anachronism, in other words, is central to the themes and concerns of *Doctor Copernicus*. Its formal pertinence proceeds from the manner in which it facilitates the disengagement of the subject from an imaginary circle of history and, instead, fosters a sense of historicity. As Theodor Adorno comments, '[b]ecause no other truth can be expressed than that which is able to fill the subject, anachronism becomes the refuge of modernity'.⁶² The anachronism, we might say, jolts the subject out of its self and into the Other.

⁶¹ It is worthwhile pointing out that for Imhof the function of the 'circular patterns in the novel' is to 'effect a reiterative narrative progression that imitates the orbital motions of the planets'. *John Banville: A Critical Introduction*, p.104.

⁶² Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974, 1951), p.221. Indeed, in the light of this it may be ventured that *Doctor Copernicus* does not so much rehearse the antagonisms between medieval and modern ways of thinking, as those between the modern and the postmodern.

It is a mode of historical testimony not of the subject's time, but of the temporality of the symbolic.

Indeed, in *Doctor Copernicus* the anachronism comes to figure as precisely that point of excess which expedites a wholesale revaluation of the rest of the narrative. A simple example of this is the description of Albrecht:

Grand Master Albrecht was a small quick reptile-like man with a thin dark face and pointed ears lying flat against his skull. His heavy quilted doublet and tight breeches gave him the look of a well-fed lizard. A gold medallion bearing the insignia of the Order hung by a heavy chain on his breast. (It was said that he was impotent.)⁶³

The juxtaposition of the 'gold medallion' with the rumour of impotency is a reference to the contemporary myth of the "medallion man" – a middle aged man who advertizes a sexual potency he is unable to deliver. This excess of signification is replicated at the level of form here, for the emplotment of the anachronism within a historical narrative is equally surplus to its identity. The parentheses employed by Banville are also symptomatic; they designate an intervention in a narrative which breaches and thereby qualifies the identity thus far established by that narrative. In deliberately foregrounding the lack of identity, Banville's utilization of the anachronism thus works to augment the operations of the dialectic between surplus and lack noted earlier in the analysis of the novel's form. In particular here, the anachronism gives rise to an avowedly historical self-consciousness, for quite clearly the conflation of references several

hundred years apart institutes a problematization of the historical coherence of the narrative. Which is to say that as the 'medallion' reference is obviously heterogeneous to its given field (a contemporary reader could date it precisely from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s), we are pressed into a cognizance, not only of our inhabitation of the present and its discontinuity from the past (and hence our distance from that past), but also of an alterity inhabiting the text manifest as a sense of history.⁶⁴ In this sense, the anachronism is the paradigmatic mode of historicization, as its recognition is predicated upon an acknowledgement of temporal differentiation.

A more subtle variety of anachronism can be found in the use Banville makes of quotations. In particular here we might note the dialogue between Copernicus and Rheticus in which they both literally ventriloquize the words of other historical figures:

The Canon was standing at my shoulder. [...] When he spoke, the words seemed to come, slowly, from a long way off. He said:

"If at the foundation of all there lay only a wildly seething power which, writhing with obscure passions, produced everything that is great and everything that is insignificant, if a bottomless void

⁶³ *Doctor Copernicus*, p.134.

⁶⁴ Paradoxically, then, an anachronistic text yields a more compelling historicity than a contrasting one with an historical narrative whose attempt to be utterly 'faithful' to the past yields an imaginary history. This is a point picked up on by Steven Connor when, in analysing A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*, he argues that 'the willingness to be possessed by the past is inseparable from the more acquisitive desire to be possessed of it. The elaborately constructed simulations of nineteenth-century prose [in Byatt's novel] are a testimony to a characteristically twentieth-century form of egocentricity, which confirms itself not by exclusion but by assimilation of what is other to it. The virtues and attentive humility before the *thisness* of the past is... never absolutely to be distinguished from the virtuoso appropriation of it.' Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History; 10950-1995* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p.148.

never satiated lay hidden beneath all, what then would life be but despair?”

I said:

“I hold it true that pure thought can grasp reality, as the ancients dreamed.”⁶⁵

The quotations here from Kierkegaard and Einstein respectively are also abetted by ones from Sir Arthur Eddington, Max Planck and Wallace Stevens. What is striking about these quotations is precisely their status as anachronisms. Whilst at one level Banville tries to alert the reader with the written nod and a wink of ‘the words seemed to come, slowly, from a long way off’ and the stilted, italicized conduct of the conversation, at another level the reader – this reader – is quite ignorant of the source of the quotations. Indeed, it is only the rather misleadingly helpful ‘Notes’ at the end of the novel which delineates their actual matrix. The significance of this is that there is nothing inherent in the quotations which distinguishes them as anachronistic in relation to the rest of narrative. If on the one hand this promotes an awareness of historical context, then, on the other hand, it also invokes a cognizance of the temporality which underwrites the anachronism. For, in order to establish these anachronisms as such, we must return from ‘outwith’ the novel (that is, from the ‘Notes’) back into the text and reappraise them anew. By so doing we are mimicking the process of the anachronism which also returns out of context to reinvigorate its field of meaning. In this sense *Doctor Copernicus* is not so much an historical, as an historicizing fiction, for it not only elaborates a historical subject but also the very structures of historicity which expedite that project in the first place.

Finally, we may perhaps aver that the anachronism indexes the persistence of the subject in *Doctor Copernicus*. Heterogeneous to its field, the anachronism represents a point preceding symbolization, that is, a point before integration within the symbolic network. As such, its situation is analogous to Jean-François Lyotard's 'event' or, more pertinently, to the status of the vanishing mediator before it has vanished. It thus discloses a moment of 'openness' in history, a time before which the narrative of that history has retroactively emplotted it within a linear story. This 'openness' is what constitutes the subject, for it is what maintains an alterity to the 'objectivity' of the symbolic network (at least anterior to its incorporation by that network). The subject, in other words, is what is ex-centric to the symbolic; it is, as Žižek proposes, 'a name for that unfathomable X called upon, suddenly made accountable, thrown into a position of responsibility, into the urgency of decision in such a moment of undecidability'.⁶⁶ *Doctor Copernicus* is a narrativization of this 'moment of undecidability'; it tells the story of an 'openness' before which Copernicus came to be designated the *arche* of modern science.⁶⁷ The anachronisms of his character and theory can thus be seen as what Michel De Certeau designates as 'lapses in the syntax constructed by the law of a place', lapses which 'symbolize a return of the repressed, that is, a return of what at a given moment, has become unthinkable in order for a new

⁶⁵ *Doctor Copernicus*, p.208.

⁶⁶ *For They Know Not What They Do*, p.189.

⁶⁷ Much of that story is concerned to elaborate the lengthy period of time during which Copernicus refused to publish his theory and thereby refused his subsequent symbolization. It is little wonder, then, that Copernicus disappears as a name from the novel towards its end, nor that he spends most of Part Four on his death-bed, because, as publication approached, so did symbolization and hence his disappearance as a subject in the sense outlined here.

identity to become thinkable'.⁶⁸ The novel returns to Copernicus his status as an historical pleonasm, the unthinkable excess of science and, in doing so, it returns him his subjectivity. Indeed, we might say that the genre of historical biography finds its most apposite expression in *Doctor Copernicus* because, ultimately, the subject of the novel is the subject itself.

⁶⁸ Michel De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. by Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 1975), p.4.

Conclusion:

The Tense of an Ending

Wishing to exercise the power of amnesty vested in her, a prison governor gathers together three prisoners in a room and makes them sit down in a triangle. She places on the head of each a randomly chosen hat from a total selection of five hats, three of which are white and two of which are black. The colour of each hat is invisible to the person who wears it. She then informs the prisoners that she will release the first prisoner who can identify the colour of his own hat, a fact which he must signify by getting up and leaving the room. In the tension of the room, three possibilities emerge.

The first possibility is that one prisoner is wearing a white hat and the other two black hats. The white-hatted prisoner can, in this instance, immediately see that both black hats are being worn and thus quickly exit the room. The second possibility is that there are two white-hatted prisoners and only one with a black hat. One of the prisoners wearing a white hat must reason that his is either black or white as he can see both a black and a white hat. Nevertheless, if he is wearing a black hat then the other prisoner wearing a white hat would conclude that his is white and get up to leave. As he does not, then the first prisoner can conclude that his hat is also white. In the third permutation, all three prisoners are wearing white hats. Seeing two white hats, one of the prisoners will initially discern that his hat is either black or white. If it is black then one of the other two

prisoners would assume that if his hat is black that the white-hatted prisoner would get up and leave. As he does not he must presume he is wearing a white hat. The first prisoner can also therefore conclude he is wearing white. Indeed, all three prisoners will simultaneously move toward the door having come to the same conclusion. On seeing that they are all trying to effect an exit at the same time, however, they will all pause wondering if each rose for the same reason, or if it was because one of them was wearing a black hat. This joint hesitation will confirm that they are all in the same predicament, that they are all in fact wearing white hats and they will all then hasten towards the door, intent on being first to reach the governor.

It is, of course, a familiar sophism, which, in one of its variations, takes John Banville's *Copernicus* merely seconds to solve.¹ For Jacques Lacan this sophism also provides an allegory of the temporal modes of subjectivity. In the first possibility Lacan discerns an exclusionary objectivity, 'the subjectivization, however impersonal, which takes form here in the "one knows that..."'.² In other words, the prisoner is instantly able to objectify the fact that '*[b]eing opposite two blacks, one knows one is white*'.³ The second possibility is inscribed within an intersubjective dialectic which involves occupying another's position: '*Were I a black, the two whites would waste no time realizing they are white*'.⁴ There is already a time lag here (what Lacan calls '*the time for comprehending*') with

¹ John Banville, *Doctor Copernicus* (London: Minerva, 1990, 1976), pp.19-20.

² Jacques Lacan, 'Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty: A New Sophism', trans. by Bruce Fink and Marc Silver, *Newsletter of the Freudian Field*, 2:2, (1988), 4-22, (p.11).

³ *Ibid.*, p.11.

‘each of the whites finding the key to his own problem in the inertia of his *semblable*’.⁵ However, in the third possibility, the purely reciprocal character of the second possibility is surmounted by the ‘*assertion about oneself*’: ‘*I hasten to declare myself white, so that these whites, whom I consider in this way, do not precede me in recognizing themselves for what they are*’.⁶ This ‘*moment of concluding*’ is the “‘I’s” logical genesis’, an assertion of the subject’s symbolic mandate which anticipates an identification in order to avoid the radical doubt of *Che vuoi?*⁷ It entails a shift, as Slavoj Žižek points out, from the ‘void of the subject epitomized by the radical uncertainty as to what I am, i.e., by the utter undecidability of my status, to the conclusion that I am white, to the assumption of my symbolic identity – “That’s me!”’⁸

Literature is also determined by an analogous anticipatory gesture. We may locate this particularly in what Steven Connor terms the ‘addressivity’ of narrative. In using this term Connor means to evoke

Not just the tendency of narratives to surmise or otherwise orientate themselves towards certain receivers or addressees but also the associated effects of recoil and redoubling, whereby the narrative may be seen to acknowledge, or even react against the knowledge of that address.⁹

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.12 and p.14 respectively.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), pp.75-76.

⁹ Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History: 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.10.

In other words, inscribed within the text is an anticipation of its symbolic mandate, a hastening towards a specific reader and a specific reading. The delicate ironies of a Jane Austen novel, for example, presuppose a reader who will share a certain set of assumptions against which the rather less refined actions of her characters may be tacitly adjudged (and the assumptions safely confirmed). The narrative, as it were, finds comfort in the fact that it will be what it already is. Such comforts, it may be suggested, are just what the postmodern novel refuses: it resists the assertion of self.

Predicated upon the future perfect, the postmodern novel always eludes the grip of a reciprocal addressivity by situating its readers beyond the imaginary reading that they have yet to reach. It is as if the material conditions of *Che vuoi?* within which narratives are written and launched (what Connor identifies as ‘the multiplication of competing forms of attention and address after the Second World War’) thus find expression in the very forms of these novels themselves.¹⁰ For they constitute a canon of texts whose binding characteristic is the refusal of canonization. Rather than hastening to the door, then, the postmodern novel expedites a hovering between the time for comprehending and the moment of concluding, producing in that tension the multiple senses of what will have been.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.12.

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