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**Inside Men**

Confession, Masculinity, and Form in American Fiction since  
the Second World War

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**PhD in English Literature  
University of Edinburgh  
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## Declaration

This is to certify that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cain McMaugh". The signature is written in a cursive style with some loops and flourishes.

Date: 29 June 2018

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Blake and Christine, and my sisters, Sarah and Vivienne, for their inspiration, understanding, and love. And to Uly, too.

## Abstract

This thesis examines the use of form and spatial language in confessional fiction by men to elucidate how they conceptualise and negotiate material, corporeal, and psychological boundaries amidst the shifting social and political landscape of the United States since the Second World War. In light of increasingly urgent calls to address gender and racial discrimination in the United States, this study offers timely insight into an identity that, while culturally dominant, often escapes examination: white, heterosexual masculinity. Focusing on the representation of forms and spatial imagery, the chapters explore how five formally experimental novelists—Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph McElroy, Harry Mathews, William H. Gass, and Peter Dimock—employ the confessional genre to illustrate the way men perceive themselves as spatially and temporally circumscribed, and to look at the way they reinforce or transgress the boundaries of masculine identity. The post-war period in the United States witnessed a proliferation of confessional writing that coincided with the popularisation of Freudian psychoanalysis, the cold war rhetoric of suspicion, and the rise of second-wave feminism. As a result, the concept of the self increasingly becomes a repository for fantasies of potential discovery and hidden danger that rely, significantly, on metaphors of surface and depth. It is within, and often against, this cultural preoccupation with the self that these writers address, both directly and indirectly, the status of white masculinity. Drawing on innovative theories of forms and spatiality, this study examines the diverse language and imagery men use to describe their sense of selfhood as well as the bonds they form with others. The works considered in this study demonstrate a common preoccupation with the boundaries that separate interior from exterior and private from public. In response to pressures both intimate and impersonal, the narrators of the texts discussed in this thesis turn to confessional practices of written self-examination to locate themselves within networks of fluctuating relations and obligations. The question that this thesis seeks to resolve is whether the forms and spatial language the narrators employ enable or obstruct their efforts to negotiate the competing demands of ethical responsibilities to others and the desire to preserve a stable sense of self.

## Lay Summary

This thesis examines the use of form and spatial language in confessional fiction by men to elucidate how they conceptualise and negotiate material, corporeal, and psychological boundaries amidst the shifting social and political landscape of the United States since the Second World War. In light of increasingly urgent calls to address gender and racial discrimination in the United States, this study offers timely insight into an identity that, while culturally dominant, often escapes examination: white, heterosexual masculinity. Focusing on the representation of forms and spatial imagery, the chapters explore how five formally experimental novelists—Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph McElroy, Harry Mathews, William H. Gass, and Peter Dimock—employ the confessional genre to illustrate the way men perceive themselves as spatially and temporally circumscribed, and to look at the way they reinforce or transgress the boundaries of masculine identity. The post-war period in the United States witnessed a proliferation of confessional writing that coincided with the popularisation of Freudian psychoanalysis, the cold war rhetoric of suspicion, and the rise of second-wave feminism. As a result, the concept of the self increasingly becomes a repository for fantasies of potential discovery and hidden danger that rely, significantly, on metaphors of surface and depth. It is within, and often against, this cultural preoccupation with the self that these writers address, both directly and indirectly, the status of white masculinity. Drawing on innovative theories of forms and spatiality, this study examines the diverse language and imagery men use to describe their sense of selfhood as well as the bonds they form with others. The works considered in this study demonstrate a common preoccupation with the boundaries that separate interior from exterior and private from public. In response to pressures both intimate and impersonal, the narrators of the texts discussed in this thesis turn to confessional practices of written self-examination to locate themselves within networks of fluctuating relations and obligations. The question that this thesis seeks to resolve is whether the forms and spatial language the narrators employ enable or obstruct their efforts to negotiate the competing demands of ethical responsibilities to others and the desire to preserve a stable sense of self.

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## Introduction

Among the most peculiar examples of the twentieth century's fascination with confessional writing is the monumental diary of Arthur Crew Inman. Inman began his diary in 1919 at the age of twenty-four and brought it to an end with his suicide in December 1963, by which time he had amassed "approximately seventeen million words" (Aaron 1). Inman, the only child of a wealthy Southern family, spent most of his life in Boston, Massachusetts, where he lived with his wife, Evelyn, on a family allowance and sought relief from various ailments. Unable to contribute to the management of the family cotton business, Inman turned to writing for a sense of self-worth. Though his poetry and fiction were not well received, Inman held out hope that one day his revealing diary would provide him with the recognition he believed was his due. The diary did, ultimately, make its way into the public sphere, some twenty years after Inman's death, edited down to a manageable two-volume set by Daniel Aaron for Harvard University Press in 1985. In his introduction to *The Inman Diary: A Public and Private Confession*, Aaron notes that the work does not fit easily into any one category of literature and suggests that the reader might think of it as, among other things, "a case history" (4), a "social history of America" (6) or a "gigantic nonfiction 'novel—or work with novel-like patterns,'" with the last describing "the way Inman came to see it" (8). Despite the diary's generic fluidity, there is a formal feature that unites the text, which Aaron highlights in the subtitle to his edition: confession.

Inman's diary is replete with confessions—not only does he present "the results of [his] self-exploration and self-analysis" (*Inman* 189), but he also "hired 'talkers' to tell him the stories of their lives—the more lurid the better" (Aaron 3),

which he later recorded in his diary. *The Inman Diary* is thus a secular compendium of confessions, which Inman quite self-consciously brought together to appeal to the market for confessional writing.<sup>1</sup> Inman is not uncritical of the tradition, observing “that no very personal record such as this may be written without causing the reader to label the author as an introspective and hypochondriacal weakling living, to an unwholesome and inexcusable degree, within himself,” but he suggests that “diaries centered around external happenings and enlivened by change and movement [...] are interesting, instructive and useful, as no other species of writing can ever hope to be” (*Inman* 182). The binary opposition of internal and external, of private and public, is a central motif of Inman’s diary and, as we will see, fundamentally organises his perception of a masculine ideal and his own inadequacies.

Arthur Inman’s diary will serve as a guide for the present study’s examination of the spaces of masculinity and the self in post-World War II confessional fiction. It will become clear that, despite the diary’s idiosyncrasies and often disturbing content, Inman is not an anomaly; instead, the major concerns of the diary—the uses of confession, the status of masculinity, and the composition of the self—are all subjects taken up by a variety of writers throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. What distinguishes Inman’s diary, and what distinguishes the confessional novels included in this thesis, is the representation of the anxieties and insecurities that circulate around the subject position of the white, male confessant. A study that focuses upon the representation of white men in novels written by white men will undoubtedly raise questions about the urgency of devoting more attention to the de facto subject of Western culture and history. This criticism would seem

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<sup>1</sup> Inman states that he “studied the manner and method of a fair number of personal diaries and memoirs” (182) as he developed his own approach.

particularly applicable to confessional writing, a genre that has been critiqued as a coercive technique for the domination of women and the vulnerable by men. In *Confession* (1990), for instance, Jeremy Tambling aligns the authority of the confessor with “the (now) bourgeois subject, assumed to be male, normal, heterosexual and white” (6), which leads him to question the substance of confessions given by men within a social system organised for their benefit. Thus, for Tambling, “what is written from and in the margins is much more important than what goes on at the centre” (7). While I agree with Tambling that it is essential to support the voices of the oppressed and disenfranchised, by over-simplifying identities “at the centre,” we may fail to fully understand the fluid dynamics of “centre” and “margin,” and even reinforce antagonism between social groups. Taking Ruth Frankenberg’s observation that “there are also tremendous risks in *not* critically engaging whiteness” (1, emphasis in original) as an injunction to reflect on the “centre,” we might just as easily substitute masculinity or heterosexuality for whiteness as identities that we must continue to examine and resist reducing to stereotype or cliché.

R. W. Connell and James Messerschmidt’s theorisation of masculinity provides insight into the variability of the lived experience of men and disrupts the simple dichotomy of centre and margin. Connell and Messerschmidt write, “[m]asculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (“Hegemonic” 836). Men who occupy the “centre,” the minority of men who display the characteristics of what Connell and Messerschmidt

describe as “hegemonic masculinity” (829), are not immune from social and historical change. It is conceivable, Connell and Messerschmidt reflect, that “there could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones” (833). Even if such a transformation did not immediately lead to the realisation of gender equality, Connell and Messerschmidt suggest that it is “possible that a more humane, less oppressive, means of being a man might become hegemonic, as part of a process leading toward an abolition of gender hierarchies.” Contemporary social movements, including Black Lives Matter and the Me Too movement, encourage men to practice self-examination in order to recognise how they may be the beneficiaries of social or cultural privileges that are obtained at the expense of other, less fortunate, individuals or groups. The seeds of large-scale social change may, at least in part, lie with men at the centre, those “inside men,” who struggle with the internal tensions of masculine identity. Connell and Messerschmidt remark, “[w]ithout treating privileged men as objects of pity, we should recognize that hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily translate into a satisfying experience of life” (852). Following Connell and Messerschmidt’s observation, it is the objective of the present study to examine the competing social and cultural forms that produce the conflicted subjectivities of “inside men” and to explore the forces that push these men towards gender equality and those that push them away from it.

To this end, this thesis looks at the writing of five formally experimental, white, male, American novelists not typically associated with confessional fiction: Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), Joseph McElroy (b. 1930), Harry Mathews (1930-

2017), William H. Gass (1924-2017), and Peter Dimock (b.1950).<sup>2</sup> Although one might suspect that these writers, known for their iconoclastic approach to literary conventions, take up the genre of confession in order to satirise its depiction of earnest self-reflection or to undermine the expectations of its voyeuristic audience, this study argues that they do not merely write against confession, but rather challenge the way we think about the writing and representations of the self. This study draws on innovative theories of form, spatiality, and embodiment to illustrate how these writers engage with pressing debates about identity and ethics that test the formerly secure and unmarked status of the white, heterosexual man in the United States. Like their authors, virtually all of the narrators of the confessional works included in this study are white, heterosexual men. It is precisely the representation of white, heterosexual masculinity in confessional fiction—the way that these men perceive themselves and how they understand their relations with others—that this study explores. Examining fiction from the 1950s to the present, this study identifies a lineage of confessional writing that parallels, and, in some instances, rebuts, the tradition of confessional poetry in the United States. These novelists provide us with a counter-narrative of confessional fiction that illustrates the limits and the possibilities of representing men at the centre.

Examining representations of masculinity, heterosexuality, and whiteness in confessional fiction by men, this study develops a methodology that draws on the

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<sup>2</sup> Although Nabokov was born in Russia and only settled in the United States at the age of forty-one, he came to identify with the country. Even after the success of *Lolita* enabled him to give up teaching and move to Montreux, Switzerland, where he and his wife could “stay near their son in Milan” (Boyd, *American Years* 459), Nabokov declared: “I am an American, I feel American, and I like that feeling” (*Strong Opinions* 107).

insights of Rita Felski's challenge to the hermeneutics of suspicion in *The Limits of Critique* (2015). Felski's text engages with an on-going debate concerning the dominant methods of literary analysis that coalesced around an issue of the journal *Representations*. The editors of this issue, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, call into question the assumptions underlying a mode of interpretation they define as "symptomatic reading," which "took meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter" (1).<sup>3</sup> In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski develops on the line of thought initiated by Best and Marcus, as she examines the conventions of "suspicious reading" (3) that have become the *de rigueur* mode of literary and cultural interpretation within the academy. Felski draws on the insights of Paul Ricoeur, who describes Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche as "[t]hree masters, seemingly mutually exclusive, [that] dominate the school of suspicion" (*Freud* 32) and who is credited with theorising the hermeneutics of suspicion.<sup>4</sup> The concepts of "hermeneutics of suspicion," "symptomatic reading," and "suspicious reading" all share a common concern with the interpretive relationship between reader and text. According to Felski, suspicious reading manifests in the affective and methodological practices of critique, whereby the critic assumes "an attitude of vigilance, detachment, and wariness" towards the object of study in order to catch it in the act of "transgression or resistance" (*Limits* 3). The dynamic between critic and text in the conventions of critique demonstrates clear parallels with the relationship

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<sup>3</sup> Best and Marcus were not the first to recognise this tendency: in "Against Interpretation" (1966), Susan Sontag criticises "[t]he modern style of interpretation [which] excavates" (6); and, more recently, in "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (1997), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick questions "the suspicion or paranoia that is common in the theoretical work" (3) of contemporary critics.

<sup>4</sup> In *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (2009), Alison Scott-Baumann traces the development of this concept in Ricoeur's work.

between confessor and confessant, police officer and suspect, or analyst and analysand that make up the most familiar confessional situations. It is therefore vital to reflect on the methods and influence of confession in order to overcome this hermeneutic impasse.

Much like Best and Marcus, Felski points to the influence of psychoanalytic and Marxist theories for raising the status of suspicious reading to its current position as “virtually synonymous with intellectual rigor, theoretical sophistication, and intransigent opposition to the status quo” (*Limits* 7). Felski, however, extends her assessment of suspicious reading to include poststructuralist criticism, which Best and Marcus do not consider in their article. Felski posits that poststructuralist critics adopt the same affective detachment as Marxist or psychoanalytic critics, but concern themselves with the “surface” of the text rather than “digging down” for concealed meaning. She describes poststructuralist criticism as a mode of surface reading, whereby the critic “stares intently at these surfaces, seeking to render them improbable through the imperturbability of her gaze” (54). Felski argues that critics must reject the surface-depth binary if literary analysis is to move beyond a hermeneutics of suspicion that inhibits the exploration of other modes of interpretation. She reflects, “[w]e shortchange the significance of art by focusing on the ‘de’ prefix (its power to demystify, destabilize, denaturalize) at the expense of the ‘re’ prefix: its ability to recontextualize, reconfigure, or recharge perception. Works of art do not only subvert but also convert” (17, emphasis in original). Scholars have examined the themes of sex, gender, and race in literature with a suspicious lens and it is vital that such work continues to be done; however, there is a need in literary studies for us to make connections as well as point out weaknesses, to read

sympathetically as well as critically, to treat a text not merely as an attempt to conceal transgressions but as a bid to establish attachments. This is not to say that we should read naively. We must recognise that reading makes us vulnerable, we find ourselves, as Georges Poulet writes, “bound hand and foot to the omnipotence of fiction” (55). Yet, if we respond to this vulnerability with only detachment and suspicion, we fail to recognise how reading also fractures our sense of autonomy and invites to participate “within this community of feeling” (59).

In her attempt to establish a new hermeneutic model, Felski abandons much of the language and many of the themes that have been the focus of scholarly research. For instance, Felski, despite her background in feminist theory, aligns feminist and gender critique with other modes of suspicious reading. While there is ample evidence of suspicious reading in the corpus of these theoretical traditions, is it therefore necessary that we abandon femininity and masculinity as objects of study? Is it not possible to examine representations of gender without reading suspiciously? Felski appears to forego gender in her account of a “postcritical” (151) hermeneutics—the methods of feminist criticism are too inured with antagonistic modes of “reading against the grain” (42) of patriarchal culture. It is, however, the contention of this study that in order to achieve a truly “postcritical” mode of reading, we need to work with and through the ideas already active and available to critics, as well as introducing new ideas to augment our understanding. We must continue to think through the representation of gender in literature and culture, but challenge ourselves to think it anew, to explore the way that texts are not merely covertly complicit in perpetuating restrictive norms, but also openly express the possibilities and the frustrations of connection and identification. However, Felski’s

priority in *The Limits of Critique* is, ultimately, to assess the practices of suspicious reading, and she puts forward only a tentative notion of postcritical reading that points to critics working on affect and actor-network theory for examples of criticism that resist the surface-depth binary model. By contrast, Caroline Levine, another critic stimulated by the debate surrounding Best and Marcus's issue of *Representations*, proposes an alternative method of interpretation that addresses both the affective and methodological limitations of critique.

In *Forms* (2015), Levine proposes a new method of literary analysis that seeks to resolve the opposition between formalist and historicist approaches to criticism, which represent the poles of intrinsic and extrinsic interpretation. Levine argues that by “expanding our usual definition of form in literary studies to include patterns of socio-political experience” we will find that “[t]he traditionally troubling gap between the form of the literary text and its content and context dissolves” (2). Levine proposes a very broad definition of form that encompasses “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference” (3) and focuses on four particular forms: the bounded whole, the rhythm or patterns of time, the hierarchy, and the network. This conceptualisation of form enables Levine to identify forms common to both the aesthetic and the social or historical features of a text without attributing priority to one over the other.<sup>5</sup> According to Levine, a multiplicity of aesthetic and socio-political forms intersect, overlap, and influence each other in a literary work—or, as she demonstrates in *Forms*, in any narrative

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<sup>5</sup> Levine asserts that this refusal to interpret literary forms as contingent upon social or historical circumstances distinguishes her argument from the recent work of “new formalist” critics who continue to “read literary form as epiphenomenal, growing out of specific social conditions that it mimics or opposes” (12).

art—in ways that preclude one form from asserting dominance over the others. She explains:

Approaching form in this pluralizing way to include both social and aesthetic forms, and arguing that no single form dominates or organizes all of the others, moves us away from one of the deepest political convictions in the field: that ultimately, it is deep structural forces such as capitalism, nationalism, and racism that are the truly powerful shapers of our lives. (17)

This is not, Levine clarifies, to diminish the impact of these structural forces, but rather to see them in relation to a variety of other forms that facilitate or inhibit the orders they seek to impose. Thus Levine’s method of formal analysis resists the “depth” model of interpretation that points to a single, concealed form as the organising principle of all the aesthetic and social features of a text.

This does not, however, align Levine’s approach with the “surface” model of interpretation that Felski attributes to poststructuralist criticism. While Levine draws on poststructuralist theory in her understanding of the artificiality of certain cultural forms and in her attention to the dynamics of “bounded wholeness” (31), she diverges from poststructuralism in several important ways. In a general sense, Levine is critical of the “deconstructive” bent of much literary analysis, and argues “the field has been so concerned with breaking forms apart that we have neglected to analyze the major work that forms do in our world” (9). Instead of treating order as strictly negative and repressive, Levine encourages us to investigate forms as capable of both positive and negative “affordances”—a term she draws from design theory “to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs” (6). In support of the attention that she devotes to the positive affordances of forms, Levine points out that, “while it may be possible to rid ourselves of particular unjust totalities or binaries, it is impossible to imagine a society altogether free of organizing

principles” (9). This observation leads to Levine’s criticism of poststructuralism for its reductive analysis of power to the operation of hierarchies. She contends that, since a plurality of forms are always actively organising experience, when seemingly dominant hierarchies “collide with other hierarchies and an array of other forms in social situations, hierarchies often go awry or are rerouted, and they can activate surprising and sometimes even progressive effects” (85). Thus, Levine explains, “[t]he most strategic approach to the power exerted by hierarchies, then, is not always to dismantle, flatten, or upend them.” Levine, like Felski, proposes that it is not necessarily in our best interest to assume a distant and sceptical relation to literary works in the manner of poststructuralist critics, but allow for an array of affective bonds to develop in our interpretive practice. In this regard, Levine aligns her approach with Heather Love’s proposal for “modes of reading that are close but not deep” (375) and which “account for the real variety that is already there” (377) in all texts. Close reading thus remains a viable technique if critics are willing to suspend their suspicions and expand their “critical mood[s]” (Felski, *Limits* 6). In other words, “[w]e must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more” (Sontag 6, emphasis in original).

Drawing on the methodological insights of Felski and Levine, this study will not treat the narrators of these confessional novels with undue suspicion, nor will it read “against the grain” of their narratives. Instead, it will examine the variety of forms circulating in these texts to understand how they give order and meaning to perceptions and experiences of masculine selfhood. More specifically, this study focuses on the aesthetic and socio-political forms that organise and, in many instances, disorganise the lives of the narrators in these texts. Four forms, in

particular, will reappear in each of the chapters: the bounded whole of the confessional narrative, the hierarchical binary of gender, the binary opposition of surface and depth, and the patterns of memory and history. This study will also examine the conscious efforts of each narrator to manipulate the form of their confession or introduce other forms into their texts in order to probe the boundaries of subjectivity. As Levine observes, and as we will see, the “collision” (18) between forms in these texts produces a variety of results that present readers with new ways of understanding how certain forms work together to isolate men and maintain patriarchal dominance, while other forms intersect in ways that disturb the status quo and offer men new ways of forming positive connections that cross gender and racial divides. Importantly, Levine’s insights on form invite us to re-evaluate subjects that critics have come to view with deep suspicion like confession, subjectivity, and gender, for the positive affordances that make them such powerful aesthetic and socio-political forms.

Whether the narrators in these works are honest or deceptive—remorseful or unrepentant—is less important for the focus of this study than is the language they use to describe themselves as embodied beings and how they represent their perceptions of the boundaries separating self from other. As a result, this thesis makes an important intervention in the study of confessional writing, as well as a timely contribution to the development of a “postcritical” hermeneutics. Before further situating this study in relation to its literary and theoretical context, I wish to briefly return to the diary of Arthur Inman—a man who could not have inherited a more fitting name—in order to illustrate the link between confession, masculinity, and form that provides this study’s interpretive nexus.

## **Arthur Inman: A Life in the Dark**

Reflecting on his early life, Inman recalls feeling inadequate in comparison with other young men: “I believed not to be a back on a football team, not to have the girls fall at your feet as they did at Sam’s was to see myself failing in virility, was to be, in effect, a sissy. It was nothing short of a mortal sin. It stamped me outside my class, a scorned thing to myself and to others, a blasted tree. I felt then a failure, a person *confined within himself*” (98, emphasis added). This passage is emblematic of the way Inman envisions the link between masculinity, the body, and public life. The sphere of public performance is, for Inman, the domain of men, and a lack of natural physical aptitude characterises a defective masculinity. The sense of a physical deficiency that Inman experiences not only limits his capacity to participate in the public realm, but also forces upon him an inner or private life that is constrained by self-awareness. Here, Inman illustrates the gendered conventions of “[t]he public-private polarity [that] defines the boundaries between male and female space, and prescribes the attributes that sustain those boundaries” (Haste 3), among the most notable of which is “the correlation and association of the mind/body opposition [...], where man and mind, woman and body, become representationally aligned” (Grosz 4). Inman’s body comes to the fore precisely because it is a problem, which thus associates him with the “unruly” female body. His experience of interiority is not a privilege of masculine rationality, but rather the consequence of his physical limitations. For Inman, the body rules the mind.

The boundaries of the body are a central preoccupation of Inman’s diary. The shortcomings he perceived in his youth were followed by a life of physical illness and psychological disturbance. Inman suffered a breakdown during his time at

university that doctors were unable to correctly diagnose or cure. Inman rejected attempts to ascribe his poor health to psychological issues and relied on the assistance and friendship of an osteopath, Dr Pike, for much of his life. During this time, Inman began to experience pain when exposed to any form of light.<sup>6</sup> He would isolate himself in a completely darkened room for days at a time, and even invited his “talkers” to meet with him there. Curiously, in this darkened space, Inman began to recover: “I was afraid of the darkness no longer. Instead, I was afraid of the light. If I had to live in darkness all the rest of my life, why I had to. There could be worse fates. Could I not move again? Could I not feel vitality returning to body and mind?” (*Inman* 144). Isolated in his “dark room” (187), Inman undergoes a transformation that frees his mind of the burden that his body normally represents. His body disappears from sight and the limits that it imposes on his mind, the constraints of his physical form, seem to dissolve. In this dark, enclosed space, Inman could fantasize that he existed in a disembodied state, and his health began to improve.

The link between confession and bounded space is deeply engrained in Western culture. Borromeo’s design for the confessional box in 1576 (Cornwell 44) provides a powerful symbol for our conception of confession as the practice of exposing the interior self, while, as Jeremy Tambling observes, among the definitions of “confession” cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is that of ““a tomb in which a martyr or confessor is buried; the structure erected over it: the crypt,

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<sup>6</sup> In a post-mortem analysis of Inman’s diary, David F. Musto, M.D., suggests that many of the symptoms Inman suffered from could be attributed to the excessive consumption of bromide; however, Musto cannot identify a “specific explanation for Arthur’s persistent photophobia” (1615).

shrine, etc. in which the relics are kept” (36).<sup>7</sup> Like Inman’s dark room, the confessional box is an enclosed whole that encourages the confessant to set aside the physical, public self and attend to the mental, private self. Reflecting on the affective resonance of the confessional box, John Cornwell remarks that “[i]solation in the dark prompts a heightened sense of interiority. The confessional box thus encourages an image of the soul as essentially disembodied” (45). We might then think of Inman’s inhabitation of the dark room as a kind of confessional practice where his authentic inner self overcomes the weakness of his body. While, as we will see, practices of confession and the confessional box are developments of a much older history of the divided self, these techniques have had a tremendous influence on our cultural imagination of the inner life.

The tension between interiority and exteriority, the mind and the body, in Inman’s account reinforces the value-laden dichotomy that contrasts a positive masculinity with a negative femininity. The confessional fiction examined in this study, however, will reveal that lived experience does not uphold the consistency of this gendered hierarchy of body and mind. While, as Elizabeth Grosz observes, “[t]he mind/body relation is frequently correlated with the distinctions between reason and passion, sense and sensibility, outside and inside, self and other, depth and surface, reality and appearance, mechanism and vitalism, transcendence and immanence, temporality and spatiality, psychology and physiology, form and matter, and so on” (3), the boundaries separating these opposing terms are often porous, inconsistent, or altogether absent in everyday experience. An enclosed, private, secure sense of

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<sup>7</sup> Cornwell notes that the confessional box was formulated as a solution to the “widespread sexual abuse in the practice of confession” (43), although “cases of sexual abuse of women brought against confessors appeared to be on the increase even as the Borromeo confessional became more widely used” (45).

selfhood is both a desired state and an impediment for Inman and the narrators of the fiction in this study. Thus, confession is a practice of self-examination that has both positive and negative affordances; it has the potential to reify the isolated male self or to reveal the points where men intersect and overlap with other people.

Inman's diary demonstrates a complex circuit of the confessional impulse: not only do we find Arthur in the role of confessant to his future readers and a projected editor, but he also assumes the role of confessor to his hired talkers, extracting from them accounts of their failures and vulnerabilities. Inman, however, is far from a pious and respectful listener. He admits to engaging in sexual relationships with several of his female confessants and displays a condescending attitude towards other talkers in his summaries of their meetings. And while Inman argues that "diaries centered around external happenings" (182) are superior to those focused on self-reflection, he cannot escape the lure of self-exploration: "To myself I am a never-ending, ever-new, ever-ungessed and unguessable mine wherein all sorts of treasures are to be had for the delving as well as much dross. To know one's self is not to know the world, but it is to know and to be able to understand a great deal of it" (182-3). Here, Inman metaphorises the self as a container of a mysterious interiority. Where, in his youth, Inman perceived interior life as a constraint, he comes to discover that it is a space of potential relief and security from the pressures of external forces.

At various points in his writing, Inman presents his diary as the product of a distinctly American context. In one instance, Inman dramatically conflates his personal account with a national narrative, stating: "I want to picture myself. I want to picture America" (416). We might thus consider Inman's diary in relation to what

Sacvan Bercovitch describes “as the genre of auto-American-biography: the celebration of the representative self as America, and of the American self as the embodiment of a prophetic universal design” (136). Although Inman’s family was based in the Southern United States, which, according to Bercovitch, produced its own tradition of self-writing, Inman’s diary does exhibit a literary debt to the northern Puritan tradition through his fusion of self and nation. Yet Inman is far from a “Nehemias Americanus” (1)—a symbolic national hero—and the diary is hardly the account of a “Self Civil War” (19) where good overcomes evil. Inman’s picture of America is often one of fear and hatred. This is evident from his views on race (“There is a fundamental difference between the psychology of the black brain and the white brain. The white brain can vision and reason; the black cannot” [*Inman* 191]), on women (“One trouble with this country right now derives from the unlimited intellectual freedom of women” [273]), and on the rise of Nazism in Germany (“Following Hitler’s career has given me self-confidence. No doubt following has given eighty million Germans self-confidence. The very fact that I have been able to foresee and predict the majority of Hitler’s strategic moves has given me reassurance as to the worth of my imagination and mind. Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler!” [973]). If Inman embodies the United States in some manner, it is the intransigent core of a nation that is in the process of a profound transformation that continues into the present day. White nationalism and masculinity are, in fact, issues in urgent need of attention in the United States at present, particularly given the rise of the “alt-right” movement and its disturbing veneration of historical groups devoted to white nationalism, including the Confederacy in the United States and National

Socialism in Germany. Inman's diary is, unfortunately, all too relevant in the twenty-first century.

### **Fiction and Spatial Forms**

The preoccupations of Inman's diary—the form of the self, the fascination with confessional culture, and the status of white masculinity—define the coordinates for this study of confessional fiction from the 1950s to the present. The texts that this study examines—Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), McElroy's *Ancient History: A Paraphrase* (1971), Mathews' *The Conversions* (1962), “Roussel and Venice: Outline of a Melancholic Geography” (1985), and *The Journalist* (1994), Gass' *The Tunnel* (1995), and Dimock's *George Anderson: Notes for a Love Song in Imperial Time* (2012)—present variations on the convention of the written confession: from a prison cell manuscript, to an academic monograph gone awry, to a secular guide for spiritual practice.<sup>8</sup> Despite the contextual differences, these works share certain essential qualities: each novel upholds the conceit that the text presented to the reader is a confession written in the first-person by a male narrator. While some of these texts might be thought of as “metafictional,” which, in brief, “is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction” (Waugh 6), I argue that this designation would be inaccurate. The novels that most overtly test the illusion of verisimilitude in this study, Nabokov's *Lolita* and Gass' *The Tunnel*, never wholly break with the concept that they are authentic written confessions. I wish to emphasise this point from the outset in order to clarify that these works preserve, and probe, the interiority—both narrative and symbolic—that confessional

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<sup>8</sup> Mathew's “Roussel and Venice” was written in collaboration with French author Georges Perec.

writing exemplifies. Where a work of metafiction might comment ironically on the narrator's perceptions of his internal life and point out the artificiality of the text, as Gass does in *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (1968), the texts included in this study uphold narrative realism—albeit narrative realism explicitly concerned with textual form—and thus provide us with language to think about the experience of interiority. Each of these novels addresses the authority and vulnerability that ideas of enclosure, of embodiment, confer upon us.

Michel Foucault's remark, "I believe that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time" ("Of Other Spaces" 23), has been borne out by the number of studies produced in the twentieth and twenty-first century concerned with spatial forms. Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1957), Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974), and Peter Sloterdijk's *Spheres* trilogy (1998-2004) are but a few of the texts devoted to exploring the way humans construct, inhabit, and imagine spaces. The works in the present study support Foucault's assertion, though, as Bakhtin observes, "[i]n literature and art itself, temporal and spatial determinations are inseparable from one another, and always colored by emotions and values" ("Forms of Time" 243). Yet literature has traditionally been viewed as a temporal art, one in which narrative events and the reader's encounter with the work occur in time, in contrast to the instantaneous perception of spatial arts like painting or sculpture.<sup>9</sup> However, critics in the twentieth century sought to challenge this idea and elucidate the spatial characteristics of literature. Joseph Frank's "Spatial Form in Modern Literature"

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<sup>9</sup> In his three-part essay "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," Joseph Frank attributes the perception of literature as a primarily temporal art form to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's theory of aesthetics in his *Laocoon* (1766).

(1945), Joseph A. Kestner's *The Spatiality of the Novel* (1978), W. J. T. Mitchell's "Spatial Form in Literature" (1980), Gabriel Zoran's "Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative" (1984), Ruth Ronen's "Space in Fiction" (1986), and Susan Stanford Friedman's "Spatialization: A Strategy for Reading Narrative" (1993) all present theories of narrative spatiality, while countless other critics have introduced spatial terms and imagery as essential devices for their theoretical projects.

Mitchell, in particular, argues persuasively for the essential role of spatiality in literature. In contrast to Frank, who claims that modernist literature demonstrates uniquely spatial features, Mitchell asserts, "spatial form is a crucial aspect of the experience and interpretation of literature in all ages and cultures" (541). Mitchell rejects "the notion that spatial form is properly defined as an antithesis or alternative to temporal form" (541-2) and challenges "the tendency of literary critics to speak of spatial form as 'static,' or 'frozen,' or as involving some simultaneous, instantaneous, and wholistic impression of that which is 'really' temporal" (542). Echoing Bakhtin, Mitchell asserts that "[i]nstead of viewing space and time as antithetical modalities, we ought to treat their relationship as one of complex interaction, interdependence, and interpenetration" (544). As we will see, the complex relationship of space and time is a central concern for the reconstructive mode of confessional writing. For the purposes of this study, I will draw upon Mitchell's account of "descriptive spatiality" (553), a term that refers "to the world which is represented, imitated, or signified in a work" (551). The perception of space in this instance is contingent upon the "temporal experience of reading the text, but it is none the less spatial for being a mental construct." In tracing the spatial properties of literature, Mitchell asserts that "[w]e must suspect that the most complex and

vividly imagined spatial form in literature is finally the labyrinth of ourselves, what Cary Nelson calls the ‘theater of [the] flesh’” (562). We apprehend literature not only with our minds, but also through our bodies; at the same time, we attribute to the literary work the model of interiority and exteriority that defines our experience of embodiment. Yet critics have largely overlooked the role of space and embodiment in literature, and treated spatial metaphor as a mere rhetorical device, rather than a conceptual entity that carries an array of powerful associations linked to corporeal experience.

The use of spatial metaphors in literary criticism is a significant preoccupation for Felski in her assessment of critique. Though spatial language and imagery are ubiquitous in everyday speech, Felski suggests that critique relies on spatial metaphors that reinforce a perception of literary works as concealing or obscuring hidden meaning. While she concedes that “all criticism hinges on metaphors or, more precisely, on metaphor clusters: constellations of images, families of figures or tropes” (*Limits* 53), Felski asserts that critique tends to deploy metaphors across two “schemas of suspicious reading” (53): the first, and most widely used, conceives of interpretation as a process of “[d]igging down” (54), whereby “[t]he text is envisaged as possessing qualities of interiority, concealment, penetrability, and depth” (53). This mode of suspicious reading derives from Marxist and Freudian accounts of socio-economic structures and mental topography, respectively. Both Marx and Freud point to latent or concealed causes to explain manifest or apparent social or psychological “effects.” The method of “digging down” is an approach that Susan Sontag identified and criticised more than fifty years ago in her influential essay “Against Interpretation” (1966). Sontag, like Felski,

remarks on methods of exegesis that apprehend texts as “deep” entities. She observes that “[t]he modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs ‘behind’ the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one” (6). The task of the critic is to unearth a hidden meaning without getting his or her “hands dirty;” that is, the critic must convey a sense of objectivity to the reader in his or her treatment of the text.

Where the first model of suspicious reading conceptualises interpretation as a process of “digging down” to unveil buried or repressed meaning within a text, the second model proceeds by “[s]tanding back” (*Limits* 54). Here, “[v]ertical metaphors yield to horizontal ones; the text is described as flat, shallow, empty, depthless, one-dimensional; it is a chain of signifiers, a verbal façade, a discursive structure, a weave of words” (69). Felski aligns this model with a Nietzschean tradition of thought that persists in poststructuralist scepticism, where the critic “stands back from a text in order to denaturalize its assumptions and position them within larger structures of power. Attention shifts from the ‘what’ to the ‘how’ of meaning, to discursive conditions that allow a text to signify” (83). While these two modes of suspicious reading deploy contrasting clusters of metaphors, they share a “commitment to a common ethos: a sharply honed suspicion that goes behind the backs of its interlocutors to retrieve counterintuitive and unflattering meanings” (131). Although Felski acknowledges that there is value to techniques of suspicious reading, she disputes the assumption that this is the only valid and worthwhile way to perform interpretation. Like Sontag, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1997), and Bruno Latour (2004) before her, Felski calls on critics to envision new ways of thinking and

writing about texts, which also requires us to re-imagine how scholars affectively respond and relate to works of literature.

The shift away from the interrogation of depths and surfaces that Felski proposes requires us to re-imagine the way we perceive both literary texts and ourselves in order to elucidate how we form “attachments” (76) and how we participate in “gathering[s]” (Latour, “Critique” 246). According to Felski, “[i]t is not a matter of rejecting interpretation, however, but of extending it” (*Limits* 175). The present study shares with Felski the ambition to extend interpretation, yet relinquishing metaphors of surface and depth is not a simple undertaking—particularly as we encounter these terms so frequently in everyday speech, as well as in literary works. The attachments we form and the gatherings we participate in are often contingent upon the spaces we occupy and our willingness to share these spaces with others. Rather than overlooking the way metaphors of surface and depth constitute our perceptions of the world, this study attends to them in order to enrich our understanding of the influence these spatial forms hold on us. This will not entail a practice of suspicious excavation, but, instead, it will take up Levine’s call for “a practice that seeks out pattern over meaning, the intricacy of relations over interpretive depth” (23). Before proceeding, however, it will first be necessary to provide some historical context for the development of confessional practices and their relation to the spatial imagery of the self in the Western cultural imagination.

### **Confession and the Space of the Self**

The notion that we need to speak or write about ourselves in order to draw forth an authentic self that has been buried beneath the demands of our relationships with

others and the pressures of social or economic forces is a powerful concept in our world. However, in recent decades theorists have cast doubt on the seemingly intuitive propensity in Western culture to look inward for a genuine and meaningful sense of selfhood. The self, such critics argue, is not an immutable entity located within us, but rather the product of precisely those social and historical forces from which we attempt to distance ourselves. And, in a dramatic reversal, the desire to examine and express our authentic selves is not a yearning from within, but an injunction from without. It is through practices of confession and self-examination, critics like Foucault argue, that we inculcate ourselves to the conventions and expectations of the prevalent social hegemony. Scholars across a variety of disciplines have taken up this critique of subjectivity in an effort to destabilise the structures of power it upholds. For many critics, this involves demystifying the spatialised language of the self.

Nikolas Rose, for instance, creates a distance from the familiar image of the autonomous subject by historicising it in the past tense in his study *Inventing Our Selves* (1996). He writes that, until recently, “we were characterized by a profound inwardness: conduct, belief, value, and speech were to be interrogated and rendered explicable in terms of an understanding of an inner space that gave them form, within which they were, literally, embodied within us as corporeal beings” (4). The model of the self that Rose seeks to upend is the product of an extensive culture history that is tied to the way we experience ourselves as embodied beings. This notion of inwardness arises out of a seemingly intuitive sense of our bodies, as Lakoff and Johnson observe:

We are physical beings bounded and set off from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins, and we experience the rest of the world as outside us.

Each of us is a container, with a bounding surface and an in-out orientation. We project our in-out orientation onto other physical objects that are bounded by surfaces. Thus we also view them as containers with an inside and an outside. (*Metaphors* 29)

This static image of the body provides the essential conceptual basis upon which so many values and beliefs about the self have accumulated, though it does not reflect the complexity and nuance of lived experience. While the surface of the body establishes connections and defines limits with the world around us, “our inner body is marked by regional gaps, organs that although crucial for sustaining life, cannot be somesthetically perceived” (Leder 43). It is the dual connotations of vitality and mystery of the bodily interior that stimulates humans to ascribe such importance to notions of inwardness. Yet, over time, the notion of corporeal depths was overlaid with an incorporeal interiority—an inner life that would be made to communicate the mysteries of its vitality.

In *Troubling Confessions* (2000), Peter Brooks remarks that “[w]hat we are today—the entire conception of the self, its relation to interiority and to others—is largely tributary of the confessional requirement” (101). Brooks alludes, here, to the influence of the Christian ritual of confession, which, in its Roman Catholic form, is the confession of sin by a member of the religious community to a priest and “involves a series of actions, namely contrition, confession, satisfaction and absolution” (Hepworth and Turner 41).<sup>10</sup> In its modern form, explain Hepworth and Turner, “confession may be defined as any statement, to a person in authority, which is regarded as a full account of motives, actions and events relating to behaviour

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<sup>10</sup> Christian confession, as Hepworth and Turner observe, may also take the form of “a confession of beliefs that are publicly known [...] as in a confession of faith” (40). Such an alternative mode of confession will be discussed in the final chapter of this study in relation to Dimock’s *George Anderson*.

which is regarded as untoward” (85). They remark that the interpretation of this practice often treats it “as either a form of social repression by which those who are legitimate holders of office (‘a person in authority’) exercise social control over confessants or as a social mechanism which has the effect of reaffirming social values and which thereby contributes to the integration of social groups.” Confession has shed many of its religious and institutional implications in modern Western culture and has come to be understood quite loosely as any practice of self-examination in which a speaking subject attempts to express a truthful account of him or herself. Where, traditionally, “[t]he idea of confession carries with it associations of sin, guilt, and repentance” (Sherwin 4), it now appears to us as an opportunity for liberation through self-exploration. Despite the seemingly positive conversion that confession has undergone, from a mode of constraint to an exercise of personal freedom, critics in the latter half of the twentieth century have cast suspicion on the assimilation of confessional practices into our everyday lives.

It was, most famously, Foucault who brought critical attention to the influence of confessional practices on modern perceptions of interiority with *The History of Sexuality* (1976-1984).<sup>11</sup> In the introductory volume of this history, *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault sets out a link between confession, sexuality, and power in Western culture. Here, Foucault writes against the still-influential 1960s counter-cultural idea that openly expressing and exploring one’s sexuality is an act of rebellion. This perceived act of resistance against the constraints of Victorian morality is, instead, argues Foucault, a submission to “a discourse of truth” (67) that

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<sup>11</sup> In “The Problem of Confession” (2005), Stuart Elden observes that Foucault initially planned a much different trajectory for this project than was ultimately realised, with the projected six-volumes of the history already titled at the time of the publication of *The Will to Knowledge* (23).

enables “the procedures of individualization by power” (59). Foucault attempts to denaturalise the perception of confessional acts as transgressive by revealing how our understanding of interiority is the product of historical forces: “The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, ‘demands’ only to surface” (60). Across the three published volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault seeks to disable the interiorising spatial logic of confession.<sup>12</sup>

Stuart Elden observes in his book on Foucault and Heidegger, *Mapping the Present* (2001), that, although he “wrote only a small number of pieces that *directly* addressed the question of space, [...] [t]he norm for Foucault is to use space not merely as another area to be analysed, but as a central part of the approach itself” (3, emphasis in original). Elden goes on to remark that Foucault’s “histories were not merely spatial in the language they used, or in the metaphors of knowledge they developed, but were also histories of spaces and attendant to the spaces of history” (101-2). Yet Elden does not include the human body as a space of examination for Foucault, but rather as a subject position from which spaces are perceived and around which they are organised. The human “interior” is significant as an imaginary, not a real, space. However, the imagined interior of the human body, the space of the mind or soul, and the spaces that we build and inhabit are powerfully connected. It is this connection between imagined and actual space that the present study takes up in its examination of confessions by men.

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<sup>12</sup> The long awaited fourth volume of Foucault’s history of sexuality—which “was left largely finished but unpublished at his death” (Elden, “Problem” 24)—was finally published by Éditions Gallimard in 2018.

Central to Foucault's critique of confessional practices is the significance placed on the expression of one's sexuality. The perception of sex as a forbidden discourse is both a misapprehension and a deliberate strategy for the continual production of discourse about it: "What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*" (*Will to Knowledge* 35, emphasis in original). At the heart of this seemingly contradictory "incitement to discourse" (34) were practices of confession that, according to Foucault, impose upon the individual a particular relationship to power. He writes:

For a long time, the individual was vouched for by the reference of others and the demonstration of his ties to the commonweal (family, allegiance, protection); then he was authenticated by the discourse of truth he was able or obliged to pronounce concerning himself. The truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power. (58-9)

Here, we see the contrast between two cultural models: in the first, truth is validated through external relations, whereas, in the second, it is determined by the alignment of the individual's expression of interiority to established laws. Confession, the "ritual discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement" (61), thus becomes the primary technique for establishing the truth of, and for, the individual in Western societies.

Although Foucault identifies sexuality as the principle theme of his history, this is perhaps somewhat misleading. Sexuality is but one, albeit crucially important, discourse among others that contributes to what he describes elsewhere as a "genealogy of the modern subject" ("Subjectivity and Truth" 149). It is the history of the subject, the production of the individual within relations of power, that is Foucault's primary focus. In contrast to the modern "confessing society" (*Will to*

*Knowledge* 59), Foucault considers practices in ancient Greece and Rome that provide an alternative model of subjectivity. Foucault acknowledges that the practices of ancient Greece and those of the Christian tradition that followed are related in many ways, the latter owing much to the former, yet he posits a series of significant differences between the two models of subjectivity that distinguish an ancient *ars erotica* from the Western *scientia sexualis* (58). In the ancient Greek tradition, he writes, sexuality was part of “an ethical domain”:

The principle according to which this activity was meant to be regulated, the ‘mode of subjection,’ was not defined by a universal legislation determining permitted and forbidden acts; but rather by a *savoir-faire*, an art that prescribed the modalities of a use that depended on different variables (need, time, status). The effort the individual was urged to bring to bear on himself, the necessary ascesis, had the form of a battle to be fought, a victory to be won in establishing a dominion of the self over the self. (*Use of Pleasure* 91, emphasis in original)<sup>13</sup>

In the Christian tradition that informs modern Western culture, the *savoir-faire* enabling a practice of self-mastery has been supplanted by “recognition of the law and an obedience to pastoral authority” (92). In contrast to his account of the modern subject conditioned by confessional techniques and dependent on an external authority to decipher and evaluate the character of his or her thoughts, Foucault describes this lost model of a subject who decides the terms of his relation to himself according to an ideal of self-mastery.<sup>14</sup>

Foucault’s genealogy of the subject describes two distinct understandings of inner life: for practitioners of an *ars erotica*, the inner passions, or pleasures, are understood as natural as well as knowable and governable by the self; by

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<sup>13</sup> In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault translates ascesis, or *askēsis*, as “training” (72).

<sup>14</sup> Foucault acknowledges that this mode of subjectivity was available only to “the smallest minority of the population, made up of free, adult males” (*Use of Pleasure* 253).

comparison, for those beholden to the modern *scientia sexualis*, the inner desires—in the Christian tradition the “flesh” and, in modern parlance, sexuality—are estranged from the rational self and often beyond the will of the subject to restrain or even understand. A rift thus emerges in our perception of the self in this second account, one that separates the “flesh” from the “spirit” and opens the individual up to techniques of subjectification. Over the course of centuries, the inner life becomes the focus of increasing attention both for one’s self and for others. Foucault is not alone in this assessment. In *Sources of the Self* (1989), for instance, Charles Taylor describes “a history of the modern identity” (ix) that examines the development of “modern inwardness, the sense of ourselves as beings with inner depths, and the connected notion that we are ‘selves’” (x). While Taylor does not place as great an emphasis as Foucault on the role of confession in the process of “internalization” (120), his text helps to fill in some of the gaps left by Foucault’s incomplete project. In particular, Taylor explores the significance of Saint Augustine’s representation of the self in his *Confessions* for modern ideas of interiority.

Taylor positions Augustine as an intermediary between the Platonic and the Cartesian notions of the self. The essential development in Augustine’s thought, writes Taylor, was that “the Christian opposition between spirit and flesh was to be understood with the aid of the Platonic distinction between the bodily and the non-bodily” (127). The language of Augustine’s writing emphasises a particular spatial orientation of the self that divides the inner from the outer according to hierarchy of value. Augustine’s innovation, Taylor observes, was to align the “opposition of spirit/matter, higher/lower, eternal/temporal, immutable/changing [...] not just occasionally and peripherally, but centrally and essentially in terms of inner/outer”

(128-9). Furthermore, the distinction between inner and outer is founded on a hierarchical schema of the self: “[t]he outer is the bodily, what we have in common with the beasts, including even our senses, and the memory storage of our images of outer things. The inner is the soul” (129). In contrast to the Platonic ideal of a balanced circuit between inner and outer life, Augustine describes these aspects of the self as opposing forces. For Augustine, “the road from the lower to the higher, the crucial shift in direction, passes through our attending to ourselves as *inner*” (129, emphasis in original). In place of practices of self-mastery that align us with the order of the cosmos, Augustine proposes that “our principal route to God is not through the object domain but ‘in’ ourselves” (129). While the Christian practice of confession as we know it today was still many centuries off, Augustine introduced the concept of the inner self as a potential source of knowledge and truth that persists into the present.

The significance of the inner self follows a winding route from Plato’s account of passions to be mastered, through Augustine’s vision of God within, to “Descartes’s dualism of soul and body” (Taylor 145), which fostered the notion of a fundamentally rational self in possession of “the power to objectify body, world, and passions, that is, to assume a thoroughly instrumental stance towards them” (151). It is with this modern account of the rational subject that Taylor and Foucault diverge. While Taylor contends that the “modern theme of the dignity of the human person, which has such a considerable place in modern ethical and political thought, arises out of the internalization” (152) of the self through radical self-reflexivity, Foucault’s appraisal is considerably more sceptical. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Foucault asserts that the modern soul, “unlike the soul represented by

Christian theology, is not born in sin and subject to punishment, but is born rather out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint” (29). The subject “whom we are invited to free” through practices like confession “is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself” (30). For Foucault, “the soul is the prison of the body.” In other words, looking inwards is not a liberating exercise, but rather a practice that internalises the values of dominant social forces.

In *The Will to Knowledge*, which followed *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault turns his attention from the disciplinary measures of the penal system to the subjectifying practices of Christianity. Despite the shift in context, however, Foucault’s critique follows a similar pattern whereby the command to examine and master our inner selves encourages a submission of the body. Foucault observes that, beginning with the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, the object of confession shifted away from transgressive acts and was increasingly directed towards “all the insinuations of the flesh: thoughts, desires, voluptuous imaginings, delectations, combined movements of the body and soul” (19). It is this development, “the nearly infinite task of telling—telling oneself and another, as often as possible, everything that might concern the interplay of innumerable pleasures, sensations, and thoughts which, through the body and the soul, had some affinity with sex” (20), that Foucault pursues in his history up to the twentieth century.

Over the course of the past two centuries, Foucault writes, the religious jurisdiction over the flesh “was broken apart, scattered, and multiplied in an explosion of distinct discursivities which took form in demography, biology, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, ethics, pedagogy, and political criticism” (33). Of particular importance for Foucault’s analysis is the dissemination of confessional

practices in the techniques of psychoanalysis developed by Freud and his colleagues. With psychoanalysis, the confessional “incitement to discourse” (34) is no longer directed towards exposing the temptations of the flesh, but towards a liberation of the mind: “Around [psychoanalysis] the great requirement of confession that had taken form so long ago assumed the new meaning of an injunction to lift psychological repression. The task of truth was now linked to the challenging of taboos” (130). The psychoanalytic model of confession promotes an image of the mind as a space containing both accessible and inaccessible material. As the term “depth psychology” suggests, the mind is spatialised in a manner that places an emphasis on exposing buried content. Foucault remarks,

By integrating it into the beginnings of a scientific discourse, the nineteenth century altered the scope of the confession; it tended no longer to be concerned solely with what the subject wished to hide, but with what was hidden from himself, being incapable of coming to light except gradually and through the labor of a confession in which the questioner and questioned each had a part to play. (66)

While this model of confession opens the inner life of the subject up to greater understanding and potential relief from mental suffering, it also leaves the subject increasingly vulnerable to the effects of power. The subject sheds responsibility for his or her thoughts and actions to the psychoanalyst’s hermeneutic authority. The topographic imagery of the mind that Freud popularised, alongside the role of language as the intermediary between the conscious and the unconscious, has a profound impact not only in disciplines concerned with the management of human beings, but also in the way we conceive of ourselves as, to use Inman’s phrase, “mines” of possible meaning and knowledge. Yet to understand how Freud’s theories, which emerge in a European context, translate to the United States, we must consider the tradition of confession in American culture.

## Confessing the Self in the United States

The history of confession and the self in the United States begins with the country's Puritan origins in the seventeenth century. Breaking from the Church of England over its residual ties to Catholicism, the Puritans established colonies in what would later become New England. Here, "[l]ife centered on the Puritans' religious mission, their belief that God had intended that they find a new promised land, and the certainty that the hard work and piety of the elect would be rewarded by God in the afterlife" (Cushman 36). In *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975), Sacvan Bercovitch examines the manifestation of the Reformation "principle of *sola fides*, which removes the center of authority from ecclesiastical institutions and relocates it in the elect soul" (10, emphasis in original), in Puritan culture and asserts that this belief in individual responsibility contributes to the distinctly American notion of "[t]he 'self-made man'" (145). Although Protestantism does away with the role of confessor as intermediary between God and the individual, confessional practices do not disappear altogether. As Bercovitch explains, self-examination plays an essential role for Puritan identity: "By the rule of *sola fides* the Puritan had to come to terms with himself; by the terms of that confrontation he could not but admit his impotence; and through that shock of self-recognition he had somehow to reconstitute himself, still relying on the resources of the internal will, an *exemplum fidei*" (23, emphasis in original). These confrontations with the self frequently took the form of written accounts which demonstrate a "pervasive use of the personal mode, whether as confession (self-display as the chief of sinners), or as eulogy (fascination with famous men, from Nehemiah to Winthrop, who had presumably to overcome their humanity), or as exhortation (appeals to the will to acknowledge

impotence)” (19). Despite their decisive break with the Catholic Church, the Puritans import a confessional practice that will ultimately enable a uniquely American conception of the self to emerge.

The deeply critical mode of self-examination that the Puritans encourage would give way, however, under the influence of economic opportunity in the eighteenth century to a new entrepreneurial American self. Philip Cushman notes a shift in attitude at this point, as the Puritans “had to think less like pious believers consumed by a wish for eternal salvation and more like separate individuals bent on the accumulation of wealth and power” (38). While the pursuit of wealth would appear to contradict Puritan values, Max Weber clarifies that “[w]hat is actually morally reprehensible is, namely, the *resting* upon one’s possessions and the *enjoyment* of wealth” (104, emphasis in original), while “of all the sins, *the wasting of time* constitutes the first and, in principle, the most serious” (105, emphasis in original). The ambitions of the self-made man were thus legitimised as “a sort of mercantile *imitation Americae*, representing a union of personal and historical ideals” (Bercovitch 145, emphasis in original). Cushman posits that, as a result of its success, there emerges in nineteenth-century America,

A new and un-European concept of the human being. Simply put, the human interior was conceived of as neither dangerous, secular, nor controlled by external events, as Europeans believed; instead it was inherently good, potentially saturated in spirituality, and capable of controlling the external world: it was an *enchanted* interior, a fitting partner for the enchanted geographical ‘interior’ that spread westward to the Pacific. It follows that whereas in Europe the path to wellness was through *control* of one’s interior, in America wellness was to be found in *liberation* of one’s interior. (117-8, emphasis in original)

Here, Cushman describes a distinctly American spatial concept of the self that maps the vast space of the nation onto the self metonymically, and promotes an image of

the self as a reservoir of potential in need only of discovery. Alongside this shift in the perception of the self, new practices of confessional writing began to appear. Bercovitch points to the distinctive creation, mentioned previously in reference to Arthur Inman, of “the genre of auto-American biography: the celebration of the representative self as America, and of the American self as the embodiment of a prophetic universal design” (136). The transformation of confessional practices in the United States, from the Puritan excoriation of the self to the entrepreneurial celebration of the independent spirit, lays the foundation for a culture in which the “liberating” tenets of psychoanalysis would thrive.

This is, however, a very partial account of confessional practices in the United States. In addition to its private and spiritual uses, confession figures importantly in the legal history of the nation. In *Troubling Confessions*, Peter Brooks observes that “[c]onfession has for centuries been regarded as the ‘queen of proofs’ in the law” (9). In contrast to a criminal case comprised of circumstantial evidence or the statements of witnesses that may leave room for doubt, “confession allows those judges to pass their sentences in security, knowing that the guilty party not only deserves and accepts but perhaps in some sense wants punishment, as the penance that follows confession” (2). Yet the obvious preference for confession within the legal realm sets up the potential for coercive practices intended to streamline the enactment of justice. While legislators in the United States sought to prevent such occurrences with the institution of the *Miranda Act*, which “establishes formal threshold conditions for voluntariness in its well-known ‘warnings’” (66), Brooks suggests that there are more fundamental concerns than the risk of forced confession. According to Brooks, “[t]he problem may be that the very act of confessing will so

often be the product of a situation, a set of physical conditions, a psychological state that do not conduce to the fullest expression of human autonomy and dignity” (72) that the interrogation will create “a state of abjection that undercuts the very claim of voluntariness on which the definition of truth reposes, and, beyond that, the very notion of human agency that the law must promote in order to do its judging” (81). Drawing on Foucault’s critique of interiority, Brooks calls into question the importance that confession has accrued in the legal environment.

In *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (2002), Deborah Nelson focuses her analysis of subjectivity and the law on the battle over privacy legislation in the United States throughout the twentieth century. Contemporary ideas about privacy owe much, Nelson asserts, to “the by now ubiquitous metaphor ‘containment,’ a term that was taken from George Kennan’s 1947 foreign policy directive for coping with the threat of soviet expansion and used to describe domestic ideology and its effects on literary and mass culture” (xii). Cold war fears of communist “subversives passing as ordinary Americans” (13) were met with contrasting anxieties about the reach of the government and the individual’s right to privacy. However, the United States had already developed a fascination with confessional narratives in the twentieth century, as David Tell observes in *Confessional Crises and Cultural Politics in Twentieth-Century America* (2012). Tell cites Bernarr Macfadden’s *True Story Magazine*, established in 1919, as the harbinger of “the ‘modern confession industry’” (13).<sup>15</sup> And, as might be expected from the historical intertwining of confession and sexuality, “sexual politics were so integral to the rise of *True Story* that they defined the genre of the ‘true story’ and recast the boundaries of the

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<sup>15</sup> This is, coincidentally, the same year that Arthur Inman began his diary.

‘confession’—genres that Macfadden used interchangeably—turning both of them into rhetorical genres inherently dedicated to the preservation of a conservative sexual politics” (23). The success of *True Story* gave rise to a multitude of publications in the United States appealing to the same appetite for confessional narratives. Thus, Americans were already primed for the narratives that would emerge in the cold war era.

Yet, as Nelson observes, cold war rhetoric had a transformative effect on the voyeuristic fascination with confessional writing in the United States. Where, previously, readers looked to such writing out of mere curiosity, the culture of the cold war re-inscribed confession with notions of suspicion, concealment, and fear typically associated with its religious function. Significantly, Nelson remarks, these cultural anxieties promoted a heightened awareness of spatial forms:

The cold war seems to have coincided with—and exaggerated—a widely experienced topological crisis in which bounded spaces of all kinds seemed to exhibit a frightening permeability. All sorts of entities were imagined as bounded spaces: nations, bodies, homes, and minds. The power of homology created a structural link between these quite dissimilar entities, mapping boundary dangers across different domains. (26)

Despite the fluidity with which this topological crisis is homologically mapped onto various enclosed forms, Nelson detects that, still, a gendered binary is evident in cold war spatial metaphors. She remarks “[w]omen and especially mothers in cold war culture often functioned as metaphors of a highly unstable border between public and private, a possibly treacherous incapacity to defend the boundaries of home and nation,” while, “[t]he male body, in contrast, figured contained, private, well-

regulated and bounded space” (114).<sup>16</sup> Women and women’s bodies thus serve as the depository for social anxieties about national security. It is, perhaps, as a reaction to this culture of suspicion and the re-entrenching of a hierarchical gender binary that a new mode of confessional writing appears that foregrounds the “exploration of shifting gender scripts” (Gregory 35).

Nelson reads the work of the confessional poets, the label affixed to several writers active in the late-1950s and 1960s, in relation to this “topological crisis” and the evolving legal discourse on privacy. The subject matter and style of poets like Robert Lowell, Ann Sexton, and Sylvia Plath present a challenge to the literary establishment by rupturing a clearly defined barrier between private author and public text. This approach “makes a claim to *forego personae* and to represent an account of the poet’s own feelings and circumstances,” while “[t]he work dwells on experiences generally prohibited expression by social convention: mental illness, intra-familial conflicts and resentments, childhood traumas, sexual transgressions and intimate feelings about one’s body are its frequent concerns” (Gregory 34). The writing of the confessional poets was seen as a challenge to repressive social attitudes, particularly with regards to women’s rights and freedoms, as well as “a deep investment in the private self as the source of freedom, individuality, and authenticity” (Nelson 27). There is something of a paradox in this notion: the confessional writers expose their personal lives to the public gaze, while, at the same time, asserting the right to privacy against the intrusion of legislative forces into intimate matters. Nelson argues that this tactic of self-exposure “offered possibilities

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<sup>16</sup> Klaus Theweleit identifies a similar deployment of gendered metaphors in his study of the journals of German Freikorps members, *Male Fantasies* (1977-78), which suggests that women’s bodies become symbolic sites of anxiety during periods of social instability.

for the private individual in a society that increasingly invaded its citizens: a confession that through its own multiplication offered the privacy not available in silence” (117). Confession, in this context, is a radical act of resistance, and not a submission to the reigning logic of suspicion and containment.

Confessional writing came to assume particular importance for women and people of colour in the United States, whose voices and experiences had for so long been excluded from public discourse. In sharing their experiences of self-examination, confessional writers contribute to the understanding of diverse identities and illuminate the social, cultural, and political circumstances in which these selves have been formed. Such texts have the potential to encourage the development of communities and foster activism against oppression. Nelson reflects that, “perhaps nowhere more than in the United States, with its faith in privacy as the location of free deliberation, has confession constituted such an important mode of political engagement and cultural expression” (27). Given the symbolic association of femininity with the private, the domestic, and the bodily, the act of writing about these themes for a public audience helped to clarify the political implications of the everyday experiences of women. Elizabeth Gregory observes that “[c]onfessional poetry crosses the line from literal into literary: moving biographical material formerly associated with non-literary prose into the poetic realm and claiming for it a new ‘feminine’ authority of the ‘real’” (37). Furthermore, suggests Gregory, men writing in the confessional style challenge the boundaries of masculinity by addressing themes and expressing themselves in ways that are often associated with femininity. Despite the lengthy history of confessional writing by men, from Augustine through Rousseau, in the twentieth century this literary genre came to be

aligned with women's writing. As we will see, the male narrators of the fiction examined in this thesis frequently describe their discomfort with, and even scorn for, the confessional mode in which, nevertheless, they write. It is perhaps, in part, due to its feminine connotations that confessional writing in the twentieth century becomes the object of much scepticism.

Despite the powerful social and political implications of confessional writing, it would not be long before critics associated "the confessional mode" with "the new narcissism that runs all through American culture" (Lasch 48). The once unlimited potential of the self to which confession offered access begins to appear susceptible to solipsism and self-deception. Reflecting on this dilemma, Felski remarks:

The question which arises is whether this confessional writing is an indispensable aspect of a process of critical self understanding which constitutes part of feminism's emancipatory project, or whether, as Richard Sennett suggests, the current fascination with intimacy and self-discovery engenders an ever more frantic pursuit for a kernel of authentic self which continually eludes one's grasp. (*Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 88-9)

Felski does not arrive at a clear answer to this question. Confession becomes an increasingly difficult form of writing to evaluate, as the tone of repentance may conceal, on the one hand, the author's narcissistic pleasure or, on the other hand, the author's subjection to coercive techniques.

Björn Krondorfer acknowledges this double bind in *Male Confessions* (2010), where he takes a cautious approach to the study of non-fiction confessional writing by men. Krondorfer opens with an optimistic view of confessional writing, noting "[a] confessional text offers a window into male interiority, into a man's way of perceiving himself within the constraints and possibilities of his environment" (7). In this passage, he draws on spatial metaphors that reflect the therapeutic "depth" model of Freudian psychoanalysis, according to which confessional writing enables a

greater understanding of the fears and desires that underlie one's behaviour. He warns, however, that male readers must be cognisant of gender bias lest they find themselves "seduced to easily by male-authored confessions" (18). Krondorfer proceeds to list a variety of scenarios where a male reader may fail to recognise

That what a text presents as a grave wounding of the male self might, in some instances, be understood as a veiled self-pitying rather than the result of trauma. Or what might seem, at first glance, a courageous act of self-revelation may turn out on closer inspection to be a rhetorical move of self-aggrandizement. Or confessing men may claim to be rebellious risk takers but play it safe after all. They may claim to abdicate narrative control but, less visibly, stay in command of interpretive patterns. (18-9)

The concerns that Krondorfer raises are important for the present study. The solution that he proposes, however, invokes the sceptical, dispassionate reader that Felski calls on us to reform in *The Limits of Critique*. Krondorfer asserts, "[a] critical distance—a hermeneutics of suspicion—is what we, as male readers, have to bring to male confessionalographies" (19).<sup>17</sup> Given the persistence of gender and racial inequality, this is a justifiably cautious approach by a male academic to a collection of texts written by men. Yet, we might be inclined to ask, why do we perceive intimacy and detachment as fixed positions? Would moving from one to the other within the course of a single study undermine critical authority? Do we not also look with affection from a distance? Can we not imagine a critical intimacy that takes into account our proximity to a subject but acknowledges that this intimacy is precisely that which enables our understanding? Are suspicion and trust the only terms by which we read a text? If we are to renew our interpretive methods, we need to

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<sup>17</sup> Krondorfer's portmanteau, "confessionalographies," applies to confessional texts that "do not seek the sheltered privacy of the *transpersonal other* (as in the confessional) but address themselves to the *public other* of the imagined reader" (14, emphasis in original).

expand our critical vocabulary beyond the binaries of surface and depth to appreciate the complex connections and attachments that we make and un-make each day.

As such, this study does not set as its objective the task of verifying the truth quotient of the confessional writing it examines; instead, it focuses on the way the male narrators of these texts use forms, both spatial and temporal, to describe themselves and the world as they experience it—not only how they conceal or reveal themselves, but also how they create attachments and negotiate boundaries. In contrast to Felski, I do not believe that we can simply ignore the conceptual metaphors of surface and depth in the pursuit of alternative forms; the language of surface and depth is essential to the way we understand our selves and the world around us. Yet, as Levine illustrates, the imagery of surface and depth, which evoke both the enclosed whole and the hierarchy, are not the only forms present in any given work of literature. Levine explains that countless aesthetic and socio-political forms interconnect or collide in their respective efforts to organise human experience. And, she suggests, “[t]he form that best captures the experience of colliding forms is narrative” (19). “Narratives,” Levine elaborates, “are valuable heuristic forms, then, because they can set in motion multiple social forms and track them as they cooperate, come into conflict, and overlap, without positing an ultimate cause.” The aesthetic forms of narrative, patterns of language, and textual design also influence the social forms depicted within a book in a similar manner. And since the narrator’s of the texts examined in this study are engaged in exercises of confessional writing, they are, in effect, composing themselves, which draws even greater attention to the confluence of social and aesthetic forms. Surface and depth will, thus, occupy an essential place in this study, as these spatial forms are so intensely

connected with ideas about subjectivity. However, these will not be the only forms examined in this analysis, nor will a suspicious interpretation of surface and depth define the interpretive methodology utilised herein. Instead, this study will examine the way forms collide in confessional fiction by men in order to understand the organising principles that give shape to modern masculinity. We will not need to “dig down” or “stand back” in order to recognise these qualities—forms are everywhere in our language.

This study will, then, examine a selection of confessional novels written by men since World War II in order to explore the significance of this narrative mode for the way men conceptualise masculinity as a form colliding and interacting with a multitude of other social and aesthetic forms. Certain forms that contribute to masculine identity, or resist its organising pressures, will appear again and again across the chapters of this study, including, most notably, the binary opposition of surface and depth. This binary imagery organises beliefs about body and mind, form and content, and femininity and masculinity into a hierarchy of value. While the opposition of surface and depth, along with confession and masculinity, remains a consistent object of analysis throughout the study, each text presents these core elements in relation to a distinct historical and intellectual context. The narrators of these texts address a diverse range of issues: the popularisation of psychoanalysis in *Lolita*; the influence of structuralism and scientific field theory on social anthropology in *Ancient History*; the codification of daily life in *The Journalist*; Holocaust historiography in *The Tunnel*; and the ethics of the American government's policy on torture in *George Anderson*. The variety of themes and contexts that these novels address is considerable, but it is precisely this feature that enables this study

to illuminate the complex arrangements of aesthetic and social forms that give shape to men's lives and inform the way they shape themselves in their confessional narratives.

The first chapter examines Humbert Humbert's troubling account of his obsession with an adolescent girl, Dolores Haze, in Nabokov's *Lolita*. Despite its secure status as a canonical novel of the twentieth century, *Lolita* remains a divisive text among literary critics and an object of deep suspicion. The novel, first published in France in 1955, is the subject of a vast amount of analysis, yet the issue that remains in dispute is fundamental: how should we read this book? One would certainly expect Humbert's confessional account of his paedophilic infatuation to demonstrate an exceptional degree of artistry in order to avoid the label "pornography" and find the wide and largely adulatory readership that it has. Yet it is precisely the artistry of *Lolita* that has troubled critics, its artifice so expertly deployed as to render the moral equilibrium of the novel undecidable. The form and content of the novel, its textual surface and ethical depths, seem fundamentally opposed, which, as Jen Shelton observes, has produced a rift among critics into aesthetic and ethical camps. Drawing on Levine's theory of forms, this chapter will argue that the bifurcation of surface and depth in *Lolita* is evident not only between the aesthetic and moral features of the novel, but also in the terms of Humbert's confessional account itself. Humbert displays an exceptional mastery of forms; he understands not only how to deploy aesthetic and social forms to his advantage, but also how to transgress their boundaries as it suits him. By focusing on the question of whether it is the novel's surface or its depth that reveals the "true" meaning, critics overlook the significance of forms and boundaries in Humbert's narrative. This

chapter, thus, does not seek to define the moral or immoral status of the novel once and for all, but, instead, focuses on the representation of forms, boundaries, and transgression in *Lolita*.

The second chapter looks at Joseph McElroy's *Ancient History: A Paraphrase*, a novel that shares several qualities with *Lolita*: it is a confessional narrative written by an isolated man who displays a preoccupation with space and its semantic possibilities. Unlike Humbert, the narrator of *Ancient History*, Cy, does not appear to have had a direct hand in the death that has led to his confession. Yet Cy's account grapples with a sense of guilt and responsibility for the suicide of Dom, a writer and controversial public figure, whom critics suggest is modelled on Norman Mailer. Despite having met Dom only recently, Cy has been observing his activities from a distance for years and has adapted theories proposed by Dom into his own conception of social organisation. Cy's preoccupation with Dom and his persistent anxiety about the dynamics of his life-long friendships with two men point to a theme that critics have largely overlooked in their commentary on *Ancient History*, as well as McElroy's writing more generally: masculinity. This chapter explores the confluence of confessional writing, masculinity, and scientific models of social connection in Cy's narrative endeavour to come to terms with the loss of a man he greatly admired and the part he may have played in his death.

The next chapter considers the place of confession in three works by Harry Mathews, who is perhaps best known for his involvement in the Oulipo, a French experimental literary group devoted to practices of writing according to formal constraints. This chapter begins by looking at Mathews' first novel, *The Conversions*, a work published well before his involvement in the Oulipo, but one

that demonstrates Mathews' early interest in formally experimental writing. What is most notable about *The Conversions*, aside from its strange, Raymond Roussel-inspired tableaux, is the virtual silence of the narrator on personal matters. The few intimate details that do appear in the text are deliberately placed to provoke the reader's interest in the narrator, who, in a novel replete with puzzles, remains its greatest enigma. From this obscure beginning, it is possible to trace throughout the course of Mathews' career the emergence of the male narrator in his writing. Where the inner life of the subject is unavailable to the reader in *The Conversions*, it is made the object of speculation in the fictional literary essay "Roussel and Venice," and comes to occupy the unstable "centre" of *The Journalist*. Across these works, Mathews employs spatial language and imagery that reflect the uncertain status of the narrator's inner life. It is notable, however, that in these works Mathews does not adhere to a strict Oulipian proceduralism. Instead, the formal constraint progresses from a structuring principle embedded in *The Conversions* to become a thematic concern in *The Journalist*, where the logic of the constraint is cast in doubt by the narrator's struggle to give order to his life. The tension between the male subject's inner life and his perception of events in the world around him is a persistent concern in Mathews' writing—one that has significant implications for the status of masculinity and the writing of the self.

William H. Gass' sprawling *The Tunnel* is the focus of the fourth chapter. Gass' novel takes up the critical trope of "digging down" as its governing metaphor. Gass is perhaps the closest literary descendent of Nabokov among the authors discussed in this study, which is evident in his propensity for linguistic flourishes, metafictional allusions, and depictions of troubling male characters. Whereas in the

novella *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife*, Gass addresses the artifice of literary representation, with *The Tunnel* he does not wholly break with the conventions of fiction, though he pushes the novel to the limits of formal experimentation. *The Tunnel* takes the form of a confessional diary written by a historian of the Holocaust named William Kohler who, unable to complete the introduction to his major work entitled *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*, has embarked on an auto-exegetic project that is both a literal and metaphorical excavation. Kohler bares an uncanny resemblance to Arthur Inman, though Gass began publishing excerpts from the novel decades before the publication of Inman's diary.<sup>18</sup> Having isolated himself in the basement of his home in the Midwestern United States, Kohler finds himself at an impasse with his work, which he characterises in notably gendered terms: "Duty drove me the way it drives men into marriage. Begetting is expected of us [...]; it was expected even of flabby maleless men like me" (4). Kohler contrasts this outward-looking, historical project with a private work of self-reflection, though he does not regard the latter as a properly masculine activity. Despite his deprecatory attitude towards diaries, Kohler's scholarly introduction transforms into a project of self-examination that takes the metaphor of "digging up dirt" quite literally, as he attempts to tunnel his way out of the family home. The binaries of public and private, exterior and interior are rampant in Kohler's diary, yet his expurgation of concealed, intimate material points to the transgression of these historically gendered boundaries. While Kohler's transgression leads to the unearthing of repressed material, the process does not lead to cathartic resolution of his hostility and fears—his dig has no end in sight. This chapter will argue that *The Tunnel's* primary

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<sup>18</sup> Gass has made no reference to the Inman diaries in his work, nor have critics remarked upon the parallels between the two works.

concern, as shown in its repetition of spatial metaphors, is the dialectic of masculinity and femininity that, Kohler demonstrates, underlies the structures of individual identity as well as the writing of history.

The final chapter of this thesis looks at the convergence of literary form and ethical responsibility in Peter Dimock's *George Anderson: Notes for a Love Song in Imperial Time*. The two novels Dimock has published thus far centre on a common dilemma: the problem of discovering "a reliable method of direct address" (*Short* 5) that can encompass narratives both private and public. In each of his books, Dimock adapts pre-existing literary forms for his own "methods": in *A Short Rhetoric for Leaving the Family* (1998), he uses the frame of a "study in rhetoric" to organise his ideas, while in *George Anderson* Dimock draws on the form of St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. Much like the other texts discussed in this study, Dimock's novels investigate questions of aesthetic surface and socio-political depth. *George Anderson*, however, focuses on recent historical events, specifically the war in Iraq initiated by the United States in 2003. The novel is constructed as a letter written to a lawyer in the George W. Bush administration by a man named Theo Fales, who questions the decision this lawyer made to excuse the administration of any legal responsibility for practices of torture used in interrogation. Fales, who has recently undergone a profound spiritual conversion, invites the lawyer to meet with him once he has completed a practice of self-examination that Fales has devised. This practice is designed to reconnect language with meaning and truth—an idea that, for Fales, is bound up with a sense of embodiment and intimacy—in a nation that has abandoned its moral foundations. The account that Fales gives of his practice is attuned to the modern world of rapid technological progress, but, at the same time,

it draws on the Puritan tradition of auto-American-biography. In looking back to the origins of American identity, Fales seeks to recuperate the nation's ethical ideals while addressing its profound history of racism and misogyny.

Concluding this study with the examination of *George Anderson*—a text that captures something of the spirit of optimism and accountability inspired by the election of Barack Obama, the first African American President of the United States—is not meant to suggest that American masculinity has progressed in the period following World War II from a state of ignorance to one of enlightenment. The election of Donald Trump in 2017 and the manipulative rhetoric of disenfranchised white masculinity that contributed to his political success make it all too clear that such a narrative of progress is false. Certainly, significant advances have been made towards greater equality at institutional and social levels, with texts like *George Anderson* engaging in the vital work of exploring the shape a positive model of hegemonic masculinity might take. Yet the issues surrounding masculine identity in the United States that have led to such disorder in recent years are not new. This will become evident as we turn now to look at Humbert Humbert's eloquent yet profoundly troubling confessional narrative and the ongoing debate surrounding the interpretation of Nabokov's *Lolita*.

## Chapter 1: Crossing the Boundaries of Confession

### *The Surface and Depth of Masculine Identity in Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita*

First published by the Olympia Press in France in 1955, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* is ostensibly a parody of Freudian psychoanalytic tropes and the popularisation of confessional culture in the United States at the mid-century (Durantaye, *Style is Matter* 3).<sup>19</sup> *Lolita* takes the form of a prison cell confession composed by Humbert Humbert, a European expatriate in the United States, who describes his paedophilic infatuation with, and violation of, an adolescent girl, Dolores Haze, upon whom he bestows the name Lolita. The novel juxtaposes this disconcerting subject matter with the aesthetic attractions of Humbert's ornate diction and guileful narrative voice. The contrast between the content and form of *Lolita* has led to much debate over how the novel should be read and what, fundamentally, is the relationship between content and form in a work of fiction. Jen Shelton summarizes the dilemma readers face as a dichotomous "choice between a moral reading that acknowledges the seriousness of what Humbert does to Dolly but denies all pleasure, and an aesthetic reading that, scrutinizing only the text's gratifications" (274), excuses the depiction of paedophilia and abuse. The opposition between content and form in *Lolita* is often interpreted as a spatial incongruity between the novel's aesthetic surface and its (im)moral depths. This is evident in Vladimir Alexandrov's observation that "what is perhaps most striking about *Lolita* is the sudden increase in the distance between its surface features and its deeper concerns" (160). In examining *Lolita*, however, we will find that this spatial

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<sup>19</sup> Leland de la Durantaye notes that *Lolita* was subsequently published in the United States in 1958 and in England in 1959.

incongruity applies not only to the opposition between the novel's content and form, but also to Humbert's account of embodiment and his interpretation of the world around him. Spatial binaries of surface and depth, of exterior and interior, are essential motifs in Humbert's narrative. This chapter argues that Humbert's deployment of aesthetic and social forms illuminates the significant role that notions of surface and depth play in our everyday experience and how this binary privileges, as well as constrains, masculine identity.

A study of confession, masculinity, and form in *Lolita* would be deeply flawed were it to proceed much further without addressing Nabokov's well-known views on Freud, psychoanalysis, and the culture of confession that he encountered in the United States, where he and his family settled in 1940.<sup>20</sup> Nabokov never hesitated in voicing his contempt for Freud's theories; in a 1964 interview for *Playboy* magazine, for instance, he remarks, "Freudism and all it has tainted with its grotesque implications and methods appears to me to be one of the vilest deceptions practiced by people on themselves and on others. I reject it utterly, along with a few other medieval items still adored by the ignorant, the conventional, or the very sick" (*Strong Opinions* 20). By the time Nabokov arrived in the United States, Freud's ideas had already been in circulation in the country for decades. Frederick J. Hoffman's *Freudianism and the Literary Mind*, first published in 1945, provides a contemporary account of the transmission and popularisation of Freud's theories and practices in the United States over the first half of the twentieth century and offers insight into the confessional culture that Nabokov encountered upon his arrival.

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<sup>20</sup> In *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, Brian Boyd describes the arrival of Nabokov, his wife, and young son to the United States by ship "[o]n May 28, 1940" (11) after more twenty years spent in exile from his Russian homeland.

Although Freud only visited the United States once, in 1909 to visit Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts (Hoffman 47), psychoanalysis enlisted many followers in the country and attained significant public attention in the decade after the First World War. Psychoanalysis, writes Hoffman, met “the desire for greater freedom among the postwar generation,” particularly in regards to sexual conventions, although “[t]he reception of Freud had been adulterated by misinterpretation and superficial enthusiasm” (65, 67). Regardless of the accuracy with which it was understood, the imagery and attention to the self that psychoanalysis promoted appealed to a young generation seeking to define itself against the conventions of the past.

Despite the initial rebellious appeal of Freud’s theories, psychoanalysis continued to attract attention in the United States and in the 1930s it “was given a more serious evaluation than it had received in the twenties” (85). At the same time, psychoanalysis made inroads as both a topic and a technique in art and literature. Hoffman observes that while some writers “used Freud, and psychoanalysis generally, as an excuse for exploiting the interest in sex” (74), others demonstrated a more nuanced engagement with the tradition, including many writers of fiction who explored the representation of consciousness and the mind in their work. Given the influence of Freud on literature of the time, Hoffman suggests that Freud’s analysis of the mind might easily be transferred to literary studies in order to produce “what amounts to a psychological analysis of the basic constituents of a literature” (319). His assessment of the transferability of a psychoanalytic hermeneutics to literary interpretation was, as we now know, correct.

Nabokov's hostility towards psychoanalysis is founded, then, not only in his contention that it poses a threat to our capacity for self-determination, but also in its potential to usurp the author's jurisdiction over the meaning of his or her work. In "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," he writes, "everybody should know that I detest symbols and allegories (which is due partly to my old feud with Freudian voodooism and partly to my loathing of generalizations devised by literary mythists and sociologists)" (314).<sup>21</sup> Nabokov's rejection of symbolic interpretation and his denial of biographical links between author and text aligns in many ways with the values of the New Criticism, which was the leading tradition of interpretation in the West for much of the early twentieth century. Summarizing the tenets of a New Critical interpretation, Vincent B. Leitch remarks,

When a New Critic came to examine and to evaluate a text, he assumed at the outset that it was a spatial complex of intricately interrelated words. The poem as a well-wrought urn or efficient machine had from the start been constructed as an impersonal and ahistorical artifice. [...] that the poem existed (as an autonomous object) was more important than the fact that it signified something: being preceded meaning. (26)

Nabokov, similarly, emphasises the being of a text over its meaning; he remarks, for instance that "a whole paragraph or sinuous sentence exists as a discrete organism, with its own imagery, its own invocations, its own bloom" that may be damaged should a reader "inject spurious symbols into it" (*Strong Opinions* 265). Yet Nabokov diverges somewhat from the New Critical attitude in regards to the autonomy of the text. The New Critics W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley write, in "The Intentional Fallacy," that "[t]he poem is not the critic's own and not the

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<sup>21</sup> Appel notes in the *Annotated Lolita*, "this Afterword was written to accompany the generous excerpts from *Lolita* which appeared in the 1957 edition of *The Anchor Review*, the novel's American debut [...]. It was appended to the Putnam's edition in 1958, and has been included in most of the 25 or so translations" (311/1, 453).

author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public" (5). Nabokov does not hold such faith in the capacity of the public to grasp the meaning of his works, especially a public infatuated with Freudian psychoanalysis. As such, Nabokov attributes a certain inaccessible quality to his books. He states: "[m]y inventions, my circles, my special islands are infinitely safe from exasperated readers" (*Strong Opinions* 210). The language of this passage suggests a special intimacy between author and text, but the spatial metaphors of "circles" and "islands" also indicates that Nabokov conceives of his works as in possession of an independent interiority that no amount of "digging down" will expose. Despite the conviction with which Nabokov speaks of the security of his texts, his vocal antipathy for psychoanalysis never abated during his life.

Nabokov's sceptical assessment of psychoanalysis singles out the practice of a hermeneutics of suspicion as a threat to both creative and personal freedom. In an interview with a French newspaper, Nabokov remarked that "psychoanalysis has something very Bolshevik about it—an inner policing ... symbols killing the individual dream, the thing itself" (qtd. in Durantaye, "Vladimir Nabokov" 61). For Nabokov, the imposition of a system of meaning upon the private life of the mind evokes the repressive extremes of communist ideology in the Russian homeland that he was forced to leave.<sup>22</sup> While their mistrust of psychoanalysis has different origins, Nabokov and Foucault share a common view of Freud's theories and the claims to liberation of the individual from unconscious forces. And though sex and sexuality

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<sup>22</sup> In *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, Brian Boyd describes how, as a young man, Nabokov and his family were compelled to leave Russian for England as the result of "Communist incursion[s]" (137) during the Russian Civil War.

feature prominently in *Lolita*, Nabokov is dismissive of attempts to reduce the novel to this subject. When asked about the representation of American sexuality, Nabokov replied: “[s]ex as an institution, sex as a general notion, sex as a problem, sex as a platitude – all this is something I find too tedious for words. Let us skip sex” (*Strong Opinions* 19). Nabokov shares with Foucault a critical view of the “truth” that an obsession with sex has to offer us. Indeed, one can imagine either author writing that sexuality “has lifted up from deep within us a sort of mirage in which we think we see ourselves reflected—the dark shimmer of sex” (*Will to Knowledge* 157).

However, the two diverge in their assessments of the “inner” life. Foucault, as we have seen, views the modern formation of interiority as the result, in large part, of the proliferation of confessional practices that represent “procedures of individualization by power” (59). The alternative that Foucault appears to support lie in the ancient Greco-Roman notion of an ““arts of existence,”” which describes “intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being” (*Use of Pleasure* 10). Nabokov also acknowledges the danger of an “outer network becoming an inner skeleton” (“The Art of Literature” 374), but, unlike Foucault, he upholds interiority as the privileged sphere of truth. In his description of the “irrational and divine standards” that may be found in “one’s private universe” (373), Nabokov gestures towards a quasi-spiritual concept of inner truth. While he does not define specific tenets of this spiritual state, what emerges in Nabokov’s critique of “commonsense” (372) is the authority of the inner, private sphere over the outer, public realm. It is for this reason that Freud’s attempt to define the general principles of the psyche represents such a threat to Nabokov’s ideal of the

freedom of the individual mind. With *Lolita*, Nabokov attempts what might be described as a counter-offensive by engaging directly with the form and subject matter of psychoanalysis: confession and abnormal sexuality.

*Lolita* takes the form of a confessional text composed by Humbert, a French-born Swiss citizen who comes to live in the United States to fulfil the requirements of a wealthy uncle's will. Leaving behind him a failed marriage, Humbert finds himself once again susceptible to the paedophilic desires that he attributes to an unconsummated sexual encounter during adolescence. After working for his deceased uncle's perfume agency and participating in a scientific expedition to the arctic, Humbert seeks out "some place in the New England countryside or sleepy small town" (35) where he can complete a scholarly project of literary translation. It is during his search for accommodations that he meets Charlotte Haze and her daughter Dolores, in whom he finds a recreation of Annabel, the object of his adolescent desire. Thus begins Humbert's infatuation with Dolores, rechristened Lolita, and his journey from paedophilic fulfilment to his imprisonment for the murder of his paedophilic rival, Clare Quilty.

Humbert, we learn, had requested that his confession not be made public before both he and Lolita, who had long since escaped Humbert's control, had died. As it turns out, this would not take long. The editor of Humbert's confession, "John Ray, Jr., Ph.D" (6), informs us in his foreword that Humbert died before he was to stand trial and Lolita died little more than a month later during childbirth. Ray, who is presumably a psychiatrist or psychologist, assures his readers that he has contributed only a brief foreword and minor editing to the text, which Humbert had given the title "Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male" (3). Ray's

foreword positions the novel in the tradition of the case study, which balances the raw material of the confession with the authoritative interpretation of the scholar, who defines the parameters of meaning in the text and cautions against potential misunderstandings. *Lolita* appears, at first, to satisfy the reader's expectations. Ray's foreword sets out the facts of the case, the current circumstances of its subjects, and refers to specific events and dates that, Ray advises, we may confirm by looking up corresponding newspaper reports. This rhetorical technique serves to reinforce the novel's claim to verisimilitude. Ray anticipates objections to Humbert's account and assures us that the text is valuable not only for its "scientific significance and literary worth," but also for "the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader" (5). Ray provides readers with the reassuring guidance of a paternal intermediary that recalls the authoritative tone of Freud's studies.

Much like Ray's foreword, Humbert's confession appears, at first, to satisfy the expectations of the "serious reader" in his frequent appeals to the sympathy of his audience, the "[l]adies and gentlemen of the jury" (9) as he often refers to us. Yet it is precisely his familiarity with the conventions of confessional writing that may lead readers to question the sincerity of Humbert's account and to suspect that *Lolita* parodies the confession, while it masks a much different narrative design. The register of Humbert's voice in the text shifts fluidly between a playfully mocking tone and moments of apparently sincere repentance to the extent that the reader cannot be certain at all times which meaning he intends for the reader to take away. *Lolita*'s manipulation of the confessional genre and its narrative instability, along with its beguilingly figurative language and its frequently inscrutable author, account for much of the division among readers and critics. What I wish to highlight in

examining this division is the preoccupation that critics demonstrate with regards to the novel's spatiality and the proximity or distance appropriate for the reader to correctly grasp Nabokov's designs.

Alfred Appel Jr., who "was Nabokov's student at Cornell in 1953-54" ("Introduction" xxxiv), argues for a parodic "surface" reading of *Lolita*. Appel contends that, despite Nabokov's use of symbolically suggestive language, the novel rebukes attempts to recover a concealed meaning. He asserts that "Nabokov has laid into the parodic design of *Lolita* an elaborate system of involutions which, like the network of coincidences, helps to close the circuits by demonstrating that everything is being manipulated, all is a fiction, thus parodying the reader's desire for verisimilitude" ("Springboard" 216). Appel's argument aligns with Jameson's description of "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (*Postmodernism* 9), in postmodern fiction. According to Appel, the reader must preserve a distance from the narrative and resist the impulse to respond to the cues of the confessional form, as these are simply reminders of the novel's artificiality. Appel writes that, "[i]n parodying the reader's complete, self-indulgent identification with a character, which in its mindlessness limits consciousness, Nabokov is able to create the detachment necessary for a multiform, spatial view" ("Introduction" xxxii). According to Appel, Humbert's efforts to draw readers into his account, to have us see the world from his perspective, are deceptive. It is only through "[t]he ultimate detachment of an 'outside' view" (xxxiii) that readers may appreciate the artificiality of Nabokov's creation and to understand the coercive effects of narrative conventions. From this perspective we may discover "the 'real plot' which is visible in the 'gaps' and 'holes'

in the narrative” (xxvi). What confronts readers in these gaps, Appel claims, is our susceptibility to illusion and our capacity for the same solipsistic and cruel behaviour that Humbert displays in his treatment of Lolita. Humbert’s deceptive narrative, while, presumably, far crueler than those his readers might tell, reminds us of our own capacity for self-deception.

Here, Appel provides a clear example of Felski’s “surface-oriented critic” for whom “[i]nsight [...] is achieved by distancing rather than by digging, by the corrosive force of ironic detachment rather than intensive interpretation” (*Limits* 70, 54). Appel’s interpretation of *Lolita* as parody refutes attempts to read the events of the novel mimetically. The sense of a hidden depth that Humbert obscures with the artistry of his narrative is a ruse for Appel. There is no covert and final meaning to discover other than the instability of all narratives. This recalls, of course, Foucault’s critique of interiority in *The Will to Knowledge*, in which he identifies literature as a participant in the dissemination of confessional practices. Foucault observes:

A metamorphosis in literature: we have passed from a pleasure to be recounted and heard, centering on the heroic or marvellous narration of ‘trials’ of bravery or sainthood, to a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of confession holds out like a shimmering mirage. (59)

Here, Foucault critiques the psychological fixation of modern fiction, which encourages readers to learn the techniques of suspicious reading. Nabokov’s values, however, do not wholly conform to Foucault’s criticism. Nabokov certainly does not share in Foucault’s nostalgia for tales of heroism, nor is he opposed to narratives that explore the behaviour of the mind (he remarks, for instance, that “[a]ll novelists of any worth are psychological novelists” [*Strong Opinions* 147]). Nabokov’s objection to the rise of confessional writing is, as we have seen, directed specifically at

literature that promotes, in whatever manner, psychoanalytic principles, as well as the lack of originality that such works typically display.<sup>23</sup>

Appel is hardly the only critic to validate a surface-orientated position in regards to Nabokov's novels. In *The Magician's Doubts* (1994), Michael Wood remarks that, although Nabokov employs some mimetic elements in the novel, "[t]he larger effect of the games in *Lolita* is to make the text, or anything resembling a text, into a metaphor, an image for what is readable and misreadable in the world" (104). Wood suggests that the particulars of the events that take place in *Lolita* are not as important as what becomes apparent when we step back and see the novel within the context of all other narratives. Appel upholds a similar view, asserting that all of the aesthetic qualities of Nabokov's fiction—the playful use of language, the allusions, the patterns—impose "no burden of meaning whatsoever other than the fact that someone beyond the word is repeating them, that they are all part of one master pattern" ("Introduction" xxviii). The implication of such claims is that the subject of paedophilia in *Lolita* has no bearing on its aesthetic qualities. As such, we need not worry that we might confuse the pleasure we experience in reading *Lolita* with the pleasure Humbert experiences in his exploitation of Dolores.

Yet, as many critics observe, in assuming a detached perspective, the reader loses a sense of the mimetic power of fiction and its proximity to life experience. For such critics, Humbert's self-exculpatory confession is not mere parody, but rather an authentic representation of the privilege male identity affords. It is because of a masculinist bias in Western culture that Nabokov could use the story of an adult man's paedophilic obsession with an adolescent girl as an object of parody. Linda

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<sup>23</sup> Nabokov is noted for his aversion to "*poshlost*," that is, "[c]orny trash, vulgar clichés, Philistinism in all its phases, imitations of imitations" (*Strong Opinions* 86).

Kauffman's "Framing *Lolita*: Is There a Woman in the Text?" (1989) is among the earliest feminist critiques of the novel. In this essay, Kauffman challenges interpretations of *Lolita* as parody, which, she argues, "acts as an injunction against a certain mode of referential reading" (133) that would acknowledge the mimetic substance of Dolores's experience. Kauffman calls on feminists to "read against the text" and resist the surface pleasures of Humbert's (and Nabokov's) enticements. She proposes the notion of a "representational fallacy," which alludes to ideas introduced in essays by Wimsatt and Beardsley, in which, as previously noted, the authors define the appropriate limits for literary criticism. Kauffman argues, "[t]he feminist critic can expose the lack, the trap, and the frame up by reading symptomatically. She can dismantle the misogyny of traditional critical assessment of *Lolita*'s wantonness by analysing the precise nature of Humbert's craving. A feminist perspective thus shifts suspicion from *Lolita* to Humbert" (149). Kauffman's "symptomatic" reading of the novel exposes the masculinist logic underlying the tenets of the New Criticism and draws on a Freudian psychoanalytic model to illuminate the social forces and gendered prejudices concealed in the narrative. By reading the novel through a psychoanalytic lens, Kauffman ignores the traps of parody that Nabokov has set and forces the text to confess its sins. This approach inaugurates a movement towards "depth" interpretations of *Lolita*, which offer an important counterpoint to the distant, impersonal surface readings of the novel.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The "deep" readings of *Lolita* are not restricted to psychoanalytic or feminist critiques; for instance, in "Dew Line, Uranium and the Arctic Cold War," Adam Piette reads the novel as an allegory for the American-Russian conflict. He asserts that the novel is encrypted with cold war symbolism and suggests that *Lolita* stands for the desirable, but lethal, uranium ore needed for the production of atomic weapons.

Although Kauffman presents a forceful argument that challenges readings of *Lolita* as parody, critics continue to seek a middle ground that would validate the aesthetic appeal of the novel while demonstrating that it does, in fact, possess a moral depth. Among the most compelling attempts to redeem the novel is Richard Rorty's analysis in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (1989), where he describes *Lolita* as a work that carries a powerful, but fraught, moral core. In contrast to Shelton's account of the divide among interpretations of the novel, however, Rorty declares that he has "little use for the moral-aesthetic contrast" (142). According to his interpretation, the moral and aesthetic features of the novel are not opposed to one another, but rather serve two distinct purposes: one public and the other private. This reading aligns with Rorty's central argument in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, that, ultimately, "a theory which unifies the public and private" (xv) is unattainable. Instead, Rorty asserts, we must learn to accept the incompatibility of these spheres and adapt our expectations. Rorty interprets *Lolita* as a work that reflects the incompatibility of private desires and public demands. For Rorty, the private and the public, or our responsibility to our selves and our responsibilities to others, carry equal moral weight. The problem we all face is how to best negotiate these responsibilities.

Rorty commends *Lolita* as a novel that does not impart a merely didactic lesson "about cruelty from the outside, from the point of view of the victims" (146), but rather challenges readers to understand what it is like to harm another. In contrast to Appel's claim for a surface reading of *Lolita*, Rorty posits that it is our proximity to Humbert that allows us to recognise his moral failings and to perceive how our private interests can blind us to our public responsibilities. Rorty asserts that

“Nabokov wrote about cruelty from the inside,” which “helps us to get *inside* cruelty, and thereby helps articulate the dimly felt connection between art and torture” (146). Humbert provides an authentic portrait of “incuriosity” (158) that leads to cruelty—a self-absorption that cancels out the world around him. Despite his recovery of a moral in *Lolita*, critics have pointed to Rorty’s interpretation as insensitive to the specifics of paedophilia in the novel. James O’Rourke takes aim at Rorty’s reduction of paedophilia as a mere metaphor for cruelty and reaffirms the impossible gap between the moral and the aesthetic in *Lolita*. He argues that “[t]he nonrealist surface of the novel operates as a marker of pure aestheticism that distances the reader from its pedophilic content and licenses the spontaneity of both eroticism and scandalous humor” (186). In O’Rourke’s reading, the treatment of paedophilia in the novel is irredeemable and it would be a profound error to see things from Humbert’s point of view.

The analyses of *Lolita* by Appel, Kauffman, Rorty, and O’Rourke demonstrate the troubling spatial ambiguity that the novel creates for its readers. If we preserve the distance of a parodic reading, as Appel argues, we fail to appreciate both the seriousness of Humbert’s crime and the role of narrative within a cultural context; if we move in close to see the world as Humbert does, however, we again risk finding ourselves entrapped within the limits of Humbert’s perspective, as O’Rourke suggests; and, if we dig down beneath Humbert’s confession to expose its patriarchal biases, we deny the novel the autonomy to answer for itself. Some critics have even come to argue that *Lolita*’s aesthetic and moral properties are deliberately irreconcilable. In *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (2014), C. Namwali Serpell contends that this ambiguity is an essential property of *Lolita*. Serpell writes, “*Lolita*’s highly

structured form molds the reading experience into the shifting, variable *mode* of uncertainty that sets aesthetics, affect, and ethics into an ongoing dance” (9). While Serpell seems to share Rorty’s view that the novel does contain a moral, she diverges from Rorty’s account of the independent operation of the aesthetic and moral features of the text in her suggestion that, instead, Nabokov moves back and forth between the seemingly contradictory modes of aesthetic pleasure and moral reflection within the novel. It is this notion of movement between meaning and across space on which I will concentrate in examining the representation of masculinity in *Lolita*. Although, as I have asserted, Humbert’s account of embodied masculinity emphasises his perception of interiority and exteriority as fundamentally opposed regions, the novel also depicts his capacity to transgress these boundaries. Indeed, as Alexander Dolinin observes, “[c]rossing a border between two worlds – whether physical or mental, spatial or temporal, literal or metaphorical – has always been one of Nabokov’s major themes” (197).

The division that separates John Ray’s foreword from Humbert’s confession is not only between analyst and analysand, or authority figure and criminal, but also between living and dead. Ray informs us that Humbert “died in legal captivity” (*Lolita* 3) days before his trial was set to begin. We may thus add to the connotations of Humbert’s account that of the death bed confession, his final statement. Humbert reinforces this theme when he refers to the space in which he is writing his confession as “tombal” (109, 308). We are reminded, here, of Tambling’s observation that “confession” once referred to a tomb or crypt. Humbert’s voice comes to us from the other side, the world of the dead, where he has been entombed and can do no more harm to the living. The text that we read, therefore, *contains*

Humbert—he is buried securely within its pages. However, as Serpell points out, within the first words of his confession Humbert transgresses the boundary between the living and the dead, as well as that between text and reader. Serpell observes that when we read the lines, “Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.” (*Lolita* 9), the reader is compelled to mouth the sounds and words, to speak them along with Humbert. Serpell contends “that this is a quiet scandal because Humbert, in effect, *has put Lolita in your mouth*. I am ventriloquized: complicity not of the mind but of the tongue. [...] *Lolita*’s opening seals us to the text via something akin to an unwitting performative utterance” (2, emphasis in original). Humbert crosses the boundary of the text—the material limits of which we have come to take for granted—and inhabits the reader, both body and mind, as we take up his confession. The reader’s objectivity is compromised from the start by Humbert’s ability to cross boundaries assumed to be impassable.

In transgressing the boundary that distinguishes narrator from reader, Humbert also disrupts the confessional power structure defined by Foucault. “[T]he confessional discourse,” writes Foucault, “cannot come from above, as in the *ars erotica*, through the sovereign will of a master, but rather from below, as an obligatory act of speech,” although “the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens” (*Will to Knowledge* 62). The reader-confessor of *Lolita* would seem to have complete control over Humbert’s confession, as he is “below” not only in terms of the power structure, but also in death, as a being that has lost the ability to respond to the reader’s interpretation. Yet through his words, Humbert returns to destabilise the order of

power in the confessional discourse, frustrating the reader-confessor's attempts to judge him objectively.

The trip of the tongue from palate to teeth that Humbert describes also alerts the reader to the relationship between the body and language. For Humbert, language is a powerful transmitter of meaning and emotion that has the capacity to revive what had been thought lost to the past. His confession constitutes within his readers an emotional understanding of his desire and despair, to which we may add our own revulsion. We apprehend this complex of emotions both cognitively and affectively as the text works through us. Humbert wishes to unsettle the objectivity with which his reader-confessors approach the text in order to implicate us in his crime and expose the deception of the confessional power structure. In demonstrating the capacity of language to transmit affective messages, *Lolita* also confronts the New Criticism's critique of emotional readings of literary works in "The Affective Fallacy." In this essay, Wimsatt builds on the arguments of fellow New Critic I. A. Richards and asserts that "[t]he Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*)" (21, emphasis in original). Wimsatt contends that "[t]he purely affective report is either too physiological or it is too vague" to provide the basis for an interpretation; instead, the "objective critic" (32, 34) must seek out the underlying idea that generates this response. Felski, as previously noted, challenges the objective critic's claims to emotional detachment, arguing that this "is not an absence of mood but one manifestation of it—a certain orientation toward one's subject" (*Limits* 6). Humbert's boundary crossings disrupt efforts to preserve critical distance from the text and oblige us to acknowledge our vulnerability to his words.

The phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty provides insight into the way that language and the body intersect. In *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), where he challenges the principles of Cartesian dualism by arguing for the essential role of the body in perception, Merleau-Ponty asserts that the body “gives a sense not only to the natural object, but moreover to cultural objects such as words” (244). He elaborates:

Prior to being the indication of a concept, the word is first an event that grasps my body, and its hold upon my body circumscribes the zone of signification to which it refers. One subject claims that upon the presentation of the word “*humide*” (*feucht*) [damp], in addition to a feeling of dampness or cold, he experiences an entire reworking of the body schema, as if the interior of his body came to the periphery, and as if the reality of his body, collected together up until that moment in his arms and legs, attempted to re-center itself. The word, then, is not distinct from the attitude it indicates, and it is only when its presence is prolonged that it appears as an external image and that its signification appears as thought. Words have a physiognomy because we have, with regard to them, just as with regard to each person, a certain behavior that suddenly appears the moment they are given. (244)

Merleau-Ponty’s description of the physiological perception of language alerts us not only to the inseparability of body and mind, but also to the corporeal interpretation of language. Nabokov, who experienced synaesthesia, was particularly attuned to the link between words and the body. In his biography, *Speak, Memory* (1967), he describes “a fine case of colored hearing,” but amends this, clarifying that “[p]erhaps ‘hearing’ is not quite accurate, since the color sensation seems to be produced by the very act of my orally forming a given letter while I imagine its outline” (34). For Nabokov, then, words communicate not only meaning to the mind, but also

sensations to the body.<sup>25</sup> *Lolita* displays Humbert's efforts to communicate to the reader his profound corporeal experience of desire and the boundaries of social propriety that defined these as abnormal. However, since Humbert's predilections are not identifiable by others at the external level of appearance, but known only by himself, internally, he comes to perceive the world around him in terms of a similar binary opposition between surfaces and depths. Furthermore, in emphasising images of surface and depth, *Lolita* alludes to the spatial metaphors so prevalent in Freud's descriptions of the topography of the mind.

Freud employs a variety of spatial imagery and metaphors to illustrate his conception of the operations of the mind. Sabine Hake observes that Freud's life-long interest in archaeology provides him with a key metaphor for his conceptualisation of psychoanalysis. Hake points to a passage in "The Aetiology of Hysteria" (1896) where Freud likens the work of the analyst to that of the archaeologist:

Imagine that an explorer arrives in a little-known region where his interest is aroused by an expanse of ruins, with remains of walls, fragments of columns, and tables with half-effaced and unreadable inscriptions. He may content himself with inspecting what lies exposed to view [...]. But he may act differently. Together with [the local inhabitants] he may start upon the ruins, clear away the rubbish, and, beginning from the visible remains, uncover what is buried. If his work is crowned with success, the discoveries are self-explanatory; the ruined walls are part of the ramparts of a palace or a treasure-house; the fragments of columns can be filled out into a temple; the numerous inscriptions, which, by good luck, may be bilingual, reveal an alphabet and a language, and, when they have been deciphered and translated, yield undreamed-of information about the events of the remote past, to

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<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty ascribes importance to synaesthesia, remarking that "[s]ynaesthetic perception is the rule and, if we do not notice it, this is because scientific knowledge displaces experience and we have unlearned seeing, hearing, and sensing in general in order to deduce what we ought to see, hear, or sense from our bodily organization and from the world as it is conceived by the physicist" (238).

commemorate which the monuments were built. (“Aetiology of Hysteria” 192)

While, elsewhere, Freud describes the topography of the mind in more active terms, the above description of the analyst as archaeological explorer provides a clear example of the importance of spatial metaphors for the transmission of psychoanalytic ideas.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the depiction of the analyst as adventurer appeals to a distinctly masculine fantasy that positions “the woman as the archaeological site” (Hake 148) to be excavated and interpreted. Hake posits that the woman’s “body [...] can also be likened to writing, in that it appears both as a text that needs to be deciphered and as an empty page into which male desire is inscribed” (148) Nabokov brings these gendered spatial tropes to the fore in his depiction of Humbert’s infatuation with Lolita.

In contrast to the fluid and reciprocal boundary that delineates interior from exterior in Merleau-Ponty’s account of the body, Humbert presents the reader with conflicting ideas about surface and depth. According to Humbert, both the “nympholept” and the “nymphet”—that is, the paedophile and the object of his desire—display an incongruity between surface and depth. Humbert contrasts the paedophilic desire that he experiences internally with his ostensibly normal outward appearance. He describes himself as “an exceptionally handsome male; slow-moving, tall, with soft dark hair and a gloomy but all the more seductive cast of demeanor” (25), and, later, reflects that he possesses “all the characteristics which, according to writers on the sex interests of children, start the responses stirring in a

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<sup>26</sup> In his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1917), Freud compares the relation between the unconscious and conscious regions of the mind to “a large entrance hall” and a “drawing-room” separated by “a watchman” who “examines the differential mental impulses, acts as a censor, and will not admit them into the drawing-room if they displease him” (295).

little girl: clean-cut jaw, muscular hand, deep sonorous voice, broad shoulder” (43).

These descriptions create an image of Humbert that is, at once, the masculine ideal of strength and self-possession, and, at the same time, anonymous and fragmentary.

Humbert is quite aware of the privilege and security that his appearance provides.

This surface, he tells his readers, conceals “a cesspool of rotting monsters” (44) that corrupts the depths of his being. Yet Humbert is a master of forms and, for the most part, able to conceal his hidden depths.

The image of Humbert as a figure who possesses an ideal masculine exterior that obscures his degenerate inner desires may be understood as a parodic characterisation of fears inspired by the popularisation of psychoanalytic ideas about the opposition between conscious and unconscious. Nabokov parodies the idea that a person, otherwise normal in appearance, may be hiding secret, abnormal desires. Humbert satisfies our suspicions with his confession. Emphasising the spatial dynamics of this suspicious hermeneutics, Nabokov anticipates Foucault’s examination of the “multiplication of singular sexualities” (*Will to Knowledge* 47) in the nineteenth century, the scientific preoccupation with identifying and categorising distinct sexualities. Foucault describes how the body came under scrutiny as the origin of these desires, how “[t]hese polymorphous conducts were actually extracted from people’s bodies and from their pleasures; or rather, they were solidified in them; they were drawn out, revealed, isolated, intensified, incorporated, by multifarious power devices” (47-8). Confession, argues Foucault, is the foremost technique in this on-going project of extraction and domination of the body. While Nabokov parodies the suspicion of what the body might conceal beneath its surface, Humbert presents a conflicted image of the dynamics of interior and exterior: while,

on the one hand, he conceives of himself as a victim of a culture hunting for sexual perversion, on the other hand, he exploits this same hermeneutics of suspicion in his description of Lolita.

Humbert identifies Lolita as a nymphet who appears on the surface to be a child but who conceals another nature within. He remarks that a nymphet standing among other children will go “unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power” (*Lolita* 17). While it is true, in a way, that the nymphet is unconscious of her power, the fact is that this power is ascribed to the nymphet by the nympholept. The nympholept constructs the mystery of the nymphet’s secret being. Humbert proceeds to define the specific dynamic that organises the relationship between nymphet and nympholept. He writes:

Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these creatures I propose to designate as “nymphets.”

It will be marked that I substitute time terms for spatial ones. In fact, I would have the reader see “nine” and “fourteen” as the boundaries—the mirror beaches and rosy rocks—of an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea. (16)

Drawing on fantastical imagery, Humbert mimics Freud’s use of mythology to describe psychological events. However, there is more to this passage than simple parody. Alexandrov observes that when Humbert “refers to the ages of ‘nine’ and ‘fourteen’ in spatial terms” time and space “become interchangeable in Humbert’s discussion, with the unintentionally ironic consequence that his emphasis on temporal *difference* begins to sound like spatial *distance*” (167, emphasis in original). Juxtaposing spatial and temporal metaphors, Humbert attempts to circumvent cultural (and legal) boundaries of age-appropriate relationships by reconstructing them as spatial.

Appel, citing the work of Diana Butler, suggests that Nabokov's description of the nymphet parallels the pupa stage of the butterfly and thus reveals "that the substratum of *Lolita* contains an extensive literary game in which the author's passion for butterflies, including the congruent joy and horror of the discovery and the necessary kill, has been transferred into Humbert's passion for nymphets, with *Lolita* the butterfly" ("Springboard" 208). There are obvious lapses in this description, most notably Humbert's desire for the nymph prior to her transformation into a butterfly. Humbert does not desire the fully formed butterfly, as Nabokov the lepidopterist does, but rather the nymphet—that is, the adolescent girl during the onset of puberty. This is a specific paedophilic obsession for Humbert, one that critics have overlooked. His desire is tied to a period when internal physiological changes are manifest on the surface of the adolescent body. He remarks, in a scholarly tone, that "[t]he bud-stage of breast development appears early (10.7 years) in the sequence of somatic changes accompanying pubescence. And the next maturational item available is the first appearance of pigmented pubic hair (11.2 years)" (20). During this period, the surface of the body reveals the activity of its depths, exposing its underlying biological principles. This is a moment when the boundary that separates inner and outer becomes unstable, and when the limit delineating girl and woman becomes unclear.

Humbert's preoccupation with time and space is tied, in his paedophilic desire, with ideas of gender. Transforming the question of *Lolita*'s age into a matter of space, Humbert reinforces cultural tropes of femininity and masculinity. As noted previously with reference to Elizabeth Grosz's list of cultural binaries, time and space are commonly treated as oppositional qualities with the former the domain of

men and the latter that of women. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984), Luce Irigaray posits that if we are to address the deeply rooted inequality between the sexes, “we must reconsider the whole problematic of *space* and *time*” (7, emphasis in original). Examining the history of these themes in Western philosophy, Irigaray identifies the privilege ascribed to the temporal. She observes that in the analysis of space and time as the fundamental subject of philosophy and human existence, a hierarchy emerges that privileges one over the other: “Time becomes the *interiority* of the subject itself, and space, its *exteriority* [...]. The subject, the master of time, becomes the axis of the world’s ordering.” Time gives meaning to space. This hierarchy is then mapped onto ideas of gender difference according to which “the feminine is experienced as space [...], while the masculine is experienced as time.” Women have long been associated with the corporeal, the spatial and the unruly, while men are aligned with the intellect, the temporal, and the orderly. While everyday observation and experience contradicts this binary, the idea it promotes persists in the way we think about men and women. This is abundantly clear in the contrast between Humbert’s cerebral evasiveness and the reduction of Lolita to a mere body.

Irigaray elaborates on the relationship between men as time and women as space, “[w]omen are only useful in part as openings-mirages that reflect this a priori proposition needed for the mind’s/his *foundation*: i.e., the seduction of *the whole of nature*. Woman will constitute the imaginary sub-basement that shores up the mine, will act as man’s guiding thread in his various relationships with the many faces of the sensible world” (*Speculum* 212, emphasis in original). Woman “serves as an *envelope*, a *container*, the starting point from which man limits his things” (*Ethics*

10, emphasis in original). The masculine notion of propriety and his delineation of the world beyond himself into objects to be possessed begin with the female body as the ground for his fantasies.

The female body as a space for the enactment of male fantasy and control is evident in Humbert's overwriting of Lolita's identity. His disinterest in her autonomy—that is, his erasure of her psychological depth—is amplified by his knowledge of, and fascination with, her surface. Humbert describes in detail the qualities of Lolita's

Marvelous skin—oh, marvellous: tender and tanned, not the least blemish. Sundaes cause acne. The excess of the oily substance called sebum which nourishes the hair follicles of the skin creates, when too profuse, an irritation that opens the way to infection. But nymphets do not have acne although they gorge themselves on rich food. (41)

Humbert reveals himself to be is a connoisseur of surfaces in the precise knowledge of dermatology he shares. In contrast to Lolita's natural adolescent skin, Humbert describes her mother, Charlotte, with a lack of interest, though he notes that the imprints of time and culture mar her appearance. He writes, “[t]he poor lady was in her middle thirties, she had a shiny forehead, plucked eyebrows and quite simple but not unattractive features” (37). Lolita exists beyond the reach of time in Humbert's eyes—she is mere form, available for his manipulation into the object of his desire.

The perception of time and space are among the most prominent themes to be found in Nabokov's literary oeuvre. Although he views “time” as “a prison” that captures us between “the two black voids” (*Speak, Memory* 20) that precede and follow the period of our existence, Nabokov is sceptical of its hold on him, writing: “I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after us, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon the other” (139). Memory and

writing provide Nabokov with the basis for his doubt, as these two techniques of reconstruction present him with the power to renew the past. Additionally, time unites us “with creatures that were not oneself but that were joined to one by time’s common flow” (21), which he opposes to “the spatial world, which not only man but apes and butterflies can perceive” (21-2). Time is that which distinguishes humans from other creatures, the privilege and burden of our existence.

The problem of examining time directly is addressed in a well-known digression in Nabokov’s *Ada, or Ardor* (1969), where the character Van Veen summarises his book, *Texture of Time*, in which he seeks “to examine the essence of Time, not its lapse, for I do not believe that its essence can be reduced to its lapse. I wish to caress Time” (420). Space is subservient to Time in Van’s account. He declares, “I cannot imagine Space without Time, but I can very well imagine Time without Space. [...] One can be a hater of Space, and a lover of Time” (425). Yet, he acknowledges, accessing time itself is not a simple task. He notes, “all who have tried to reach the charmed castle [of time] have got lost in obscurity or have bogged down in Space” (420). Van holds space in low regard, as it seems to inhibit the direct apprehension of time. He writes, “[w]e measure Time (a second hand trots, or a minute hand jerks, from one painted mark to another) in terms of Space (without knowing the nature of either)” (424), but as a result we encounter “the blind finger of space poking and tearing the texture of time” (421). Humbert, like Van, wishes to access time itself, to move freely from present to past. This is what he attempts to do when he ignores Lolita’s autonomy and collapses his past infatuation with the child that he encounters as an adult.

Humbert reinforces the spatial, rather than temporal, distance that separates Lolita from him when he describes the “gap of several years, never less than ten I should say, generally thirty or forty, and as many as ninety in a few known cases, between maiden and man” as “a question of focal adjustment, of a certain distance that the inner eye thrills to surmount, and a certain contrast that the mind perceives with a gasp of perverse delight” (17). Time, here, is constituted as a physical boundary to be transgressed first by the inner eye—in other words, the mind—and later, perhaps, by the male body. The distant, or detached, male gaze is also depicted in Nabokov’s *Despair* (1936/1965), where the narrator, Hermann, describes the pleasure he takes in “a certain aberration” (32) of behaviour when, while making love to his wife, he experiences a “Split” that separates him into two selves: one in bed with his wife, and the other an observer “standing naked in the middle of the room.” He soon discovers “that the greater the interval between my two selves the more I was ecstasied” (33).<sup>27</sup> The distance that Humbert and Hermann revel in transgressing is one that, unbeknownst to others, upends assumptions of intimacy, trust, and respect. The border between intimacy and detachment is one more boundary that Humbert flouts.

Having won the trust of Charlotte and moved into the guest room of the Haze home, Humbert describes the methods he uses to entice Lolita into his space. In a diary from that time, which he reconstructs from memory, he writes: “[f]or some days already I had been leaving the door ajar, while I wrote in my room; but only

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<sup>27</sup> As Grishakova notes, this scene did not appear in the original Russian version, but was added by Nabokov when he revised the English text for publication in 1965 (227). However, in his foreword to the second edition, Nabokov appears to allude to this passage and suggests that he had intended for its inclusion in the original but excised it “in more timid times” (10).

today did the trap work” (48). Invoking the spider-insect metaphor to describe his attempt to lure Lolita, Humbert describes his sensitivity to her movements in the house: “*My web is spread all over the house as I listen from my chair where I sit like a wily wizard. Is Lo in her room? Gently I tug on the silk. She is not [...] The bathroom door has just slammed, so one has to feel elsewhere about the house for the beautiful warm-colored prey*” (49). Humbert develops an unusual relationship with the house, as he will with other buildings like the Enchanted Hunters hotel, and he displays an unusual sensitivity: “*Knowing as did I its every cranny by heart—since those days when from my chair I mentally mapped out Lolita’s course through the house—I had long entered into a sort of emotional relationship with it, with its very ugliness and dirt, and now I could almost feel the wretched thing cower in its reluctance*” (77) to undergo cleaning. The space of the home is bound up with Humbert’s play of fantasy and so becomes an extension of his own isolated interior as he absorbs Lolita and Charlotte while denying their status as individuals. The house remains imprinted with the hunting ground and leisure park of Humbert’s desires.

The motif of hunting, a game of concealment and surveillance, continues in the infamous scene on the sofa where Humbert, unbeknownst to Lolita, fulfils his sexual urges. Lolita sits on the sofa with her legs stretched across his lap while Humbert uses her movements to satisfy his desire. He remarks that “*every movement she made, every shuffle and ripple, helped me to conceal and to improve the secret system of tactile correspondence between beast and beauty*” (59). The concealed nature of the act, and his ability, now, to reveal it, adds to Humbert’s pleasure in his retelling:

I entered a plane of being where nothing mattered, save the infusion of joy brewed within my body. What had begun as a delicious distension of my innermost roots became a glowing tingle which *now* had reached a state of absolute security, confidence and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life. [...] Lolita had been safely solipsized. (60)

Nabokov plays with the notion of autoeroticism in this scene, emphasising the double prohibition of paedophilia and masturbation, and his ability to watch Lolita who remains “beyond the veil of [his] controlled delight” (60). Here, once again, Humbert takes pleasure in crossing, seemingly undetected, the barrier of surface and depth from which he extracts pleasure from Lolita without her knowledge. The veiling of the act in his recollection is mimicked in the language he uses to describe it. For instance, Humbert disguises the word “penis” when he writes, “[t]he corpuscles of Krause were entering the phase of frenzy” (60). Humbert seeks to recover the pleasure of his past deceptions by circumventing the reader’s awareness in such passages.

Although Humbert claims that Lolita has been “safely solipsized” (60) during this encounter, her reported reaction suggests differently. Humbert describes how Lolita “wiggled, and squirmed, and threw her head back, and her teeth rested on her glistening underlip as she half-turned away” (61). While Humbert chooses not to comment upon her physical response, her reaction made enough of an impression for him to take notice. There is a clear contradiction between Humbert’s assertion that Lolita did not realise what had happened and his recollection of her behaviour noted above. It would seem, then, that Humbert is wilfully, and ironically, blind rather than deceptive. That is to say, the surface of his narrative is uneven and displays both his selfish desire that Lolita be “safely solipsized” from the knowledge of the pleasure he is deriving from her and his observations of her behaviour, which he elects not to

interpret. And yet the ironic implication of the scene—that, in the folds of the text, Humbert displays some level of awareness that he is despicable and is not deceiving this child—does not change the fact that Lolita is still the object of a paedophile’s desire. Here, the reader may recognise the failure of Humbert’s desire to transgress the boundary of surface and depth without detection. However, the narrative’s ironic doubling fails to account for the truth that Humbert, in fact, is genuinely in “a state of absolute security, confidence and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life” because, as an adult male, he has the power to control the narrative, to deny Lolita the capacity to voice what she observed or experienced. While she might intuit what took place from his movements, it is unlikely that Lolita, a child of the nineteen-forties, would have the language or the support to communicate what had happened. Humbert’s hermeneutic authority is on full display despite the ironic aestheticisation of his description.

In contrast to the desirable instability of Lolita’s embodied adolescent condition, Humbert depicts Charlotte as a woman whose nymphetic being has been worn away by time and cultural conventions. In pursuing Charlotte as a way to access Lolita, Humbert is initiated into the American world of popular culture. The novel satirises Charlotte’s reliance on guides to raising children and her lack of intuitive knowledge of home decoration. The impression of Charlotte that Humbert conveys is that of a woman who lacks the intellectual substance and independence of masculinity. He observes that “[w]ith the authoress of *Your Home Is You*, [Charlotte] developed a hatred for little lean chairs and spindle tables. She believed that a room having a generous expanse of glass, and lots of rich wood panelling was an example of the masculine type of room, whereas the feminine type was characterized by

lighter-looking windows and frailer woodwork” (78). While Humbert mocks the gendering of furniture and the encroachment of cultural homogeneity into the private sphere of the home, *Lolita* presents no middle path between the perverse onanism of high-culture and the uniformity of the low.

Charlotte embodies the notion of *poshlost* for Humbert. Along with her physical appearance and home aesthetics, Humbert mocks her enthusiasm for confession as a characteristic of an unoriginal mind. He is first inaugurated into the culture of confession when Charlotte leaves a letter for him that begins “[t]his is a confession: I love you” (67), as if he would not understand the significance of the message unless she defined it generically. In a ploy to get even closer to Lolita, Humbert elects to enter into a relationship with Charlotte where he soon discovers that the marker of intimacy between a man and a woman is the reciprocal confession. Humbert recalls,

Never in my life had I confessed so much or received so many confessions. The sincerity and artlessness with which she discussed what she called her ‘love-life,’ from first necking to connubial catch-as-you-can, were, ethically, in striking contrast with my glib compositions, but technically the two sets were congeneric since both were affected by the same stuff (soap operas, psychoanalysis and cheap novelettes) upon which I drew for my characters and she for her mode of expression. (80)

Despite his condescending view of the culture of confession in the United States, Humbert admits that he, too, has had sufficient encounters with soap operas and psychoanalysis to imitate its manner and content. In contrast to the natural and unadorned link between surface and depth that *Lolita* embodies, Charlotte’s confessions reveal only an absence of authenticity. This is evident in Humbert’s first impression of Charlotte as,

One of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality, but never her soul; women who are

completely devoid of humor; women utterly indifferent at heart to the dozen or so possible subjects of a parlor conversation, but very particular about the rules of such conversations, through the sunny cellophane of which not very appetizing frustrations can be readily distinguished. (37)

The platitudes and artificiality of Charlotte's confessions provide an effective contrast for Humbert's claim to artistry and depth in his own confession. Humbert's scornful characterisation of Charlotte provides readers with little material to find sympathetic, except when, upon discovering Humbert's secret desire for Lolita in a diary he kept locked away, she sheds the veneer of culture and reacts as any reader might. However, an errant car rapidly dispatches Charlotte as she flees the scene of her confrontation with Humbert, leaving Lolita completely vulnerable to his now legal authority over her as her guardian.

In order to take full advantage of this power over Lolita, Humbert leads her on a journey across the United States by car, moving westward from their New England home. Early in the journey, they stop at the Enchanted Hunters hotel, a location encrypted with a multitude of allusions and metaphoric depth, where Humbert intends to consummate his nymphetic fantasy. It is also here where Humbert's paranoia accelerates and the fear of being exposed shifts into the fear of being usurped and losing Lolita. Describing the hotel room they have been allocated, Humbert observes "[t]here was a double bed, a mirror, a double bed in the mirror, a closet door with mirror, a bathroom door ditto, a blue-dark window, a reflected bed there, the same in the closet mirror, two chairs, a glass-topped table, two bedtables, a double bed" (119). The abundance of mirror images and the sentence's circular route back to the double bed prompt Appel to describe the room as "a little prison of mirrors, a metaphor for his solipsism and circumscribing obsession" (378, nt. 119/2). The room offers Humbert the capacity for complete surveillance of Lolita: she is

enframed in every direction. It will allow him “to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (*Lolita* 134). Appel argues that mirrors represent the point where the self reaches an impasse in its ability to escape solipsistic impulses. This scene presents a powerful metaphor that aligns Humbert’s conception of private, inner space with that of the room. It might be argued that, in admitting the reader of his confession into the space, Humbert is exposing his solipsistic fantasy and opening the space outward for others to judge. However, the reader also risks becoming entangling in Humbert’s narrative, succumbing to the seduction of his words as they instil in the reader the textual equivalent of Humbert’s desire. Humbert and Lolita are not alone in the reconstruction of this memory—the reader shares this space, too.

This, then, is the dilemma that confronts readers of the novel and remains a point of contention: are we complicit in the exploitation of Lolita? Nabokov places us in the room with Humbert and leaves us to decide whether to take pleasure in the paedophilic surface description that he decorates with literary puns, allusions, and sexual suggestion, or to read against the text’s allures. Humbert describes something that appears, on the surface, to be remorse, but on closer inspection is understood to be an evasion of responsibility:

Somewhere behind the raging bliss, bewildered shadows conferred—and not to have heeded them, this is what I regret! Human beings, attend! I should have understood that Lolita had *already* proved to be something quite different from innocent Annabel, and that the nymphean evil breathing through every pore of the fey child that I had prepared for my secret delectation, would make the secrecy impossible, and the delectation lethal. (124-5)

Humbert’s description evokes the image of an exorcism, as the spirit of the nymphet seeps through the barrier of Lolita’s skin and overwhelms Humbert. He sees himself, not Lolita, as the victim in this scene. Humbert plays to the reader’s expectations of

confessional discourse, while eschewing responsibility for his actions. Furthermore, he contrasts his own apparently modest expectations with Lolita's actions, remarking, "I had thought that months, perhaps years, would elapse before I dared to reveal myself to Dolores Haze; but by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me" (132). This statement is Humbert's most flagrant display of cruelty and dishonesty. While, on the one hand, we may read this as evidence that Humbert's account should not be trusted, on the other hand, his rhetorical skill has convinced some readers to view Lolita as the offender in this scenario.<sup>28</sup> Though Humbert, ultimately, concedes that he is guilty of "rape" (308), are these scenes, reconstructed from memory, accurate portrayals of his psychological state at that time, or are they re-enactments for the sake of self-gratification? This remains a troubling question for readers.

Having finally consummated his desires with a nymphet, Humbert reflects on the hypothetical psychoanalyst's narrative that would "have me take my Lolita to the seaside and have me find there, at last, the 'gratification' of a lifetime urge, and release from the 'subconscious' obsession of an incomplete childhood romance with the initial little Miss Lee" (166-7). However, this proves not to be the case. The novel foils the wished-for closure of the narrative and rejects the "acceptable" deviant behaviour that may now be decathected and sublimated into other, more appropriate, pursuits. Instead, Humbert pursues a circuit of the United States with Lolita in order to sustain his fantasy, while his paranoia about losing her builds.

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<sup>28</sup> In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, for example, Leslie A. Fiedler summarises *Lolita* as the story of "the seduction of a middle-aged man by a twelve-year-old girl" (335).

Humbert's desire to "fix" the fundamental nature of the nymphet—that is, to possess complete knowledge of the object of his infatuation—remains a preoccupation. He believes that if he has control of the object of his desires, he will be able to gain control over the desires themselves. Reflecting on the difficulty of accessing this knowledge, Humbert writes "[m]y only grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys" (165). This passage reveals Humbert's misrecognition of the "interior" that he cannot attain. By dividing Lolita into nymphet spirit and adolescent body, he has failed to perceive her as a child, through and through. He comes to this realisation when, observing Lolita and a school mate, he acknowledges, "I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate—dim and adorable regions which happen to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden me, in my polluted rags and miserable convulsions" (284). The inner life that he will never have access to, that he failed to perceive in their time together, was mistaken for the physical boundaries that he sought to penetrate and expose.

Their tour of the country at an end, Humbert settles into a job teaching at the all-female Beardsley College. Despite the security this provides, he discovers that their sedentary life leaves him more vulnerable. He reflects, "I often felt we lived in a lighted house of glass and that any moment some thin-lipped parchment face would peer through a carelessly unshaded window" (180). Unshaded, that is, from the lens of interpretation that Humbert tries to impose on the story that Lolita is merely his daughter. Humbert cannot sustain the pressure of this performance for long, and the

pair set out, once again, to circle the country. It is during this journey that Clare Quilty emerges from the allusive depths of the text to usurp Humbert's power over Lolita. Humbert's descriptions of suspected sightings of Quilty appear, initially, as a parody of a pursuit. Humbert, remarking on a suspicious car behind their own, observes that "traffic on the highway was light that day; nobody passed anybody; and nobody attempted to get in between our humble blue car and its imperious red shadow—as if there were some spell cast on that interspace, a zone of evil mirth and magic" (219). The shadow that follows Humbert, who is himself aligned with images of shade, introduces a villainous masculine substitute who, conveniently obsessed with Lolita, casts Humbert in the favourable "light" of a victim.

Quilty is a spectral figure that, for much of the text, seems merely a phantom of Humbert's paranoid imagination. After Lolita makes her escape during their second journey, Humbert places the blame on Quilty, a competitor for Lolita's affections who Humbert has only sensed but never seen. This begins a long search, which Humbert describes as a "cryptogrammic paper chase" (250), which leads Humbert to find a now-married and pregnant Lolita. Though only seventeen, the spirit of the nymphet in Lolita (now "Dolly Schiller") has died and she appears to Humbert "as a bit of dry wood [...] her pale-freckled cheeks were hollowed, and her bare shins and arms had lost all their tan, so that the little hairs showed" (269). For the first time in his account, Humbert gives Lolita her own voice, one that appears foreign to the reader trapped for so long in Humbert's fantasies. Lolita gives Humbert the name of the man with whom she escaped, but refuses his request to leave with him. With Lolita now firmly an object of his past, Humbert seeks revenge

on Quilty, who is both a psychological construct of Humbert's paranoia and a real person.

Humbert locates Quilty at his isolated home, which, like the mirrored room of the Enchanted Hunters, provides an image of Humbert's own state. He remarks, "[t]he elaborate and decrepit house seemed to stand in a kind of daze, reflecting as it were my own state" (293). Presenting the house in this way, Humbert invites the reader to see the events metaphorically as a confrontation with himself. Quilty is described as the unruly corporeal double to Humbert's restrained, cerebral masculinity. While Humbert describes his appearance as stylish and composed in "a black suit, a black shirt, no tie" (295), Quilty is depicted in fragments. Humbert observes his "high hoarse voice," "smudgy mustache," and "small pearly teeth in a crooked grin." Under the influence of alcohol or drugs, Quilty is unable to understand why Humbert has come for him. Humbert's efforts to kill Quilty take on a comic turn, as Humbert parodies his ineffectual use of a gun as a symbol of phallic incompetence in order to head off psychoanalytic interpretations before they can start. After clumsily killing Quilty, Humbert notes the peculiar feeling that he "may have lost contact with reality for a second or two" during which time he perceives an alternative version of his life, one where, instead of standing in Quilty's bedroom, he found himself "in the connubial bedroom, and Charlotte sick in bed" (304). In taking Quilty's life, the boundary that Humbert had long maintained between his intellectual and his corporeal selves appears to collapse. The union of bodily space and mental time is suggested when Humbert looks at his wrist watch and notes that "[t]he crystal was gone but it ticked." The barrier between abstract time and material space is lost; Humbert can no longer maintain the illusion of their separation. Having

fought with his already injured foe, Humbert realises that he is “all covered with Quilty” (306). Humbert can no longer evade the corporeal world of flesh and blood. Interior has, quite literally, taken the place of exterior.

Humbert escapes in his car, but soon drives off the road and waits for the police to catch up with him. During this interval, Humbert recalls an earlier moment of recognition, when he first sensed the cruelty of his treatment of Lolita. This scene has been the object of much attention for critics like Appel and Rorty who assert that, in acknowledging his abuse, Humbert’s narrative secures a moral end. Standing at the parapet of a highway overlooking a “small mining town” (307), Humbert perceives the many congruent details of life in the town. His senses attuned to the aesthetic satisfaction of the view, he remarks on the sounds coming from the “transparent town” (307):

Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic [...]. I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from the concord. (308)

According to Rorty, this is a moment when Humbert’s inner world opens up to the harm he has caused—he becomes sensitive to the possibility of Lolita’s own inner life, but only after he has wholly undermined any potential for sharing in it. The depiction of Humbert looking down from above over “the friendly abyss” (*Lolita* 307) and perceiving with great clarity contrasts profoundly with the room of mirrors in the Enchanted Hunters. The spatial language of this passage, with Humbert’s observations of “colors and shades that seem to enjoy themselves in good company,” the “transparent town,” (307), and the sense “of blended voices, majestic and minute,

remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic” (308) suggest the fusion of surface and depth into a unified whole. The “secret,” the novel tells us, is not found in practices of “digging down” for concealed meaning, but in moments of synthesis. Humbert’s project to fix the enigmatic nature of the nymphet was a failure because it sought to excise the ordinary girl—the synthesis of surface and depth—that imbued *Lolita* with such power and meaning for Humbert. The path Humbert follows maps out the poles of modern hermeneutics: from suspicion and the practice of “demystification” and the “reduction of illusion,” to an exegetical technique that evokes “the manifestation and restoration of a meaning addressed to me in the manner of a message, a proclamation,” which requires a “willingness to listen” (Ricoeur 27). This concept resonates strongly with the narrative shift from visual to aural perception that Humbert describes while standing at the edge of that “friendly abyss.”

The experience of perceptual synthesis that Humbert recounts in the final lines of *Lolita* is not, however, beyond reproach. The moral apotheosis that he experiences suggests a kind of process of ascension, a spatial transformation—Humbert now sees from “above” the imbalance created by his “depth” interpretation of *Lolita*. The spatial logic of the text is recalibrated for the moral alignment of surface and depth. The final lines of *Lolita* clarify Humbert’s ambitions for his confession as a way for *Lolita* to “live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my *Lolita*” (309). The posture of nobility and penitence that Humbert assumes at the novel’s end is meant to redeem his behaviour, however provisionally, by elevating his victim and

himself through art. Despite this resolution, many critics remain troubled by Humbert's aestheticisation of Dolores's abduction and rape. For such critics, the moral awakening that Humbert achieves does not balance the equation of the novel's characterisation of femininity as an exploitable symbol. *Lolita* may well remain, as Serpell suggests, an "undecideable" work of literature for many readers; however, the novel sets out a series of themes that preoccupy the work of writers following in Nabokov's wake and up to the present: confessional culture, aesthetic and social forms, and masculine identity.

## Chapter 2: The Distance Between Men

### *Field Theory and Friendship in Joseph McElroy's Ancient History:* A Paraphrase

Joseph McElroy begins his essay “Neural Neighborhoods and Other Concrete Abstracts” (1974) with the recollection of a moment nearly twenty years in the past when, in an attempt to define the essence of his creative ambitions, he described the fundamental theme of his writing as “the relationship between Outside and Inside” (201). McElroy reflects that at the time he made this remark—in his twenties and yet to publish a novel—he did not really understand what this pronouncement meant. Still, the idea remained with him and as his writing progressed it began to accumulate significance. In “Neural Neighborhoods,” McElroy describes how he has come to understand Outside and Inside as two modes of perception and understanding: Outside refers to the vital, though limited, knowledge available to humans through our individual, subjective faculties as we engage with the world around us—a knowledge of surfaces; Inside, by contrast, describes scientific knowledge, often assisted by technology, that enables us to penetrate the inner workings of things in the world, including our own bodies, and examine the structures that bind us but are otherwise inaccessible to ordinary perception—a knowledge of depths. While these modes of knowledge, the one intimate and the other impersonal, are often construed as incompatible, McElroy takes it as his task to explore possible connections between the two in his fiction, to reform this binary division of knowledge. Notions of outside and inside are thematised from his first novel, *A Smuggler's Bible* (1966), but with his third book, *Ancient History: A*

*Paraphase* (1971), McElroy addresses this topic directly, uniting the abstract concepts of modern science with the intimacy of a confessional narrative.

*Ancient History* takes the form of a stream-of-consciousness confession that Cy, the novel's narrator, is writing after the sudden death of a man named Dom. Over the course of the novel, we learn that Cy, a social scientist, developed both a professional and a personal fascination with the theories of social form espoused by Dom, a writer and public intellectual. Cy's confession is unusual for a number of reasons, not least of which is his description of a field theory of energy that he uses to map and coordinate the important relationships in his life. Cy claims to possess a unique biological gift that he calls "the Vectoral Muscle" (81) which enables him to perceive a "Force-Field," the underlying network of physical and psychological forces through which people move and interact. Upon learning of Dom's death, Cy takes pause to reassess the field of his relationships and reflect on the limits of this system. *Ancient History's* account of human interaction engages with contemporaneous theories in the social sciences during a period when these disciplines were "drawn to the natural sciences, especially physics, as a source of methodology" (Middleton 8). This was a time when social scientists from a variety of disciplines imported theoretical models of matter and energy in their efforts to better understand the organisation of human behaviour and society. The field theory that Cy describes is a hybrid of the social and natural sciences, displaying language and concepts derived from both structuralism and quantum physics—two disciplines that aspire to penetrate to the inside of things in order to reveal the systems underlying society and matter, respectively. Drawing upon scientific concepts and forms, Cy explores a mode of knowledge that seeks to bridge

the gap between the intimate and abstract. Yet the confessional text that Cy composes during a night spent in Dom's now uninhabited apartment in an attempt to re-orientate himself within the field of his relations reveals that these modes of knowledge are not necessarily compatible, and that uniting the intimate and abstract involves certain risks.

In examining Cy's unusual use of form and spatial language, this chapter brings McElroy's scientific interests into conversation with another recurrent, though largely unexamined, theme of his work: the dynamics of relationships between men. More specifically, this chapter focuses on the way Cy conceptualises his relationship with Dom and two of his childhood friends, and his elaborate efforts to preserve distance between these men. While Cy's preoccupation with the men in his life may invite some readers to view this as a symptom of a repressed, perhaps even homoerotic, narrative, digging down for such an interpretation would ignore the novel's overt attempt to address the difficulty of negotiating homosocial bonds and, in fact, reinforce what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as "the diacritical opposition between the 'homosocial' and the 'homosexual'" (*Between Men* 2) in modern Western society. The binary form that organises homosocial and homosexual bonds between men, which Sedgwick identifies as "the schism in the male-homosocial spectrum created by homophobia" (201), is the internalisation of the hierarchy that opposes the masculine and the feminine within masculinity itself. And while the insecurities that Cy displays in his practice of keeping his male friends at a distance very well may be the product of a culture of homophobia and the anxieties that it instils in all men, Cy's interests in *Ancient History* are directed toward a better understanding of the complexity of male bonds, rather than exposing transgressions

and reaffirming a binary masculinity. As such, this chapter will argue that by examining the ambiguity of Cy's concern with the relationships between men in his life through field theory, he revives a notion of "the potential unbrokenness of a continuum" (*Between Men* 1) of male homosocial desire. This is not to suggest, however, that Cy presents an ideal model of relations between men, or even that he succeeds in bridging the homosocial-homosexual schism. Rather, by applying scientific concepts to intimate concerns, Cy attempts to form a connection between these domains typically gendered masculine and feminine, respectively. In so doing, the language of his field theory represents a vocabulary in which Cy is able to address his emotions while preserving a sense of security. *Ancient History* thus depicts the collision of two powerful forms within its confessional narrative: the network structure of field theory and the hierarchical gender binary that organises masculinity.

Joseph McElroy was born in New York City in 1930, where he completed a doctorate at Columbia in 1961 and later taught for many years at Queens College (Colby 465-6). He has authored nine novels over the course of his career, the most recent of which is *Cannonball* (2013), along with many short stories and essays. McElroy has come to be known as a cerebral postmodernist writer, an author who "does not compromise in his fiction, does not mix college humor with technology as Pynchon does" (*Anything Can Happen* 236). There is truth to this characterisation of McElroy's fiction, which, as Flore Chevaillier notes, "uses a large variety of paradigms (theory of chaos, cybernetics, biology, data processing, geology, botany, genetics, ecology, and relativity, as well as others)" (227). McElroy is not only interested in introducing scientific or technological themes to the subject matter of

his narratives—he incorporates concepts from an array of disciplines into the very form that his narratives take in order to explore what happens when forms collide in his fiction. In this regard, McElroy’s fiction provides an excellent example of Levine’s observation that “forms travel [...] by moving back and forth across aesthetic and social materials” (5). Critics have noted this characteristic of McElroy’s writing and suggested that this is indicative of his core philosophical interest. Tony Tanner posits that, “[b]eing a writer, [McElroy] is obviously concerned with the structure of a book, but he can clearly see this as part of a much larger matter – namely, what is the nature of the structure of systems? His interest is phenomenological and technological as well as literary” (208). McElroy, like Cy in *Ancient History*, writes in order to understand how systems and social bonds are organised and what it is that preserves their connections.

McElroy’s concern with ideas of inside and outside is apparent in both the form and content of *A Smuggler’s Bible*, McElroy’s first novel. The book is composed of eight chapters of a manuscript written by David Brooke that explore the relationships between himself and the people in his life. Preceding each of these chapters is a first-person narrative delivered by the voice of David’s unconscious, which informs the reader of the difficulty David is having finding the overarching connection between the eight sections of his manuscript which is due to be submitted to a publisher. The voice explains, “Here’s what he’s thinking: Are the manuscripts one manuscript simply as they now stand? After all, they’re crawling with links. [...] And if not? If not, then David has barely a week to join them” (4). Thus, questions of textual and social connectivity are explicit concerns for the narrative. Tanner elaborates that David’s “principal concern is the matter of connection. [...] Just what

is a connection, separation? What fits into a system, what makes a pattern, what constitutes a form?" (208). This is evident across multiple narrative levels of *A Smuggler's Bible*: first, there are the various direct and indirect connections among the people depicted throughout David's manuscript; next, from David's perspective as the author of the manuscript, there are various textual and thematic elements that link its chapters together; finally, there is the connection between David and his unconscious, a fraught dynamic that reveals the tensions and imbalance between inner and outer knowledge. This last point of narrative connection introduces questions about McElroy's representation of masculinity and self-knowledge. In an interview with Thomas LeClair, McElroy reflects on the way these themes are depicted in the tension between David's conscious and unconscious selves:

I was dimly aware when I was writing *A Smuggler's Bible* that the hedonistic, yet also strangely homosexual, homogenitive, voice in the interchapters who was urging Davey to have more, to take more, to be more, had something to do with a drive in me that I was afraid of. The desire in *Hind's Kidnap* [1969] to protect, to pacify, to soothe, to take care of others, which is one strain in my being, I now believe covered or sublimated the other feelings—aggression, ambition, pleasure-loving, even wild desires to have everything, to have it all. (*Anything Can Happen* 239)

Here, McElroy acknowledges his own experience of the binary division of masculine identity—the opposition between an aggressive, self-orientated masculinity and a nurturing, other-orientated masculinity—and the significance of this theme for his first two novels. With *Ancient History*, McElroy brings together these divergent modes of masculine identity in an effort to find points of connection and compatibility. However, this theme has been overshadowed by McElroy's formal experimentation and his engagement with scientific language and concepts, although these, too, have something to tell us about masculine identity and subjectivity.

The novel *Plus* (1977), for which McElroy is perhaps best known, demonstrates how he transports forms across traditional disciplinary boundaries. The novel is organised according to concepts drawn from the natural sciences, which inform the abstract language and cumulative structure of the text. *Plus* depicts a disembodied brain, called Imp Plus, coming to self-awareness as it orbits the earth in a small spacecraft deployed on a scientific mission. Told from the perspective of Imp, the text begins with a vocabulary that is constrained by Imp's limited mental capacity: "He found it all around. It opened and was close. He felt it was himself, but felt it more" (3). The reader's understanding of the narrative thus progresses alongside Imp's recuperation of a vocabulary. In an essay entitled "Fiction a Field of Growth," McElroy explains the inextricable link between form and content in *Plus*:

The growing of the actual body [Imp's brain] prepared and paralleled the growing and healing of a necessary consciousness—in turn alive and embodied in its words—its reacquisition of language, and the groping unforeseeable gathering of words hearing other words—living *with* this growth and functioning not only as medium and sign but as really limbs. So the *words* have a body and are not apart from the biology. (31, emphasis in original)

McElroy reveals here a profound fascination with the possibilities of intertwining narrative form and thematic concerns, which led him to organise *Plus* according to a biological model of growth.<sup>29</sup> This is, undoubtedly, an unusual example of how forms travel, but it demonstrates how McElroy conceives of the novel as a laboratory where he can observe collisions between disparate forms.

Given the linguistic experimentation of *Plus* and the monumental length and scope of his next novel, *Women and Men* (1987), it is little wonder that McElroy has

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<sup>29</sup> In the front-matter of *Plus*, McElroy cites Lehninger's *Bioenergetics: The Molecular Basis of Biological Energy Transformations*, Noback's *The Human Nervous System*, and Weiss's *Principles of Development*, which suggests the efforts he made in his attempt to reproduce an authentic model of development in the novel.

garnered the reputation of an author who is “less interested in human beings than in the complexity of global systems” (Chevaillier 228). Yet throughout his career McElroy has insisted that his fascination with science resides precisely in what it enables us to discover about ourselves as human beings. For instance, McElroy remarks that his novels draw upon “science and technology in their idioms and horizons [...] in a time when these odd and sometimes remote systems have threatened us with self-knowledge” (“Fiction a Field” 1). Science is not opposed to subjectivity in McElroy’s view; rather, it presents us with knowledge about ourselves that we may not yet be prepared to accept. While the increasingly specialised knowledge in the sciences may seem alienating to many interested in literary fiction, as C. P. Snow famously observed in his account of the “Two Cultures,” McElroy attributes great importance to finding points of connection between these fields of knowledge. Thus, in addition to its syntactic representation of the growth of an organic being, we may also consider *Plus* as a confessional narrative. Imp Plus engages in an exercise of linguistic self-examination that allows it to “grow” both physically and psychologically, ultimately enabling it to achieve autonomy from the human forces overseeing its progress from Earth. Science is not impersonal in this book; instead, it facilitates a kind of intimate knowledge that is mediated through techniques and vocabularies that appear impersonal to many. In this sense, *Plus* is a logical extension of the forms, themes, and language explored in its confessional predecessor, *Ancient History*. Yet where *Plus* is primarily concerned with relations between organic matter, *Ancient History* addresses relations in a more familiar, though no less complex, social context.

The combination of scientific and literary elements in *Ancient History* prompts Joseph Tabbi to suggest that the book “occupies a special transitional place in [McElroy’s] *oeuvre* between the predominant realism of the early novels and the uncompromising experimentalism of the later” (“Generous Paranoia” 86, emphasis in original). Much like David in *A Smuggler’s Bible*, Cy is deeply preoccupied with the nature of connections, both intimate and abstract. Unlike David, however, Cy draws upon scientific concepts in the effort to achieve a better understanding of human relations. Several critics, including Tanner, Tabbi, and LeClair, have remarked upon the significance of structure and form in *Ancient History*, and they have taken seriously Cy’s efforts to apply scientific theories to the study of personal relationships. Tanner, noting the confluence of the intimate and the abstract in the novel, explains that the issues that trouble Cy “concern the geometrics and physics of relationships” and that the use of technical language is not arbitrary—“McElroy really wants to know what happens in terms of mass and energy when, say, you dive off a board into a pool or when, say, two people move into each other’s orbit and fall in love” (223, 225). What Tanner does not consider, however, are the risks that come with applying abstract concepts to intimate matters. Personal, or inside, forms of knowledge provide certain affordances that may be displaced or obscured when brought into contact with scientific forms, and vice versa. This is precisely the focus of Foucault’s critique of the appropriation of confession by scientific discourses in the nineteenth century for the “production of truth” (*Will to Knowledge* 65) and the operation of power. In submitting his personal relationships to scientific modes of analysis, Cy risks becoming preoccupied with discovering the quantifiable and ignoring the intimacy of human bonds.

Tabbi also attends to the significance of Cy's unusual scientific theories in his analysis of the novel. Although a fascination with hidden structures is often associated with paranoia in postmodern literature, Tabbi identifies an optimistic outlook in McElroy's "conceptual commitment to *systems of connection* among individuals, events, and modes of communication that are usually thought to be unrelated" (90-1, emphasis in original). Tabbi detects in McElroy's fiction a sense of "faith [...] in the liberating power of the syncretic imagination" (91). *Ancient History*, however, does not make it easy for the reader to appreciate this syncretism. LeClair reflects that "[b]ecause [Cy's] language is 'unexpected'—specialized terms out of context, abstract concepts used for a private purpose, mixed jargon, invented terms, allusions with multiple possibilities—it has an informational density that is difficult, as Cy puts it, 'to receive'" (24). Perhaps it is as a result of the peculiarity of this language in *Ancient History* that several important features of the novel have failed to capture the attention of critics. Significantly, the confessional form of the novel has received only passing remarks, while masculinity has been discussed in limited terms despite Cy's explicit anxiety about the dynamics of his male friendships. It is my contention that these features of *Ancient History*, these forms, are of great significance for Cy and, in conjunction with the particular intellectual context to which the novel alludes, provide unique insight into the dynamics of a particularly creative and turbulent period of American intellectual life.

Both Tanner and Tabbi point, quite rightly, to the influence of Norman Mailer on *Ancient History* both as a model for the controversial public intellectual Dom and as an author whose writing draws on technical language to describe social conditions. Yet one might go even further and point to a specific essay, Mailer's

“The White Negro” (1957), as a source of inspiration for this novel. In this text, Mailer anticipates the coming of a revolutionary shift in the youth of the United States against prevailing social conventions. The evolution of the “hipster,” Mailer writes, “may erupt as a psychically armed rebellion whose sexual impetus may rebound against the antisexual foundation of every organized power in America, and bring into the air such animosities, antipathies, and new conflicts of interest that the mean empty hypocrisies of mass conformity will no longer work” (356). Mailer envisions this as a transformative period for white masculinity, which draws inspiration from marginalised African-American culture and turns away from its European roots. Yet this is a decidedly psychological, rather than material, development. For Mailer, the transformation develops in the minds of young white men and may be described as a kind of “philosophical psychopathy” (343). He elaborates that the “white negro” is “a man interested not only in the dangerous imperatives of his psychopathy but in codifying, at least for himself, the suppositions on which his inner universe is constructed” (343) in an effort “to create a new nervous system” (345). Mailer’s vision for a psychological revolution is, quite evidently, aimed at liberating white men. Yet buried amongst his misogyny and racism, there are hints of a positive homosocial revolution.

Mailer calls for “a new language, but a new popular language” (353) that will enable men to communicate the reality of their experience. He places great emphasis on the role of the body for this new language, stating that “without the illumination of the voice and the articulation of the face and body [the language] remains hopelessly incommunicative” (353). It is this attention to masculinity, language, and the body that appears to have inspired McElroy’s characterisation of Dom in *Ancient*

*History*. Even more significantly, Mailer writes that this new language is “a language for the microcosm, in this case, man, for it takes the immediate experiences of any passing man and magnifies the dynamic of his movements, not specifically but abstractly so that he is seen more as a vector in a network of forces than as a static character in a crystallized field” (348-9). The translation of ordinary experience into scientific abstraction that Mailer evokes in this passage is a key reference for the theory of the Force-Field, which Cy is able to map with the assistance of the Vectoral Muscle. The Force-Field, Cy explains, is a network that encompasses all people, who appear in it as “time-warped centers of attractive force” (185) and who unknowingly emit vectors of intention or potential that, cumulatively, appear in the field as “many forces acting in many directions through many distances” (132). He elaborates that the Force-Field’s “overpopulated commonwealth of distances can be ruled only in the exercise of a rare gift. This consists in that ripe triangle arcing between (a) the poly-linked Pons Varolii, (b) the point in the Spinal Bulb where winking is controlled, and (c) a point so perfectly between the cerebral hemispheres as to be of neither” (81). This peculiar description of the Vectoral Muscle, a fortuitous, and intangible correlation of points in the body, expands on Mailer’s scientific imagery to engage with the dilemma of the mind-body dualism. The risk that emerges with Cy’s field theory is that by viewing people in abstract, scientific terms, he will fail to acknowledge their independent subjectivity, the quality that distinguishes human beings. The dilemma of the mind-body dualism, as we will see, is part of a series of binary forms that have prompted feminist critics to challenge the gender hierarchy implicit in scientific thought.

The mind-body, or Cartesian, dualism, is a concept deeply entrenched in Western notions of subjectivity, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis. This binary form promotes the idea of a fundamental separation within the self between mind and body, where the mind is regarded as superior, and even in opposition, to the body. The hierarchical binary that separates mind from body fits into a series of binary relations that are tied to the relation between genders. In *Reflections on Gender and Science*, Evelyn Fox Keller asserts that “the deeply rooted popular mythology that casts objectivity, reason, and mind as male, and subjectivity, feeling, and nature as female” (6-7) has had a profound influence on the culture, methods, and values of the natural sciences. Drawing upon feminist theories, Keller examines “how ideologies of gender and science inform each other in their mutual construction” (8). Keller traces the significance of gender in science from its grounding in the philosophy of Ancient Greece and into the modern world, revealing the persistent, though unacknowledged, influence of masculinist ideals. She states that “our ‘laws of nature’ are more than simple expressions of the results of objective inquiry or of political and social pressures: they must also be read for their personal—and by tradition, masculine—content” (10). Keller points out that “the ideology of modern science, along with its undeniable success, carries within it its own form of projection: the projection of disinterest, of autonomy, of alienation” (70). These impersonal scientific values are associated with the abstract, masculine faculty of the mind. Keller contends that “[s]cience bears the imprint of its genderization not only in the ways it is used but in the description of reality it offers—even in the relation of the scientist to the description” (78-9). This claim is significant for the way we assess Cy’s field theory and his capacity to interpret the

energetic potential of the people around him. Keller remarks that “[n]ot only are mind and nature assigned a gender, but in characterizing scientific and objective thought as masculine, the very activity by which the knower can acquire knowledge is also genderized. The relation between knower and known is one of distance and separation” (79). This account of the masculine knower observing and measuring the feminine observed from a distance illustrates the unequal power relations that characterise scientific practices. As we consider Cy’s attempt to develop a hybrid scientific method that unsettles such hierarchies, it will be important to consider the balance of power in his techniques and watch for instances where mind dominates and distances itself from body. Before examining Cy’s confessional narrative, however, it will first be necessary to examine the particular scientific context in which he composes his narrative.

*Ancient History* draws upon concepts from two distinct scientific fields that had a significant impact in America and on the world during the twentieth century: modern physics and structuralism. Physics, of course, played a decisive role in bringing the Second World War to a close with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The subsequent Cold War period in the United States, writes Peter Middleton, was “a time when science’s hegemony was pervasive,” even “threatening [...] the transfer of creative power from the arts to the sciences” (3, 4). Yet, as Middleton observes of numerous American poets in his book, not all artists responded to the rise of science with suspicion or hostility. Many writers, including McElroy, found that “[t]hinking about composite facts such as time and space with accuracy and tests of truth, working with imagined sciences in field compositions, and penetrating the unknown, discovering laws or forms in all things” (Middleton

21) was a liberating and necessary development for literature of the time. Thus, scientific concepts and forms circulated throughout American culture during the post-war decades and helped to shape new ideas about subjectivity and identity, as the language of Mailer's account of the hipster demonstrates.

In *Ancient History*, Cy presents a field theory derived from physics whose network form he contrasts with the binary form that is central to the structuralism that he employs in his work as a social scientist. We learn from Cy's account that he works in "social anthropology" (70) and his research recently underwent a shift "from Jewish-Negro myth-friction in southeast Brooklyn to hors d'oeuvre ceremony on the Heights" (181). While there is parody in this image of an anthropologist studying hors d'oeuvre, it also signals the prevalence of the scientific analysis of human behaviour, which leads Cy to describe his field derisively as "Structural Anthroponia" (143). This latter title alludes to structural anthropology, the method developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, which sought to bring scientific rigor to the interpretive practices of anthropology. This endeavour fits into the rise of scientific rationality to disciplines beyond the borders of the natural sciences. Middleton observes that "[s]ociologists and psychologists who aspired to put their own fields on a more sound footing were drawn to the natural sciences, especially physics, as a source of methodology" (Middleton 8). Lévi-Strauss developed his theory of structural anthropology after a fortuitous encounter with linguist Roman Jakobson in New York in the 1940s, where both were living as refugees from the war in

Europe.<sup>30</sup> During their time in New York, writes Greif, Jakobson introduced Lévi-Strauss to the work “of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure” (294), who posited the distinction between “*langue* from *parole*” whereby “[t]he former is a system, an institution, a set of interpersonal rules and norms, while the latter comprises the actual manifestations of the system in speech and writing” (Culler 8). As a result, explains Jonathan Culler, “the linguist’s task is not to study utterances for their own sake; they are of interest to him only in so far as they provide evidence about the nature of the underlying system” (8). Saussure’s theory provides the foundation for the development of structuralism by subsequent linguists who sought to catalogue the structures underlying language, as well as theorists in other fields who applied this methodology to various areas of social and cultural life. Structuralism thus deploys a depth-model of interpretation to the objects of its inquiry.

The structuralist methodology proved amenable to Lévi-Strauss’s ambition to uncover the rules that organise social relations. Greif observes that this was a natural fit for the anthropologist, whose

Earliest intellectual formation derived from musing upon the ‘unconscious structures’ of the human mind and human history discoverable in his first masters, Freud and Marx. Structural reduction should offer a model of universal analysis with even greater scientific and mathematical perspicuity than theirs, if the right minimal elements were identified. (295)

In *Structural Anthropology* (1963), Lévi-Strauss draws upon the work of the Russian linguist Nikolai Troubetzkoy to describe the “four basic operations” of structural linguistics, which he applies to the field of anthropology:

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<sup>30</sup> Greif explains that both Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson received visas to work in New York for “a new initiative, the *École Libre des Hautes Études*, chartered independently but closely allied with the Free French forces of Charles de Gaulle and anti-Vichy networks springing up globally after the fall of France” (294).

First, structural linguistics shifts from the study of *conscious* linguistic phenomena to study of their *unconscious* infrastructure; second, it does not treat *terms* as independent entities, taking instead as its basis of analysis the *relations* between terms; third, it introduces the concept of *system*—‘Modern phonemics does not merely proclaim that phonemes are always part of a system; it *shows* concrete phonemic systems and elucidates their structure’—; finally, structural linguistics aims at discovering *general laws*. (33, emphasis in original)

Significantly for Cy’s narrative in *Ancient History*, Lévi-Strauss adapts the structural linguist’s attention to the relations between terms to focus upon kinship relations in social systems. And, as Culler remarks, “the relations that are most important in structural analysis are the simplest: binary oppositions” (14). Yet the binary terms that Lévi-Strauss identifies are not necessarily the most obvious. He diverges from the views of his contemporaries by rejecting the assumption “that the biological family constitutes the point of departure from which all societies elaborate their kinship systems” and asserts, instead, “[a] kinship system does not consist in the objective ties of descent or consanguinity between individuals. It exists only in human consciousness; it is an arbitrary system of representations, not the spontaneous development of a real situation” (50). Lévi-Strauss looks at the larger network of relations in order to understand the conditions that enable a society to endure, which leads him to an unexpected finding about the underlying structure of marriage. Sedgwick cites Lévi-Strauss on this topic in her study of male homosocial desire: “[t]he total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners” (qtd. in *Between Men* 26). While this may not be the way that we now typically view the dynamics of marriage in the West, this model of exchange between men still organises the underlying structure of modern conventions. Much

like Lévi-Strauss and Sedgwick, Cy focuses on the relations between men in his efforts to better grasp the structure underlying social relations.

The aspect of Lévi-Strauss's theory of structural anthropology that Cy finds constricting, however, appears to lie in the diminished significance that it attributes to individual subjects. As noted above, it is not the individual who speaks or acts that is important for practitioners of structuralism, but rather how their speech or action reveals the underlying structure. The binary relationship between *langue* and *parole* is also hierarchical, with the system occupying a privileged position over the individual speech acts in structuralist analysis. Structuralism thus enables a critique of subjectivity, as Culler observes:

Once the conscious subject is deprived of its role as source of meaning – once meaning is explained in terms of conventional systems which may escape the grasp of the conscious subject – the self can no longer be identified with consciousness. It is 'dissolved' as its functions are taken up by a variety of interpersonal systems that operate through it. The human sciences, which begin by making man an object of knowledge, find, as their work advances, that 'man' disappears under structural analysis. (28)

On the one hand, structuralism presents individuals as inextricably linked to the culture and society in which they are raised and this invites us to see all human societies as sharing in certain essential organising principles; on the other hand, however, it devalues the ethical and creative potential of the individual, a cornerstone of humanist thought. For this reason, the ideas of Lévi-Strauss and fellow structuralists came to be known as "antihumanism" (Greif 285). Despite the loss of status for the subject, Culler provides some consolation in the necessity of subjects for the maintenance of these structures: "[the individual] may no longer be the origin of meaning, but meaning must move through him" (30). By locating ourselves in relation to these structures, by discovering the rules according to which they operate,

we may gain the capacity to decide what we will allow to move through us, and what we will resist. While Cy shares in the structuralist ambition to uncover “the secret structures” (*Ancient History* 147) that organise us as subjects, he envisions a form of relations that resists the diminishment of the individual, a form of relationality that unites rather than divides: field theory.

Cy’s fascination with Dom originates in the latter’s development of “a science called Structural Activism,” which presents a “way of accommodating Dialectic and Dichotomy to Field and Collaboration” (79, 183). Cy finds in this theory a way to break free of the constraints and suspicions that “Structural Anthroponia” implies. By “Field,” Cy explains, Dom envisions “a mode that lowers, eases, even coolly ousts ancient hectic hierarchies that have set the mass of us or our parts discretely off from each other or from the mass of our setting” (187). In contrast to the “dialectic,” “dichotomy,” and “hierarchies” that are fundamental to most theories of social systems, from Marx and Freud to Lévi-Strauss, Dom’s field theory enables Cy to see the social as an interconnected network of relations, a unity that cannot be reduced to binary oppositions or hierarchies of power. Field theory, as N. Katherine Hayles explains in *The Cosmic Web* (1984), has a long history in physics, but in its modern formulation it denotes a theory that emerges as an explanation for observations unanswerable by the conventions of Newtonian physics. Hayles describes how “Newtonian mechanics,” which upholds “the atomistic, ‘common sense’ perspective we are all familiar with that views the world as composed of objects situated in an empty, rectilinear space and moving through time in one dimension,” was upset by a new theory, “the field concept” (16, 9). This concept, writes Hayles, produced “a revolution in world view,” that replaced the

Newtonian model with a theory whose “distinguishing characteristics [...] are its fluid dynamic nature, the inclusion of the observer, the absence of detachable parts, and the mutuality of component interactions” (15). In *Fiction in the Quantum Universe* (1992), Susan Strehle likewise asserts that “the new physics has reimagined reality” and posits that “the new reality may be described as relative, discontinuous, energetic, statistical, subjective, and uncertain” (13). At the centre of this theory is the notion that everything is “interconnected by means of a mediating field” (Hayles 41).

The field that mediates interactions between entities has a profound influence on how we conceptualise relations. In contrast to the Newtonian idea “of action at a distance, in which X somehow *directly* affects some Y that it does not touch,” field theory proposes that the force emitted by X is transmitted across, and interacts with, a field to affect Y: “Although X may somehow ‘cause’ or anchor the field, we do not say that X itself affects Y. The potential for force is in the field, not in the magnet” (Martin 7, emphasis in original). In field theory, writes Strehle, “[s]pace, time, and matter are not discrete entities but rather interacting aspects of the curved gravitational field” (10). This presents a significant shift in conventional ideas of causality, introducing a mediating field of potential that intervenes between the interactions of all objects. Furthermore, this theory undermines the hierarchy separating observer and observed that is an implicit element of structuralism, and scientific methods more generally; Strehle cites Heisenberg’s observation “that subatomic reality changes with observation—and, even more radically, is constituted by the choices the observer makes from an involved vantage” (12-3). The influence of the observer on the object of study requires scientists to evaluate the attitudes and

values underlying their practices. The scientific model that emerges with quantum physics appears to offer an alternative worldview that would require scientists to practice self-examination and acknowledge potential biases.

While field theory provides physicists with a clearer understanding of the complex behaviour of particles, Middleton, Hayles, and Strehle all remark upon the influence of this new worldview in the fiction of many twentieth-century authors—particularly its impact on experimentation in textual forms and notions of subjectivity. In particular, Strehle observes, writers of fiction have recognised that the network form of the field model poses a challenge to the hierarchical gender binary embedded in the Newtonian worldview. She writes,

Responding to the theoretical assumptions newly important in physics, as well as in political philosophy and feminism, the subject and object become permeable and open to reciprocity and exchange. Subjectivity extends to women as well as men; it is engaged, interested, and open to dialogue with other beings and with the world. The subject does not lose itself in inquiry, nor does it assert power over the objects of its study. Rather, the subject engages the object in an unfolding process of questioning, in which each modifies the other without combat, conquest, or loss to either side. (164)

This new model of physics presents science as an amalgam of objective and subjective knowledge that cannot easily be separated—precisely what McElroy seeks in his ambition to unite inside and outside knowledge. The uncertain and subjective aspects of quantum field theory re-introduce characteristics that we typically associate with the condition of human nature and so this revolution in the sciences might be thought of as a re-imagining of humanism after the anti-humanism of structuralist theory. While this profound shift in physics presents writers with compelling new ways of conceptualising subjectivity and knowledge, Cy's narrative reveals the challenges and consequences of integrating new forms into accepted ideas about the world.

Cy addresses his written confession to Dom, whose body, we learn in the novel's opening pages, has minutes earlier been removed from his apartment by paramedics, dead of an apparent suicide. Cy, who recently moved into the building with his family, observes this scene from the hallway outside. He explains that, although he had only met Dom once before, he had become fascinated with his theory of Structural Activism and had come to speak with Dom in the hope that he would be able to provide insight into a problem Cy had encountered. Cy explains that, while he is inspired by Dom's account of "a mode that lowers, eases, even coolly ousts ancient hectic hierarchies," he finds it difficult to reconcile this concept with the organisation of the world that he has always known. In an outburst of frustration, Cy exclaims: "my eyes cry out, Can all that other life I know about subside into some rankless field and lose its poignant fussy orders?" (187). This passage reveals the key tension in *Ancient History*; Dom's theory does not merely represent a change in professional methodology for Cy, but a fundamental transformation in the way he perceives and engages with the world around him, including the well-established dynamics of his personal relationships. It is this dilemma that has brought Cy to Dom's apartment, though it seems he has come too late. Noticing that the police have left the door to Dom's apartment unlocked, Cy impulsively slips into the space, where he finds himself compelled to write a confession in an attempt to make sense of the loss of this influential figure and to reflect upon his own preoccupations with the order of his social relations.

Cy conceives of his experience in Dom's apartment and the narrative that he composes as features of a hybrid form that he calls a "paraphase" (237)—the term which appears in the subtitle to *Ancient History*, distinguishing the form of text from

“a novel” or “a confession.” This form, as Cy describes it, draws upon the enclosed space and retrospective narrative associated with confession and the interconnected network conceptualised in field theory. These forms collide in Cy’s narrative attempt to understand his immediate circumstances and to work through the questions about order that brought him to Dom’s apartment in the first place. The word “paraphase” alludes, of course, to the notion of “paraphrase,” which is “[a] rewording of something written or spoken by someone else, especially with the aim of making the sense clearer” (*OED*). This is evidently what Cy attempts to do with his narrative, as he examines his past—his personal “ancient history”—in an effort to make sense of the present. But as “phase” suggests, Cy places emphasis on the temporal component of his narrative. In fact, Cy theorises that by entering Dom’s apartment at this particular moment, so soon after the removal of Dom’s body, he has entered an exceptional phase or state that exists apart from ordinary time, perhaps an effect of the residual pull of the vacuum created in the field by Dom’s death. Cy presents several descriptions of this state over the course of the night. He writes, for instance, “[w]e have warped to a soft set of coordinates that are not time, or are beside its point” (*Ancient History* 128); and, later, he remarks that time in Dom’s apartment “now spreads like an inestimably charged field ever, yet, within the coördinates of this room, to a mode like time, but solute” (236-7). Cy’s experience in this charged state of concentrated time does not enable him to alter past events or perform some other astonishing act; rather, the enclosed space of the apartment empowers him to reflect on his past as though it were spread out like a field rather than viewing it as a linear sequence following a causal logic. Instead of looking for a string of causes and effects that leads him from his childhood to the present, Cy examines his past for

patterns that lead to, at most, a statistical understanding of events as is the case with quantum physics. Cy's confession thus proceeds in a non-linear manner, shifting between scenes from his past in a seemingly random order. Tabbi reflects that, although it seems like Cy's "narrative hardly progresses at all [...] there is, nevertheless, a moment by moment *accumulation* of details as Cy obsessively returns to particular, highly charged words and phrases" (89, emphasis in original). It is this formal quality that unites the intimate, confessional form with the abstract theories of quantum physics in the paraphrase. The risk that emerges in viewing the past in this manner, however, is that Cy will succumb to a relativism that prevents him from recognising the effects of his actions.

Cy ascribes great symbolic importance to the enclosed space of Dom's apartment, a form that evokes the confessional box. He suspects that, in some manner, he is still able to communicate with Dom, though Dom cannot respond. Cy recounts that while waiting for a chance to enter unnoticed he sensed that "somehow your apartment watched" (2). Anthropomorphising Dom's apartment, Cy imparts to the space a residual psychological quality of Dom himself. He even describes Dom in his absence as an "ideal listener alive in the space of your things here" (153). This remark about Dom's apartment aligns with Docherty's observation that "[t]he confessional is a site of an essential silence. That is to say: the confessional box represents a *reduction* of space and of time: it is a 'here-now' that cannot be represented (its words cannot be rehearsed again, for the confessor is sworn to silence), and it is thus a kind of space that is nowhere: a utopia" (72-3, emphasis in original). This utopian space, note Hepworth and Turner, represents a point of exchange "between private conscience and public order" (80). While many critics,

like Foucault, regard the relationship between the individual and society as antagonistic and focus on the coercive potential of confession, this practice might also be viewed as “a socially constructed means of celebrating the value for the individual and society of sincerity and honesty” (Hepworth and Turner 147).

Confession, in other words, has the potential to support a relationship of mutual trust between individual and society. Cy’s confessional paraphrase appears to be a tentative effort towards communicating honestly and placing trust in his listener. Yet, despite Cy’s remarks about Dom’s residual presence in the apartment, it is difficult to ignore the distance that now separates the two men. One cannot help but wonder if it is Dom’s absence that makes it possible for Cy to express himself. This scepticism is tied to the particular reason that Cy has come to Dom’s apartment, which, Cy explains, was to address the distance and control he preserved in his relationships with his male friends.

Cy devotes much of his confession to examining his friendship with Al and Bob, two friends he has known since childhood. Although he has shared such a long friendship with these men, Cy explains that “Al and Bob have never met, or at least to my knowledge hadn’t until their respective arrivals in the city yesterday. [...] Till now their sole bond has been me” (5). He goes on to confide “that over the years by design I’ve kept Bob and Al from meeting” (6), although his reasons for doing so appear merely speculative: “Were they two men who would stir each other’s worst colors? Apart, they are dreadfully alive for me” (7). Cy does not elaborate on what it is, precisely, about keeping Al and Bob apart that creates this sense of vitality for him. Yet his descriptions of the two reveal that he conceives of them as binary opposites. This idea is embedded in his early memories of their friendships:

Summers I knew Al, a country boy. Soon after Labor Day I turned to Bob who spent summers at the ocean. Yes, after fields of goldenrod and the serial flow of bugs finely buzzing above the warm tar road that Al and I wildly pedalled, my friendship with my Poly classmate Bob returned as cleanly exercising as new kinds of math problems and as alien and promising as the paint smell in my parents' city apartment. (5)

Although this passage appears to be a relatively mundane description of childhood routines, it demonstrates how Cy has mapped his friendships with Al and Bob across a series of binary oppositions. First, there is the opposition between temporal periods—Cy associates Al with summer holidays and Bob with the academic year. Next, there is the contrast between life in the country, associated with exterior space (“fields of goldenrods,” “the warm tar road”), and life in the city, which he aligns with interior space (his “parents’ city apartment”). Finally, there is the opposition of the body, which Cy evokes in the imagery of time spent cycling with Al, and the mind, brought forth in the connection between Bob and “new kinds of math problems.” It is not simply a fear that Al and Bob might not get along that worries Cy—it is, rather, that the opposition of these two men represents a whole series of binaries that fundamentally structure Cy’s life. By keeping the two men apart, Cy has found a way to reinforce this series of binaries and to exercise a semblance of control over the order of the world. The distance that he keeps between Al and Bob also reveals that distance in his own relationship with each of these men.

The origins of Cy’s desire for an orderly, binary world lie in his difficulties with sleep. He explains that his experience of the states of sleep and wakefulness—the opposition of consciousness and unconsciousness—are unstable. He writes,

My puzzle with sleep, Dom, was never falling into it but out. I wake too soon. I sleep too fast. My fall from sleep—I’m a *desomn*—brings not just the solitary shock that, as I pivot from one locus to another, I can’t ever get ready for; no, in all fairness to the rhythms that be, this pivotal precipice reveals, often for as much as a minute or more, my chairs and walls, shadows and

shelves, optical irritants or my favorite print, as if they were newly unknown. And that unholy plummet-swing of waking revalues these phenomenal possessions of mine by wily new balances. (9, emphasis in original)

In this confused, indeterminate state between sleep and wakefulness, Cy finds himself unable to act and fearful of the world around him. He remarks that “[i]t is no addict thief or random murderer there in Ev’s kitchen, but it honors my paralyzed alert as if it were” (10). This sensation, commonly known as sleep paralysis, describes a disconnection between body and mind that leaves Cy feeling exposed and vulnerable in an environment that he does not recognise.<sup>31</sup> In this condition, he perceives the familiar objects that fill his home as unknown and even hostile figures. It is this uncontrollable experience of a faulty binary that separates conscious and unconscious experience that underlies Cy’s preoccupation with securing that the other areas of his life demonstrate a strict binary order. Furthermore, the action of “falling,” which is how Cy characterises the movement from sleep to wakefulness, comes to hold symbolic importance in his narrative. He describes this action in terms of a parabola, a symmetrical curve, which represents the bond that joins “one locus to another” and allows him to trace “that unholy plummet-swing of waking.” Cy, who describes himself as a “parabolist” (37), looks to mathematics and to science to define the connections between states (or people, or spaces) in terms of a parabolic curve. The parabola is a form that recurs throughout Cy’s narrative, joining together images of diving or falling scattered throughout his past.

Cy’s experience of sleep paralysis and his perception of a disorderly gap between conscious and unconscious states leads him to search for security in clearly

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<sup>31</sup> *A Dictionary of Psychology* defines sleep paralysis as “[a] condition in which REM atonia is experienced in the waking state. Such episodes typically occur immediately after waking or shortly before falling asleep. They are often frightening and may be accompanied by out-of-body experiences.”

defined binary oppositions elsewhere in the world. He extends this effort from a personal theory of order to a professional methodology in his work as a social scientist practicing structural anthropology. The translation of his theory from private to public life does not represent a weakness in the binary separating these dimensions, but, instead, this validates Cy's faith in his method. However, the application of binary oppositions to social or cultural structures, as previously discussed, is often associated with implicit, if not explicit, values that oppose masculinity and femininity in a hierarchical relation. Women are peripheral figures in Cy's confession. Cy speaks fondly of his wife, Ev, although he also admits lying to her about his reasons for leaving their apartment that evening and even claims to hold "power over her" (117). This seems to be typical of the women in McElroy's fiction. Commenting on the depiction of David's wife in *A Smuggler's Bible*, Tanner remarks that "Ellen, and this seems to be true of most of the important women in McElroy's work (particularly the wives of the protagonists), seems to be beyond the need of narrative" (212). Tanner does not elaborate on why it is that women do not seem to share the need for narrative in McElroy's fiction, nor why narrative is so troubling for men. While Tanner seems to be implying here that women in McElroy's fiction are superior to men, since their lack of narrating drive indicates that they are, perhaps, more level-headed or already possess a solid grasp of narrative connections, his analysis nonetheless glosses over an important issue in McElroy's work. Furthermore, Tanner also overlooks the significance of this observation about women for the tensions, both internal and external, between men in McElroy's fiction. It is my contention that both the absence of prominent female characters and

the preoccupation with relationships between men are features of the dilemma that masculinity poses for Cy and the other male narrators of McElroy's early novels.

The psychological portrait of Cy that his confession presents is that of a sensitive, nostalgic, and socially aloof man, whose capacity for self-criticism is, at times, overpowered by a desire for knowledge and control. Cy embodies a cerebral masculinity that holds the rational in opposition to the emotional. In *Unreasonable Men*, a study of masculinity and social theory, Seidler posits that this masculine type has its origins in Enlightenment values. He explains, "[w]e learn to accept that only what can be measured or quantified is real for, with Descartes, we are assured that reality is organised in mathematical terms. It is through reason that we can supposedly move beyond the realm of appearances to lay bare the structure of reality itself" (61). Masculinity, in this account, associates reason with depth and substance, while emotion represents only the ephemeral surface of things. This recalls McElroy's distinction between outside and inside knowledge, the one scientific and objective and the other intimate and subjective. Cy's professional work represents a search for the deep, fixed structures that undergird social relations. The detachment necessary to carry out anthropological observation and to identify buried structures carries over into Cy's personal life to define many of his relationships, particularly those with other men.

Cy often uses dispassionate, technical language to describe personal or emotional concerns; for instance, he refers to the emotional state of his stepson, Ted, after the divorce of his parents and the death of his father as "an orbit of filial distraction" (*Ancient History* 21). This is a strangely impersonal way to describe his stepson's experience of change and loss. And, according to Ted, Cy's technical

language is not reserved for professional work or his private musings, but also appears in his everyday musings: “He says I sound like I ran my words through some old-fashioned computer” (17). Despite his emotional detachment towards his stepson, Cy reveals that there is an aggressive side to his personality. Reflecting on the death of Ev’s ex-husband, Doug, Cy confides to Dom: “I can’t call it the anniversary of Doug’s suicide: only the anniversary of its eve: or if a Field-Rear Agnostician insists upon an anniversary, then say tonight was the calendar night Doug and I had it out while Al looked on embarrassed” (220). The implication here is that Cy’s behaviour may have contributed to Doug’s suicide. Cy does not reveal what was said between the men, but this confession presents us with an image of Cy that seems to conflict with his otherwise rational, controlled persona. This is not to suggest that his confession is deceptive, but, rather, to acknowledge the artificial, gendered binary separating reason and emotion that is frequently a source of discord in homosocial relations.

Given the tension that characterises Cy’s relationships with Ted and Doug, and the control he exercises over his friendships with Al and Bob, Cy’s theory of the Vectoral Muscle represents an alternative model of conceptualising relationships that challenges the fixed logic of binary thinking. Instead of thinking in terms of opposites, the Vectoral Muscle enables Cy to visualise intricate unities and to understand the complexity of human nature. He explains that the Vectoral Muscle has its origins in the work of sixteenth-century physician: “It was [Constanzo] Varolio who noted that the cerebral cavities communicate, and it’s only fair to say that if I’d never come across the properly memorial pons Varolii, Varolio’s Bridge (that mass of nerves across the belly of the brain at the anterior end of the Spinal

Bulb), I might never have located the Vectoral Muscle” (209). This bridge, which connects the two hemispheres of the brain and enables them to communicate, represents for Cy a model of collaboration. This notion emboldens Cy to envision modes of relationality that are not rooted in binary logic. He goes on to explain the notable characteristics of the Vectoral Muscle: “(a) the vectoral muscle is rare even among its principal possessors, Only Children; (b) if you have it, you can perceive Field-State; but (c) only if you have a V.M. can you come down with the dreaded Vectoral Dystrophy which shrinks Field to Dichotomy. The relation of this result to problems of parabolic locus should by now be clear” (220). Despite its technical jargon, there is something strangely juvenile about Cy’s description of the Vectoral Muscle—it displays the kind of imaginative logic that might be found in children’s games. Yet this may be precisely the point. In contrast to the well-defined methodology of structuralism, the theory of the Vectoral Muscle and the Field-State encourages Cy to shed his rational preconceptions and to engage imaginatively and emotionally with the world around him. In contrast to the orderly, objective Newtonian worldview that characterises structuralism, Cy now perceives the world in terms of abstract forces and vectors that move through a field. He reflects, “[g]reat distances at which forces in a field occultly but exactly work—aren’t they, Dom, like those silences love knows it does not have to fill?” (43). This comparison conjures a sense of harmony between the abstract and the intimate, between outside knowledge and inside knowledge.

The Vectoral Muscle breaks with similar concepts that attribute agency or reason to an internal source, like the soul or the mind, by drawing attention to the field that connects all people. Instead of seeing himself as a “self-made man,” that

distinctly American formulation of isolated masculinity, Cy comes to “feel all the vectors whose sensitive product I am” (148). Cy recognises that he is composed of the complex intertwining of his own vectors and those of others—a synthesis of internal and external forces. Similarly, the Field-State that Cy describes diverges from the structuralist notion of rigid systems with its flexible and subjective form. While the Vectoral Muscle enables Cy to sense the trajectory of vectors others emit, and even to map their parabolic curves, this does not mean that he can determine their future paths with certainty. Nevertheless, this theory draws Cy out of the isolation that he associates with being an only child who “dwells upon others with a private thoroughness” (98-9). Tabbi remarks that Cy’s “diagrams and equations are, in this respect, ways of wresting the self from its isolated subjectivity; they put aspects of human character and identity in new and unsuspected contexts, so that even so pronounced a personality as Dom will be complexly embedded in other, more private lives” (88). It with his discovery of the Vectoral Muscle and the Field-State that Cy comes to appreciate the ideas espoused by Dom.

Cy identifies in Dom a similar desire to overcome binary modes of thinking and to see the world as an intricate field of forces. Dom is a public figure known for his “notorious grasp of the times” (6) and his efforts to shape public thought through his political activities, his books, and his interventions in the press. Cy recalls statements Dom made at various public events in which he challenges the conventional divisions of private and public life. He writes:

You were putting on your abortive Italian rhythm: ‘We gotta get away from *centralized privacy*, stop try’n’a keep a hold of our *sentiments*—wait I mean—*no*—our sentiments make us hold onto this rap about our own centrality—this city gotta be deunified, everybody gotta see the city from one big helicopter. If elected that’s where I *begin*, pal, everyone rides that helicopter, see the city as a coördinate field of force, not a series of kitchens

subordinated to living rooms subordinated to underpants on the bedpost'.  
(141, emphasis in original)

Dom promotes a communal, leftist politics that challenges the turn to individualism and narcissism that critics, like Christopher Lasch, identify as a harmful cultural characteristic of the United States in the 1970s. Yet Dom suggests that the path away from such self-centred thinking, which positions people in a relationship of hostile competition with one another, lies in the exercise of self-examination. Cy recalls that Dom stated at a political march that the activists were present “not really to penetrate a Think-Tank but to confront ourselves” (79). Self-reflective practices, like confession, have the potential to aid us in seeing ourselves as part of a larger community. Even a critic as sceptical as Lasch, who remarks that “[t]he popularity of the confessional mode testifies, of course, to the new narcissism that runs all through American culture,” acknowledges that “the best work in this vein attempts, precisely through self-disclosure, to achieve a critical distance from the self and to gain insight into the historical forces, reproduced in psychological form, that have made the very concept of selfhood increasingly problematic” (48). Dom’s theories are similarly directed towards a notion of subjectivity that is interwoven with a communal vision of society as a “field of force.”

Cy speaks in admiring, if not uncritical, terms about Dom. He describes Dom as possessing a strong personality and ambitions for leadership that can be divisive, despite his communitarian politics. Dom thus embodies a public mode of masculinity that contrasts with Cy’s private, introspective nature. Although the two men differ in significant ways, Cy also recognises similarities between himself and Dom. This leads Cy to think of them as a binary pair that might be able to establish a bond despite their differences—a bridge like that joining the hemispheres of the brain—

that could serve as a model for uniting Al and Bob. Cy explains that, when he met Dom for the first time, he had hoped to confide in him “how months before I’d taken an interest in you as locus of violence and contemplation, how I’d even found similarities between us, and how I’d come to link our secret kinship with my ancient habit of not introducing Al and Bob” (*Ancient History* 211). It seems, then, that in coming to speak with Dom about Al and Bob, Cy had hoped to finally address this powerful symbol of binary oppositions around which so much of his life has been organised. By speaking honestly with Dom about his attachment to the logic of binary orders, by relinquishing control over the distance separating his two friends, and by embracing the uncertainty and complexity of the field of forces, Cy would open himself up to a model of self-reflective masculinity that has the potential to disrupt the internal schism that Sedgwick describes. Through the language of the field, a combination of abstract and intimate terms, these men might find a way of negotiating their masculinity together. While Dom’s suicide upsets Cy’s plans, he proceeds with his confession in an effort to ready himself for the likely meeting of Al and Bob. This optimistic reading of Cy’s confession, however, is cast in doubt by unsettling remarks that suggest Cy may have contributed to Dom’s suicide.

Cy’s involvement in Dom’s suicide is made ambiguous by the non-linear, discontinuous form of his confessional paraphrase. He makes a series of convoluted and contradictory statements about his involvement, which allows him to avoid taking responsibility for his actions. First, Cy declares, “I am not responsible for your suicide, Dom, but if I am it’s because in the extended privacy of my mind I could see the whole life you were trying to live” (122). Only a few pages later, he concedes, “Ask me right out, Dom I’ll answer Yes I did it I guess I suspect I killed you and will

try to bear it. I could have kept you equidistant from yourself and corresponding and alive” (128). And, later still, Cy remarks, “Dom, to no one could I deny that I did not bring about your suicide. I didn’t do it” (144). While Cy expresses remorse for failing to act when he recognised “this suicide of yours weeks ago as one newly viable valence in that field or field situation” (17), he is unrepentant for interventions into Dom’s personal life. Cy admits to intercepting several letters meant for Dom from his family. He states that the letters from Dom’s ex-wife, Dorothy, “misconstrued your work so subtly I almost resealed them and sneaked them back into your box. But I trusted my hand and deposited them in our floor’s incinerator chute” (30). And Cy becomes defensive when he describes letters from Dom’s son, Richard: “I don’t care how much you were looking forward to your son Richard’s next letter (as it began by saying you’d said), believe me most of it was punitive decoration. The core was that you ought to lay off” (77). These admissions present Cy in a light that contrasts with his aspirations to finally relinquish control over his friendships with Al and Bob, and to embrace the fluidity, uncertainty, and respect of a genuine homosocial continuum. Instead, Cy’s possessive, insecure behaviour reveals that he is unable to shed, in Dom’s words, the “protective pressures” (56) that reinforce distant and impersonal relationships between men.

In *America* (1986), a collection of observations on his travels through the United States, Jean Baudrillard wonders, “[w]hy do people live in New York? There is no relationship between them. Except for an inner electricity which results from the simple fact of being crowded together. A magical sensation of contiguity and attraction for an artificial centrality” (15). Although the events of *Ancient History* are sequestered within the living room of Dom’s New York City apartment and the

utopic spaces of Cy's memory, Baudrillard's description provides an essential insight into Cy's theorisation of social bonds. The great error of Cy's field theory is his misperception of contiguity for intimacy. Cy claims to understand Dom like no one else, but he does not seek to establish a directly personal relationship with Dom until it is too late to confirm whether contiguity and intimacy really do amount to the same thing, or if there is more to intimacy than what one person knows about another. The field provides Cy with a form that has the potential to transcend the binary principle organising homosocial relations, but he is not yet ready to bring these forms into collision and discover what happens when he releases control of his relationships. Much like McElroy, the themes of control, form, and masculinity are central concerns in the writing of Harry Mathews. Yet, whereas McElroy addresses these subjects directly at the surface level of his fiction, as we have seen with *Ancient History*, Mathews adopts a cryptic approach to writing that generates much ambiguity between textual surface and depth. However, as the following chapter will argue, the themes of control, form, and masculinity becoming increasingly more visible over the course of Mathews' career.

### Chapter 3: The Key and the Lock

#### *Cryptic Masculinity in the Fiction of Harry Mathews*

The critical discourse surrounding the work of Harry Mathews (1930-2017) invariably turns to the question of what lies hidden within his texts. This is only natural given Mathews' long-time membership in the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, commonly abbreviated to the acronym OuLiPo or Oulipo.<sup>32</sup> The Oulipo is a collective of writers and mathematicians, founded in France in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais (Motte 1), who share a commitment to revitalising forgotten literary forms and devising new ones. At the heart of Oulipian writing is the formal constraint, which denotes the rule or rules that define the form or the content—and quite often both—of the text. Oulipian writers are often secretive about the formal constraint they use, which encourages readers to view their texts as puzzles to be solved. As a consequence of the formal constraints that Mathews and his fellow Oulipian writers adopt in their compositional practice, readers and critics frequently treat the narrative events of their texts as arbitrary, and secondary in importance to the aesthetic code embedded within the work. In contrast to this approach, this chapter will examine the relationship between aesthetic and social forms in three texts by Mathews and explore how these forms collide and modify one another in his writing. More specifically, this chapter argues that masculinity is a

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<sup>32</sup> Warren Motte notes that *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* translates roughly to workroom or workshop of potential literature. He explains: “The French word *ouvroir* has three principal meanings: it denotes the room in a convent where the nuns assemble to work, a charitable institution where indigent women engage in needlework, and a ‘sewing circle’ where well-to-do ladies make clothes for the poor and vestments for the Church” (9). There is, therefore, something playful and subversive in the selection of this term to define a group composed, at the time, exclusively of men.

recurring theme in Mathews' writing and closely connected to the aesthetic form of his texts. This chapter describes the intertwining of masculinity and aesthetic form in Mathews' fiction as "cryptic masculinity": a confluence of social and aesthetic forms that serve to divert attention away from anxieties surrounding masculine identity toward a problem of logic or reasoning. Cryptic masculinity, as we will see in Mathews' fiction, emerges out of the contrasting pressures of the imperative to confess and the ideal of self-contained, dispassionate masculinity. This chapter will look at the representation of cryptic masculinity across three of Mathews' works: *The Conversions* (1962), Mathews' first novel; "Roussel and Venice" (1977), an imaginative essay written in collaboration with fellow member of Oulipo Georges Perec; and, *The Journalist* (1994), the most conventionally confessional of the three texts. Despite his reputation as a spirited formalist, this chapter will demonstrate that Mathews' was also concerned with the social form of masculine identity.

Harry Mathews was born into an affluent family in New York City in 1930 ("Autobiography" 154). He studied for a music degree at Princeton and Harvard before moving to France in 1952 with his wife, the artist Niki de Saint Phalle, and their young daughter, Laura (153). Although this marriage would not last, Mathews continued to live in Europe for much of his life, during which time he encountered many important literary and intellectual figures and formed a close bond with the author Georges Perec. It was through Perec that Mathews first encountered the Oulipo, and with his support Mathews was invited to join the group in 1972 (*Oulipo Compendium* 179).

Although critics typically associate Mathews' literary career with his membership in the Oulipo, his work as a writer and his experimentations with form

began long before his admission into the group. Yet, coincidentally, both Mathews and the founders of the Oulipo share a common source of inspiration for their formal experimentation in the methods of the French writer Raymond Roussel (1877-1933). The work of the iconoclastic Roussel had not been well received during his lifetime, but there was renewed curiosity about his life and work in France in the 1950s.<sup>33</sup> David Macey notes: “The first book [on Roussel] appeared in 1953, but it was Michel Leiris’s 1954 article in *Critique* that really marked the revival of interest” (125). Mathews was introduced to Roussel’s writing in the late-1950s through the poet John Ashbery, who he first met in Paris in 1956 (“Autobiography” 180). The two, along with Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler, produced a short-lived literary magazine named after one of Roussel’s novels, *Locus Solus* (“Autobiography” 181-2). Meanwhile, Queneau and Le Lionnais had “the troubadours, the Rhétoriquers, Raymond Roussel, [and] the Russian formalists” (Le Lionnais, “Queneau” 77) in mind while they were defining the tenets of the Oulipo in 1960.

While Roussel’s texts, like the aforementioned *Locus Solus* (1914), are in themselves evocative and strange, the posthumous publication of “How I Wrote Certain of My Books” (1935) brought to light the unusual techniques that Roussel employed in constructing his narratives. Roussel explains that he made frequent use of homonymic puns as the genesis for a story, creating multiple images from the same sequence of words. Roussel notes, for instance, that “[*m*]aison (house) à *espagnolettes* (window fasteners)” also suggests “*maison* (royal dynasty) à

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<sup>33</sup> In “How I Wrote Certain of My Books,” Roussel expresses his great disappointment at the silence with which his books were met. This failure prompted him to compose works for the stage, although he fared no better. His first theatrical production, he writes, was “more than a fiasco, it was a veritable hue and cry. They described me as a madman, ‘barracked’ the actors, pelted the stage with coins and sent protesting letters to the manager” (23).

*espagnolettes* (little Spaniards)” (6, emphasis in original). Tresch explains that “[a] narrative that incorporates both the original phrase and the other lying as it were ‘buried’ within it—[Roussel] frequently refers to his work as ‘mining’—will then be built around these central jewels” (314). Roussel’s methods demonstrate the generative capacity of language under constraint to produce unexpected results, a model that Mathews and the Oulipo would adopt in their own practice.

Foucault was another admirer of Roussel, which is evident in *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel* (1963), Foucault’s only full-length monograph devoted to literature. Foucault’s interpretation of Roussel draws on the linguistic theory of César Chesneau Dumarsais, an eighteenth-century French intellectual, who developed the concept of the “tropological,” which refers to the capacity of words to carry multiple, often very different, meanings. This feature of language was, as we have seen, the source of much fascination for Roussel. Foucault explains that “[i]n the space created by this displacement, all the forms of rhetoric come to life—the twists and turns, as Dumarsais would put it: catachresis, metonymy, metalepsis, synecdoche, antonomasia, litotes, metaphors, hypallage, and many other hieroglyphs drawn by the rotation of words into the voluminous mass of language” (17-8). The capacity of words to carry multiple meanings suggests a hidden potential that, when employed, reveals the flexibility of language and invites us to think of words as, in some sense, containers that possess a secret interior. The cryptic dimensions of metaphor was a subject of examination for many linguists and literary theorists in the mid-twentieth century, including Roman Jakobson, Gérard Genette,

and Foucault, himself, in *The Order of Things*, published three years after his book on Roussel.<sup>34</sup>

In his study of Roussel, Foucault describes the opening created by the rupture between a word and its meaning as “topological space” (18) and characterises it as incompatible with the regimented conventions of language that bound sign and object harmoniously. Instead, topological space is “that neutral space within language where the hollowness of the word is shown as an insidious void, arid and a trap” (18). Although Foucault describes this feature of language in negative terms, his analysis of Roussel’s use of topological space presents it in a different light. Foucault remarks that homonymic puns and similar devices create a kind of textual “enclosure” (9): “It would delineate a privileged place, beyond reach, whose rigorous outward form would free it from all external constraints. This self-containment would disconnect the language from all contact, induction, surreptitious communication, and influence, giving it an absolutely neutral space in which to develop” (10). The void, or depth, that Foucault attributes to Roussel’s work is a property of language itself, an autonomous feature that exists in the work independent of the author’s intentions.

Roussel’s writing provides an ideal example of the capacity of figurative language to generate new and unsuspected associations. Roussel deploys and manipulates the topological space in a ludic manner and exposes the fluid capacity of language to hold a plurality of meanings without insisting upon a dominant interpretation. His narratives are fundamentally self-referential; his language answers only to itself. Foucault suggests that Roussel “wants to *discover* an unexpected

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<sup>34</sup> See, Jakobson, *Fundamentals of Language* (1956) and Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse* (1982).

space, and to *cover* it with things never said before” (18, emphasis in original) and, in this sense, his writing functions like a “mask” (20) that conceals a secret. Roussel’s narratives obscure not only the methods of its creation, but the void—the empty signifier—that makes this possible.

While in *Death and the Labyrinth* Foucault is reticent to suggest that tropological space in Roussel’s work conceals a personal secret, in a later interview with Charles Ruas he attributes Roussel’s unusual methods to his sexuality: “On reflection it should be said that because he is homosexual, he hid his sexuality in his work, or else it’s because he hid his sexuality in his life that he also hid it in his work” (“Interview” 186).<sup>35</sup> Foucault does not point to a particular instance in Roussel’s oeuvre that reveals this secret, but, instead, suggests that Roussel’s techniques represent a practice of self-construction, a way for him to communicate the secret of his life without naming it. Although the particular historical context in which Roussel lived would have made it much more difficult than it is today for him to address his sexuality directly, his predicament speaks to the more widespread dilemma of how men can address their inner lives. In *Men and Masculinities*, Stephen M. Whitehead notes the contrasting imagery associated with the public and private lives of men: “If the public world of men is rooted in myth and mystery, then men’s private lives can appear deep, dark, almost gothic in their impenetrableness” (146). Stephen Frosh describes the inner lives of men with similarly opaque terms, remarking, “while masculinity presents an appearance of integration and strength, its inner coordinates will always remain mysterious and unavailable to articulation”

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<sup>35</sup> Mathews and Perec play with this idea in the fictional essay “Roussel and Venice.”

(112). The interior, emotional life of men is commonly described as an uncertain territory, a space that is often left unexamined or is hostile to investigation.

While the attraction of Roussel's writing for Mathews and the Oulipo of Roussel's lie in his use of unusual compositional devices or constraints, this chapter will argue that these techniques also represent a way for these men to practice self-examination and self-expression without overtly presenting themselves as emotionally vulnerable, a characteristic viewed as weakness within the norms of hegemonic masculinity. Cryptic masculinity thus describes a literary response to the competing pressures directed toward men to confess and to repress their inner lives. The form of the text, composed according to the rules of a formal constrain, provides the author with a rational structure within which the inner life emerges as available for exploration. This interpretation aligns with the argument that Tracy McNulty makes in *Wrestling with the Angel* (2014), where she posits that there is a parallel between the Oulipian practice of writing under constraint and the psychoanalytic scene. McNulty writes that, much like the material that emerges as the result of writing under constraint, in psychoanalysis we find "a subject that can be known or constructed only on the condition that it be called forth under the constraint of the transference and made the object of a possible construction" (16). Formal constraints thus provide an avenue for drawing out the unconscious.

McNulty's interpretation aligns with remarks made by Slavoj Žižek, who declares "[t]rue art has *nothing whatsoever* to do with disgusting emotional exhibitionism," but clarifies that, in art, the "'inner Thing' emerges only through a 'pitiless censorship' of one's imaginary 'inner life'" ("Neighbors" 135, emphasis in original). Here, and elsewhere in his essay, Žižek's contempt for emotion and his

idealisation of scientific objectivity point to a masculinist bias in his thinking.

According to McNulty, the Oulipian method is fundamentally concerned with the subject: “[a]t stake are not only new literary possibilities, therefore, but latent possibilities within the writer as a subject” (184). The division among the Oulipo and its critics over the role of the subject and its relationship to an “authentic” text returns us to the writing of Harry Mathews—an author who has become one of the most prominent members of the Oulipo, and whose fiction displays both a concern with the autonomy of the subject—specifically, the male subject—and an ambivalent attitude towards the use of formal constraints. In turning to examine Mathews’ first novel, *The Conversions*, which was composed more than a decade before he was introduced to the Oulipo, the influence of Roussel is readily apparent throughout the work. While critics have sought to uncover the secret buried in the strange word play and historical allusions of *The Conversions*, they have overlooked the psychological dimensions of the book and its depiction of a narrator unable to address his own troubles.

### **The Silent Self in *The Conversions* (1962)**

Mathews has readily acknowledged the influence of Roussel on *The Conversions*, though he clarifies that he “didn’t use [Roussel’s] methods specifically, but mine were similar in that they were based on relationships between words, often puns. The whole thing is based on misunderstanding language” (*Paris Review* np).

Misunderstanding, in many instances, becomes an alternative mode of narrative progress in the novel. The misheard word or phrase also indicates what Mathews will later describe as the “otherness hidden in language” (“Mathews’s Algorithm” 126). A

misapprehended word opens up the tropological space that invites a plurality of interpretations, even if this means pursuing and accumulating knowledge that is based on error. The plot of *The Conversions* follows the efforts of an unnamed narrator to answer three riddles that will guarantee the inheritance of a fortune. The narrator stumbles into these circumstances after meeting a wealthy man named Grent Wayl at a party. After Wayl's death some months later, the narrator discovers that he has been named by Wayl as his primary heir. However, this inheritance is contingent upon the narrator's ability to answer three riddles:

- 1) When was a stone not a king?
- 2) What was *La Messe de Sire Fadevant*
- 3) Who shaved the Old Man's Beard? (46)

The reader is made ready for the task of interpretation early in the text when, at a party held by Mr Wayl, the narrator is asked to "interpret the series of engravings" (4) etched on a ritual adze. The narrator presents a seemingly reasonable answer to this request, suggesting that the images are rooted in Christian symbolism, but Wayl abruptly rejects this account. Despite the narrator's mistake, Wayl continues to demonstrate an interest in him. This example of hermeneutic frustration is a recurring motif in the novel, as interpretations prove mistaken and images fail to communicate the meaning they embody.

This latter problem first occurs at the culmination of an elaborate competition put on by Wayl, when the trail of slime left by a worm reveals the message: "e as no s ex rex noth Syl i" (14). Wayl tells the narrator, "[t]hat is not what I meant. I tried to lay down his food so that he would spell... But the result is nothing—fragments" (14). It is not above Mathews to encrypt this moment of failed communication with another message, unidentified by the novel's characters: we might read the fragments

of Wayl's message as "he has no sex, rex, nothing, silly." Indeed, "rex" might simply serve as a convenient rhyme rather than suggesting "king." Mathews remarks in an interview with Lytle Shaw that "[t]here is a great deal about castration in *The Conversions*, a basic male fear" (38). The symbolic failure of the worms to inscribe the message designed by Wayl presents the reader with both a hidden depth—that is, the completion of Wayl's message, perhaps available once the hermeneutic code of the novel is grasped in its entirety—and a surface level that reveals itself in such moments of semantic failure. Yet the failure of the worm to fulfil its task suggests another distinctly masculine fear: impotence. Together, these elements point to the dilemma of heredity, the genetic transmission or conversion from one generation to the next, which affects both Wayl and the narrator. This is a recurring temporal form that serves a central role in the organisation and endurance of many social forms, including the patriarchal structure of Western society. While the reader's instinct, prompted by the novel's alignment with the quest narrative, may be to seek out a meaning hidden from the narrator in the depths of the text, such erudition potentially overlooks messages available at the surface. Mathews plays with spatiality throughout the novel and resists assigning priority to surface or depth.

To examine the surface level of *The Conversions* does not imply that the text is void of encrypted messages that await interpretation. Tomasz Mirkowicz, who translated *The Conversions* into Polish, identifies many references embedded in the text that point to a network of symbols etymologically linked to "Alba/Alva" and argues that these in turn refer to the "clematis, or Clematis vitALBA" (100, emphasis in original). Mirkowicz goes so far as to assert, "the whole novel is built on allusions to the plant and its various names" (100). It may be the case, however, that despite

Mirkowicz's excavation of the novel's encrypted symbolism, the key to the text lies closer to its surface, in both a figurative and material sense. There is no clear elucidation of the novel's title within the narrative itself, though it may provide a frame for reading the tropological and semantic operations of the text. The *Oxford English Dictionary* presents multiple definitions for "conversion" across several fields of study, such as architecture, mathematics, rhetoric, and law. The significance of conversion in these fields varies, but it typically designates a change in orientation, in spatial location, or in objective. The sense of transformation and movement in these definitions register the implications of tropological space and the conversion that takes place, as Dumarsais first recognised, when the original meaning of a word deviates. The title thus encourages the reader to observe the spatial shifts that take place in the novel, the many deviations in its path, but makes no promises of arriving at a conclusive and universal perspective.

There are, furthermore, two additional definitions of "conversion" that are relevant for the novel. First, its theological significance, where conversion designates "[t]he turning of sinners to God; a spiritual change from sinfulness, ungodliness, or worldliness to love of God and of holiness" (*OED*). Here, confession serves a role in the ritual of conversion through which the sinner comes to recognise past transgressions and accepts penance in order to achieve redemption and be admitted, or re-admitted, into the religious community. The narrator demonstrates a familiarity with Christian symbolism in his interpretation of the ritual adze, while the admission that he is in the midst of a divorce—a detail that corresponds chronologically with Mathews' own biography—is one of the rare confessional moments in the novel. The narrator, notably, makes only two brief references to his personal life: he tells the

reader that his wife, who does not appear in the novel, has “begun proceedings against [him] for divorce” (128), and that he is a “mulatto” (166). The brief insertion of these personal details carries considerable weight. The reader becomes conscious of the significant events that the narrator has left out of the text, which invites the reader to pause in the midst of the novel’s semantic deluge to reflect on this undisclosed subtext.

The second important connotation of “conversion” brings together the symbolic resonance of events in the text and questions about the narrator’s psychological state. Many of the situations in the novel describe dream-like scenarios and suggest hidden content in the tradition of psychoanalytic interpretation. Freud first applies the term “conversion” to describe the process in hysteria when “a libidinal energy is transformed or *converted* into a somatic innervation. Conversion goes hand in hand with the detachment of the libido from the idea in the process of repression; the libidinal energy is then ‘transformed into something somatic’” (Laplanche and Pontalis 90). Akhtar observes, “[t]he notion of conversion also had a symbolic dimension, since the somatic symptom invariably expressed the hidden, repressed idea [...]. It is as if the body rather than the mind, was telling the story of what was troubling the individual” (57). The strange, symbolic imagery of *The Conversions*, the narrator’s hermeneutic quest, and his silence on personal matters invite a psychoanalytic reading that distinguishes between manifest and latent content. The body of the text appears to disclose, in distorted forms, a submerged conflict about which the narrator is unable to communicate explicitly. Indeed, the puns and misunderstandings that fill the novel echo not only Roussel’s techniques,

but also Freud's observations on parapraxes in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, where he identifies the latent origins of slips and substitutions in speech.

Although the psychoanalytic concept of conversion seems to align with the significance of "Alba/Alva" in the novel, Mirkowicz explains that he is unable to discover the key that will explain this phenomenon in the text. The proliferation of these allusions never finally point to a single, clear meaning in the novel's repressed content. Mirkowicz ultimately concludes that "[t]he journey through the labyrinth leaves us not much the wiser than we were at the start" (107). Despite the encryption of these clues throughout the text, which seem to encourage precisely this kind of analysis, the novel ultimately rebukes Mirkowicz's etymological excavation. However, one particular scene in the novel does appear to account for Mirkowicz's frustration and possibly illustrate Mathews' methods. When the narrator visits the French painter M. Félix Namaque in his efforts to resolve the Wayl's riddles, he is made privy to the secret that has garnered the artist's work so much attention. Namaque's success derives from "his unique style of coloring" (121), where "the colors were never equivalent to those of their subject—they were always highly 'interpreted'" (121). The narrator remarks:

[The colours] did not seem to be the mere result of fancy, taste, or any personal predilection; they rather gave the impression of following some systematic distortion. Critics and amateurs had exchanged numberless fatuities trying to reveal the principle governing M. Namaque's methods, but none of their suppositions and analyses, no matter how ingenious or thorough, could completely account for the coloring of even a single picture [...]. (121)

In this passage, Mathews anticipates reactions to *The Conversions* and efforts like those of Mirkowicz's to discover the "principle governing" Mathews' novel. The narrator recounts Namaque's resolution that "[t]he painting [...] had its own

independent existence; therefore the painting, not the subject, would determine the colors” (125). This description may provide the key to the novel—although what it reveals is a purely arbitrary technique, rather than a unifying logic encrypted in the novel’s depths. Indeed, the painter’s account reveals that Mathews is thinking about the creative process in terms very similar to those Queneau and Le Lionnais are developing during the same period.

The narrator reaches a final impasse at a resort town near Houlgate in Normandy. On his way, the narrator receives a telegram informing him that “Mr Wayl’s will had been thrown out as a complete hoax” and, as a result, “Beatrice and Isidore Fod were to inherit the fortune” (165) meant for the narrator. Despite these revelations, he decides to challenge these claims and, in a final effort, seeks an answer in the waters off Normandy. In this section Mathews alludes playfully to the spatial concerns, both material and mental, of the novel. The narrator encounters “a group of amateur skin-divers, called the Cogito Swimmers Club” (165) who are preparing to dive for the submerged monument that the narrator has come to examine. The diving club, the narrator tells us, “were interested in more than the practical aspects of skindiving—they believed that prolonged immersion helped introspection and metaphysical speculations” (165). The term “skin-diver” evokes in the context of the “cogito” a figurative dive into the interior space of the mind, a place that the narrator has been reticent to explore. This winking allusion emphasises the idea of “mental space” and the dream-like events of the novel that are, at the same time, symptomatic of an underlying and undefined issue.

The narrator dives with the group and remarks on the sensation of “memories flood[ing] my head” (165). However, this flood comes from the somatic world of the

quest, not the latent world of his unconscious. He reflects on the fantastically complex deception that Wayl would have had to perpetrate in order to mislead him. There is a clear parallel here between the narrator and Wayl, and the reader of *The Conversions* and its author: like the narrator, the reader wonders if this mysterious quest will have a pay-off, or if there is something still buried in the book that we have yet to identify. The narrator finally reaches the submerged monument, composed of “a clocklike mechanism” (167) that contains within it an integrated, self-sustaining system. The narrator proposes no further interpretations of the mechanism and, finally, abandons his quest, remarking “[t]here was nothing for me to do but return home and begin paying my debts” (171). The narrator fails to obtain his inheritance, fails to satisfy the hermeneutic demand that ensures his masculinity, and is now a debtor who cannot pay what he owes. *The Conversions* overloads the reader with semantic possibilities in the form of word games, symbolism, and mythological allusions, and the novel’s lack of resolution compels us to re-examine these for a hidden meaning that the narrator overlooked. The reader is left with many questions: does the novel contain a hidden resolution that we have overlooked? Or, instead, is there no depth to be probed? No concealed meaning in the text at all? The reader assumes the narrator’s debt and looks to the text to answer for it.

*The Conversions* aligns with Felski’s observations on the way that certain novels induce the reader’s suspicion. Although Felski’s argument in *The Limits of Critique* focuses on the responsibility of critics for institutionalising a hermeneutics of suspicion, she remarks that, at the same time, “[r]ather than being innocent victims of suspicion, literary works are active instigators and perpetrators of it” (42). Modernist literature demonstrates a propensity for the embedding of covert meaning,

notes Felski. In its use of mythological symbolism and interpretive uncertainty, *The Conversions* follows in the tradition of innovative modernist literature. It is unsurprising, then, that critics like Mirkowicz respond to the novel's uncertainties with suspicion and impute "qualities of interiority, concealment, penetrability, and depth" (*Limits* 53) to the text. As we have seen with the "Cogito Swimming Club" section, the novel encourages just this kind of reading. Felski aligns analysis that examines the "deep" or hidden qualities of a text with a hermeneutics of suspicion embodied by the symptomatic readings of Freud and Marx, while the defamiliarising interpretations of poststructuralist critics exploit "surface" characteristics of a text. In its "conversion" of tropological space, *The Conversions* appears capable of fruitfully supporting either mode of this binary and, therefore, reinforcing a hermeneutics of suspicion.

Mathews acknowledges that, along with Roussel's techniques, his education introduced him to new modes of interpretation that would inform the approach he took to his early novels. He remarks that during his time at Princeton he studied with Eugene O'Neill Jr., son of the playwright, who "was doing the kind of reading that didn't really become current until the poststructuralists. It enthralled me—how a writer could encrypt things that he wasn't overtly stating. It's something I've relentlessly tried to do" (*Paris Review*). The cryptic and defamiliarising techniques of *The Conversions* push and pull at the reader, and lead to suspicion of the narrator's reliability, despite the detached and matter-of-fact tone of his account. We might even suspect, as I suggest above, that there is an unspoken trauma underlying the narrator's tale, which distorts the events through "condensation and displacement" (Laplanche and Pontalis 90) in a manner that recalls Roussel's techniques. This does

not mean, however, that the reader must diagnose this condition and draw words out from the depths of the text to define and delimit it. Nor must we distance ourselves from the text and interpret the narrator as a discursive formation, a mere textual convention. Instead, we might read the hermeneutic tension between surface and depth in this text as characteristic of a specifically masculine dilemma. The contrast created by the weight of the narrator's silence on private matters and the proliferation of irreconcilable symbolism presents *The Conversions* as a representation of the no longer adequate poles of masculine identity that rely, at once, on strict privacy and, at the same time, on the capacity to rationalise and master the external world. The image of the submerged clock mechanism at the novel's end epitomises the notion of self-sufficient hyper-rationality: the clock brings together the ideals of hermetic independence and instrumental mastery that, bound up with its significance as a device that measures progress, rejects, finally, the narrator's inadequate identity. The prognosis is bleak for the narrator of *The Conversions*. Yet this impenetrable object no longer serves a purpose, it is merely a self-signifying entity—it lacks a context that would give it meaning. The submerged clock mirrors the narrator's own masculinity in its cryptic, self-referential depth. The novel does not provide a resolution to the narrator's quest, nor to his private troubles. It is unsurprising, then, that this dilemma of masculine identity reappears, in slightly different formulations, throughout Mathew's fiction.

The notion of a coherent and knowable inner life is itself bound-up with an androcentric worldview. Whitehead remarks that “to assume I can come to ‘know myself’ would require me to believe in the humanistic agent of modernism, the Cartesian founding subject” that is depicted as “an authentic self which can, through

some rational process, be reached, civilized, tamed, nursed, saved, in part through taking up the (masculinist) grand narratives of the Enlightenment” (146). In its depiction of the narrator’s search for refuge from his personal woes in hermeneutic complexity, *The Conversions* draws on conventions of masculine identity as intrinsically rational. Yet the repetition of interpretive frustration that meets the narrator in his efforts to confirm his hereditary status points to a failure or inadequacy in the transmission from one generation to the next. However, the narrator’s quest into cryptic interpretive space in search of a buried rational order (a quest re-animated in the reader’s experience) leads, instead, to a state of isolation and a hermeneutic impasse. In this way, *The Conversions* is an account of the incompatibility of a culturally encoded masculinity with the world around it. These concerns persist, as we will see, in Mathews’ later engagement with the methods of the Oulipo.

### **Oulipo and the Freedom of Constraint**

Formed by Queneau and Le Lionnais, the Oulipo’s interest in bringing together mathematicians and writers focuses on two primary objectives: “analysis, that is, the identification and recuperation of older, even ancient (but not necessarily intentional) experiments in form; and synthesis, the elaboration of new forms” (Motte 1). By focusing on the question of form, the Oulipo directs attention away from the author as the mysterious source of literary inspiration and, instead, focuses on how form and structure might generate certain types of discourse and meaning. Colin Symes remarks that these methods seek to “regularize composition and subject its processes to precise formulation” (88). This statement, however, implies a codification of

literary creation that fails to account for both the significance of innovation and the ludic principle in the Oulipian procedures. The Oulipo does not seek to regularise composition by imposing rigorous systemisation; rather, their methods seek to liberate writing from ideologies and values that are active in accepted formal conventions. To describe an Oulipian constraint as “precise” undermines the rebellious Oulipian spirit that imposes constraints precisely to push back against these new limitations.

The discovery of new conditions of constraint for the genesis of a literary work is both a challenge to be overcome—a game to be played—and a conscious recognition of the constraints that already exist, but go unquestioned, in the tradition of literature in the West. Le Lionnais remarks on this in the group’s first manifesto by drawing attention to these unacknowledged constraints:

Every literary work begins with an inspiration (at least that’s what its author suggests) which must accommodate itself as well as possible to a series of constraints and procedures that fit inside each other like Chinese boxes. Constraints of vocabulary and grammar, constraints of the novel (division into chapters, etc.) or of classical tragedy (rule of the three unities), constraints of general versifications, constraints of fixed forms (as in the case of the rondeau or the sonnet), etc. (“Lipo” 26-7)

Members of the Oulipo reverse the order of this convention by first attending to the form that the text will take and then writing according to these conditions and restraints.<sup>36</sup> It is the conscious and wilful acceptance of constraints, in contrast to the unexamined faith in “free writing,” that sets the Oulipo apart. Jacques Roubaud, another member, notes that for Queneau, “[t]he intentional, voluntary character of constraint to which he insistently alludes time and again is for him indissolubly

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<sup>36</sup> Examples of Oulipian constraints are well-documented in French as well as English, with Motte’s *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (1986) and the Oulipo edited *Oulipo Compendium* (1998) both providing examples of the formulas that may form the basis for an Oulipian text.

linked to this lively refusal of the frequent equation of chance and freedom” (“Mathematics” 87). All writing, just like all social forms, relies on some underlying constraint, and the ability to define a constraint and to submit to it by choice is liberating for the Oulipo.

The idea of freedom as formless reflects a fundamental misconception that the Oulipo’s emphasis on constraint attempts to correct. Mathews remarks that “[i]mposing fixed patterns as it does, the Oulipian approach sounds as though it discouraged such self-generating activity, but this is not so: in practice it guarantees that the unforeseen will happen and keep happening. It keeps us *out* of control” (“Translation and the Oulipo” 81). The basis of an Oulipian work in the conditions of a mathematical formula compels the writers to think differently about how they write and to find new meanings in collaboration with the arbitrary terms of the constraint. The Oulipo displays many parallels with Foucault’s critique of discursive formations that impose limitations and prohibitions on sexuality and gender that, in effect, produce certain kinds of subjects. The proliferation of “automatic” and “stream-of-consciousness” writing in the first decades of the twentieth century promotes a mode of writing that is “truthful” and a practice through which we might discover something essential about human nature and about the unconscious. In opposition to this approach, constrictive writing relies on the initiation into the secrets of literary constraint that lie outside the individual subject. This writing is contingent upon “the art of initiations and the masterful secret” (*Will to Knowledge* 58). The Oulipian constraint, notes Mark Wolff, challenges the conventions of what Foucault called the “author-function” by separating “the traditional author into two functions, the inventor who discovers new ways to write literature and the poet who makes texts”

(114). To practice Oulipian techniques evokes something like an apprenticeship—in which a knowledgeable practitioner imparts the secret to the initiate—and rejects the expectations that an author’s genius is an innate, natural quality. We might therefore think of the Oulipo as espousing procedures in line with Foucault’s distinction of *ars* rather than *scientia*, despite the fact that their concern with form enjoins them with a field of knowledge that is bound-up with the sciences. However, the abstract nature of mathematics, its connotations of structure and space, and its system of relations make it ideal for generating texts.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the interchangeability of a variable in a function recalls the topological space that Foucault identifies in Roussel’s writing. Mathematics formalises this variability, which linguistics describes as ambiguity, and draws attention to the structure of the function or equation as it determines the outcome. Despite the often ludic and even comic results of Oulipian procedures, the alignment of their methods with scientific rationality produces a dialectic of surface and depth according to which the playful surface sits atop a rational foundation. As we will see, this dynamic of surface and depth encourages what Felski, after Ricoeur, describes as a hermeneutics of suspicion. In the case of the Oulipo, this suspicion is often rewarded with the discovery of the secret constraint.

Secrecy is a theme that comes up repeatedly in descriptions of the Oulipo and its formal concerns. Jacques Bens states, “a potential work is a work which is not limited to its appearances, which contains secret riches, which willingly lends itself to exploration” (“Queneau Oulipian” 65), while Marcel Bénabou notes that the constraint “forces the system out of its routine functioning, thereby compelling it to reveal its hidden resources” (“Rule and Constraint” 41). The significance of

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, “Mathews’s Algorithm” (*Oulipo* 126-39).

“potential” in the acronym “Oulipo” suggests this cryptic sense of discovery, which Bens affirms in his remark that “the first postulate of potentiality is the secret, that which is hidden beneath appearances” (“Queneau Oulipian” 66-7). There is a structural parallel in the relation between the spatial metaphors of surface and depth that characterise the Oulipian text, and “[t]he separation between insider and outsider [that] is inherent in secrecy” (Bok 6). A truly great Oulipian text, then, is one that most effectively conceals the principle that underlies its creation. While, on the one hand, this establishes a hierarchy of knowledge that resists a subjectifying confessional discourse, on the other hand, it creates a relationship of power between practitioner and initiate—or author and reader—that has the potential for misuse. Ricoeur admits that this approach requires “faith [...] a second faith of one who has engaged in hermeneutics, faith that has undergone criticism, postcritical faith” (*Freud* 28). In their essay on Roussel, Mathews and Perec perform the role of analysts and seem to follow the path of suspicion towards the cryptic secret of the author’s genius.

### **Cryptographic Methods in “Roussel and Venice” (1977)**

In “Roussel and Venice: Outline of a Melancholic Geography,” Mathews and Perec present a fictional case study of Roussel that draws explicitly on the methods of psychoanalysis. The essay imitates, and alludes to, the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, the Hungarian-born French psychoanalysts who extend and elaborate on Freud’s topography of the mind in their cryptonimic technique of psychoanalysis. While the particular contributions Mathews and Perec each made to “Roussel and Venice” are uncertain, it is likely that the work of Abraham and Torok first came to

the attention of Perec during his time in analysis. In his biography of Perec, David Bellos describes how Perec, with the encouragement of Mathews, sought help from the psychoanalyst Jean-Bertrand Pontalis. Known for his work with Jean Laplanche on the first encyclopaedia of psychoanalysis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (1967), Pontalis would have been familiar with the theories proposed by Abraham and Torok.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Perec and Abraham both suffered traumatic loss during the Holocaust.<sup>39</sup> Abraham and Torok's concept of incorporation is the product of its historical context of violence and trauma beyond comprehension. In the essay "Mourning *or* Melancholia: Introjection *versus* Incorporation" (1972), Abraham and Torok describe incorporation as fantasy that results from "[i]nexpressable mourning [which] erects a secret tomb inside the subject" (130). The authors describe how, "[r]econstituted from the memories of words, scenes, and affects, the objectal correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person, complete with its own topography" (130). The constraint the crypt imposes prevents "any form of verbal communication" (131) of the buried secret, though parapraxes may emerge in dreams.<sup>40</sup> The theory of incorporation would clearly have resonated with Perec's own losses and with the constraint he employs in the novel *La Disparition* (1969), in which the letter 'e' is never used and any character that comes close to using it

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<sup>38</sup> Abraham's essay "The Shell and the Kernel: The Scope and Originality of Freudian Psychoanalysis" (1967) was published as a response to Laplanche and Pontalis's *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. In the essay, Abraham sets out many of the key elements of the theories he developed with Torok.

<sup>39</sup> Perec, like Abraham, was Jewish. Perec lost both his parents by the age of six: his father died fighting the Germans, and his mother was sent to Auschwitz where she was likely killed, though no precise information has become known (Bellos 44-61).

<sup>40</sup> Abraham and Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* performs a comprehensive reinterpretation of Freud's analysis of his famous patient, exposing the role of incorporation as an unidentified feature of the Wolf Man's psychic conflict.

disappears. Perec transforms the unspeakable into a literary constraint and gives form to his psychic conflict.

The encryption of language and the evocative metaphors of psychic space invite a comparison to the techniques and language of secrecy promoted by the Oulipo. Mathews and Perec reveal the compatibility of these traditions in “Roussel and Venice” by utilising Oulipian constraints and psychoanalytic theory. However, by imposing their interpretation on Roussel’s psychic terrain, the authors risk reducing Roussel’s brilliance to a feature of his biography and reintroducing the concept of the subject as the source of inspiration. Their analysis of Roussel may even force a confession from the author’s texts that points to an inner essence that generates his innovative methods, rather than the Oulipian ideal of the constraint as an independent and liberating process.

The essay on Roussel, originally written in French and published in a 1977 issue of *L’Arc*, a journal of French literary studies, adopts the generic characteristics of an academic article including appendices and substantial notes (Bellos 612). Mathews and Perec at once satirise and honour psychoanalysis as a method for the discovery of and relief from psychic trauma.<sup>41</sup> The essay relies on the invention of newly discovered fragments of a work hidden in the lining of a book belonging to Roussel.<sup>42</sup> The authors present historical evidence that justifies the likelihood of the book belonging to Roussel, as well as an account of what appears in the fragments. Mathews and Perec deduce from the outline of a story appearing on one of the

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<sup>41</sup> Roussel was himself a patient of the analyst Pierre Janet and he served as a case study in Janet’s *De l’angoisse à l’extase* under the pseudonym “Martial,” which Roussel acknowledges in “How I Wrote Certain of My Books.”

<sup>42</sup> There was precedence for such a discovery—a chapter of “Documents to Serve as an Outline” titled “In Havana” was recovered and published in a 1962 issue of *L’Arc*, with an introduction written by John Ashbery.

fragments allusions to his psychological state and to a secret trauma. In their imitation of a case study, the authors go so far as to quote almost verbatim an extended definition of incorporation from Abraham and Torok's "Mourning *or* Melancholia"—though in an abbreviated and slightly paraphrased form—which they attribute to an invented author. Deciphering the fragments, Mathews and Perec trace Roussel's trauma back to the sudden death of a young man with whom he had a brief romance that "revealed to him his own desire" ("Roussel and Venice" 129), that is, his homosexuality. The death of the young man, Ascanio, provokes an irresolvable rupture in Roussel's psyche and leads to the incorporation of the love-object.

Mathews and Perec propose that "Roussel's work is [...] a unique commemoration of his other, invisible journeys, the ones that took place in the 'secret topological system' in which he had buried the loss of his one and only love object: Ascanio. The site of this topography is Venice" (128). The authors then map this secret topological system—in Abraham and Torok, a "*secretly perpetuated* topography" ("Mourning *or* Melancholia" 125, emphasis in original)—onto the settings and events of Roussel's fictions. It is noteworthy that Mathews and Perec use "topology," a term that designates a particular field of study in mathematics, in addition to Abraham and Torok's application of "topography," which is associated with the surface characteristics of a geographical area. Mathews and Perec propose that a topological formula underlies the properties of Roussel's topographical landscapes. To clarify this point, they write:

Venice is a city made for walking, where one is never quite sure which way is north or south, where one never knows quite how far it is from one point to another, where the link between two points is a question of continuity and/or discontinuity of surface, just like the space of topology, which disregards direction and measurement. (130)

This topological quality accounts for the singularity of Roussel's works and retrospectively links him to the Oulipo. Roussel's trauma therefore speaks through a topologically encrypted language that emerges, encoded, in his books. Out of this biographical and textual analysis, Mathews and Perec claim to have solved the secret at the very core of Roussel, a secret that he could never speak.

Mathews and Perec perform a brilliant imitation of a psychoanalytic literary interpretation in the essay. The layers of Roussel's encrypted story, discovered hidden in the binding of a book, are matched by the excavation the authors perform in giving form to these fragments. Yet the application of psychoanalysis to illuminate the secret trauma that generates Roussel's literary experimentation contradicts the core Oulipo tenet that values conscious technique over the aleatory nature of individual "inner genius." While the essay is a parody of psychoanalytic modes of interpretation, it draws on genuine biographical details, such as the Roussel's mental breakdown at nineteen and his homosexuality, leaving ambiguous the essay's relationship to truth.<sup>43</sup> Despite the essay's satiric qualities, the narrative the authors' produce reinforces a pathological interpretation of Roussel's originality. By attributing Roussel's cryptonimic genius to his repressed homosexual desires, Mathews and Perec impose a personal, authorial source to Roussel's texts. They write that after Ascanio's death, "Roussel's life was divided between a social life of 'normality' (think of his extreme concern for conventions) and 'perversion,' which both stem from one mechanical behavior pattern, and thirty-seven years of a lonely death agony devoted to constructing his 'extraordinary travels'" (129). The account Mathews and Perec give of Roussel's trauma suggests that he absorbed the loss of

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example, François Caradec, *Raymond Roussel* (1972).

the love-object as a punishment for his sin, a sin for which he could never fully atone. Mathews and Perec thus assume the role of confessors for Roussel's unresolved guilt and remorse, extracting a confession from his imagined textual remains. The substance of their interpretation is consistent with the actual discourse on homosexuality. Indeed, the essay demonstrates how Oulipian and psychoanalytic writing both rely on metaphors of space and share a fascination with cryptic language. However, Oulipian conventions distinguish it from the psychoanalytic by depersonalising the buried content.

With "Roussel and Venice," Mathews and Perec prove to be as adept at suspicious reading as they are at cryptic writing. However, a reader sensitive to the Oulipian constraints might suspect an additional secret buried in the text, perhaps a mathematical formula. It is certainly possible that the two rely on a systematic technique, although this has yet to yield any results. The invented fragments of Roussel's text are "reproduced" among the appendices to their study. The disconnected words and phrases on these pages resemble elements of *The Conversions* and prompt the reader to investigate for puns that would further undermine the authoritative tone of analysis.<sup>44</sup> If Mathews and Perec are parodying the suspicious techniques of psychoanalysis, their essay reveals an ambivalence that does not wholly reject its postulates. The image of the crypt in the psyche is a notion that carries genuine value for Perec. Indeed, the parody does not read as hostile or critical of Abraham and Torok; rather, their compelling language of intrapsychic tombs and transgenerational phantoms provide formulas for imaginative exploration.

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<sup>44</sup> There are several references in the essay that point to Mathews' previous works; for example, "Fitchwinder University" (123) is mentioned among the appendixes to *The Conversions*.

While the Oulipo may reject the space of the mind as the container of genius, it does not mean that they are any less concerned with questions of subjectivity and interiority. By defamiliarising language through constraints, the Oulipo seek a greater understanding of the mechanisms of creativity. Furthermore, the Oulipian form does not preclude examination of the psyche, but merely takes a different approach to analysis of a common object: language. In positing a mathematical formula as the origin point of their practice, the Oulipo inscribe their work with the rational authority of science. Despite the frequently ludic and even absurdist events of their writing, the Oulipo underwrite their texts with a rational principle. This presents something of a dilemma: on the one hand, we might argue that the Oulipo disrupts the dichotomy of masculine rationality and feminine irrationality by uniting these qualities in a single practice. On the other hand, the reliance on an abstract scientific rationality as the “foundation” of their method reinforces a hierarchy that is contingent upon masculine authority. If the Oulipo is a reaction to unconsciously accepted textual and cultural conventions, then we might expect issues of gender and sexuality to have a prominent place in the tradition. Critiques have left such questions largely unexamined in their analysis of Mathews’ texts. Yet, as we have seen, gender and sexuality are important, but cryptic, elements in Mathews’ writing. With *The Journalist*, the themes of textual form, identity, and sexuality emerge as complex thematic issues.

### **The Fragmentary Self in *The Journalist* (1994)**

*The Journalist*, published more than thirty years after *The Conversions*, is only Mathews’ second novel as a member of the Oulipo—although, he did publish short

stories, essays, and poetry during this time. *The Journalist* follows *Cigarettes* (1987) in a distinct formal shift, as it “doesn’t have the digressions, it doesn’t have the erudition or the wordplay and language games” (“Interview with John Ash” 31) of his early, Roussel-influenced novels. Edmund White observes, “*Cigarettes*, which at first (and last) glance seems his most realistic book, is also the one most manipulated by combinatorial devices” (“Their Masks, Their Lives” 78). While *Cigarettes* organises each chapter around the relationship between two characters during a particular period of time, characteristics that White describes as “time signature” and “key” (78), *The Journalist* revisits the first-person narration of *The Conversions*. Given Mathews’ participation in the Oulipo, and *The Journalist*’s overt experimentation with textual space, the reader has every reason to approach the novel with the suspicion that there is a cryptic secret to discover.

*The Journalist* takes the form of diary entries written by an unidentified man who, much like the unnamed narrator of *The Conversions*, is preoccupied with making sense of the world around him. In this case, however, the text depicts the world according to a more familiar literary realism. Early in *The Journalist*, we learn that doctors have recommended the journal as a kind of therapeutic technique, a practice of self-examination and interpretation meant to alleviate some of the narrator’s anxieties. The journalist, as it is most appropriate to refer to him, explains, “Dr. Max (and Daisy) urged me to start this notebook for greater understanding, and my new sense of things suggests his reasoning was sound, despite its being founded on an exaggerated clinical interpretation of what was no more than a prolonged spell of the blues” (19). While the journalist does not provide insight into what precisely took place during this “spell of the blues,” the text alerts the reader to the themes of

mental health, psychology, and fears of losing control. In addition to his writing practice, the journalist records that he is taking lorazepam, a drug often prescribed for the treatment of anxiety and insomnia. He observes that “the medicine works [...] I slept through; I woke no drowsier than usual” (3). The medication and the journal are components of a strategy to address the journalist’s mental health—an issue that his characterisation of a previous “prolonged spell of the blues” suggests he is trying to diminish.

At first, the journal seems to provide its writer with a degree of stability. In order to find material to record in his book, the journalist experiences a heightened level of attention and a stronger connection with the world outside him. While at work, he notes “[p]aying the attention needed to retain the words let me see the speakers in a vividly spatial way. It brought them in from the flat screen of what surrounds me, which usually looks impenetrable no matter how near it is. I felt closer to them” (4). Referring to his colleagues as “speakers” points to his experience of alienation. The journalist finds his visual and spatial perceptions altered by the organising principle of the journal. It provides a structural order for his interactions with the world. The “impenetrable” barrier of the two-dimensional “flat screen” that previously described his sensory experience transforms and he experiences the full complexity of three-dimensional depth. At the same time, his sense of being brought “closer to” his colleagues suggests that this perceptual development opens up a new sense of emotional proximity. He reflects that he “felt independent but by no means separate from my fellow, except in the tiny power I enjoyed in watching them” (4). While his interconnected subjectivity describes a healthy sense of the relationship between self and other, his awareness of a power derived from observing his

colleagues points to the capacity for this practice to degenerate. This scene of observation and documentation connects the novel to ideas of power organised around confession and judgement. Although the journalist confides his observations to his journal, Foucault reminds us that authority need only take a “virtual presence” (*Will to Knowledge* 61) in confession to enforce relations of power. These thoughts appear early in the journal, but they signal potential difficulties to come and alert the reader to the journalist’s anxieties concerning power and control.

In parallel with the formation of new bonds with the external world, the journalist observes an inner transformation. While talking with a colleague, he remarks on his ability to detach from the immediacy of the encounter and turn inwards. He writes that “[n]odding in apparent attentiveness, I savoured this invention of my small, quiet solitude” (5), which reminds him of a similar childhood sensation when he became aware of “the flesh-and-bones me sitting at the table and another invisible part of me pursuing its own life” (5). The journalist’s experience follows a dichotomy between body and mind that positions the bodily external world as spacious, interconnected, and public, while the inner mental space is a “small, quiet solitude” that is separated from others. The image of separate spaces runs contrary to the psychoanalytic model, which proposes “the mutual interpenetration of inner and outer space” (Frosh 13). The journalist’s sense of an inner identity does not intersect with his sense of a bodily or material self. His sense of inner space, materialised in the language of the journal, becomes a territory to defend and a private space from which to act upon others. These thematic concerns recall the almost complete exclusion in *The Conversions* of personal observations, as well as the imagery of Roussel’s private, secretive inner space mapped out in the essay with

Perec. As we will see, the impulse for control and organisation that characterises earlier works is a subject that Mathews explores and elaborates upon in *The Journalist*.

Although writing about his experiences and his thoughts engages the narrator in a discourse that provides a sense of control, he soon fixates on the gaps that exist in the journal's form. Worrying that he might unintentionally leave something out, the journalist shifts from a familiar first-person prose style to documenting his life in a point-form list. Despite this modification, the journal still does not match his ambitions:

But 'this' is incomplete, false, and misleading! On the day I started keeping this record (yesterday?!), I understandably left things out [...]. Since then I've noticed that what I wrote down has been kept vivid for me (I had to see the office shoes to preserve them in writing, and I still see them now). Trying to put in even more led to this list. But the list doesn't give me access to what it contains—its events are as dead as unrecorded ones. Its only benefit has been to show me how much I still leave out, how much more I want to get down, how I want to get *everything* down—impossible, I know, but a man's reach, et cetera. (8, emphasis in original)

The desire to organise all of experience—to contain and master life through writing—becomes an obsession that is increasingly the focus of the journal itself. The narrator describes his experience of existence as “an obscurity of unknown predicaments enshrouding not only present things and events but remembered ones as well” (10). This account could serve comfortably as a summary of *The Conversions*. The descriptors “obscurity” and “enshrouding” evoke both a perceptual and a hermeneutic sense of secrecy and uncertainty. However, the journalist discovers that “[o]bjects and events, once I've *written* about them, emerge from the strangeness of belonging to systems outside my control. They are naturalized” (9, emphasis in original). Writing serves as a technique of mastery, one that brings

objects outside of himself and beyond his control within a semantic system that imposes a semblance of order. His system unites confession with a hermeneutic principle that creates an internal circuit of power. Simply by giving language to experiences and objects, the shroud of their alterity begins to dissipate and they enter into a domain over which the journalist feels a sense of control.

Language provides a medium for negotiating between external and internal worlds—a central concept in the Freudian tradition of psychoanalysis—and the journal becomes a frame where the two spaces intersect. The narrator glimpses in the journal the potential for order and control. Authorised by a clinical authority, the journal is evidently a technique of truth telling that, as Foucault famously notes, is “inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power” (*Will to Knowledge* 59). The journalist resists defining his method as confessional, reflecting “I haven’t got Plutarch’s philosophy or Rousseau’s wily gift of confession” (*The Journalist* 200). His resistance to this lineage, however, emerges out of a sense of pride. He envisions himself as a formal innovator: “My work is not for ‘the world’ (by that I mean *anybody* else) or for me (I hardly have time to read what I’ve written),” the journalist declares, “It’s for ‘It.’ ‘Its’ fugitive name does not matter. I’ve called it truth, and before reality; since it is never to be completely attained, it may be beyond naming altogether” (200, emphasis in original). Here, the reason for the journalist’s superior attitude towards confession becomes clear: he does not identify his activities as fulfilling a function in the confessional relationship, but rather as constructing an entirely new apparatus for the exercise of power. In remarking on the “fugitive name” of his object of analysis, he evokes coercion as a part of his hermeneutic method. Although the journalist imagines himself situated on

the authoritative side of the confessional equation, the novel ultimately reveals this to be a fantasy. While the novel points to his decline from its first page, the journalist continues to pursue a hermeneutic system that will encapsulate “*everything*” (8, emphasis in original).

Taking up the challenge of formulating a system that will both designate and give adequate weight to the different areas of experience, the journalist begins to assign classifications to his journal entries, abandoning point-form and returning to a prose style. The first distinctions he makes are between “what is verifiable and objective,” which he gives the classification “A” and “what is subjective,” which is designated “B” (83-4). To these categories he adds “Memorial,” but quickly wonders whether “memories also belong in B, since the things they convey, being no longer here, are not verifiable” (24). This ambiguity of his system leads the journalist to re-examine the specific dimensions of his observations and insert additional sub-categories in order to organise his experiences. It is not difficult to imagine the journalist as a mature version of the narrator of *The Conversions*, whose struggle to find coherence and meaning in the outside world has led him to this method of obsessive classification. While there is, of course, no textual evidence for this claim, the similarities between these two figures reveal the questions of interpretation, truth, and subjectivity as on-going themes in Mathews’ fiction. The solitary male narrators of *The Conversions* and *The Journalist* both seek order and meaning in the external world while failing to fully interrogate the conditions underlying this impulse. Indeed, the unwillingness of both men to address the source of this desire for truth and mastery pushes them towards untenable circumstances and always away from themselves.

There is a notable similarity between the journalist's method and that of the Oulipian writer in their application of systems to writing. In *Design and Debris* (2002), Joseph Conte observes this parallel in *The Journalist* and remarks that the journalist functions as "the surrogate author of a procedural novel" (100). Conte imparts the term "proceduralist" to texts that "express an immanent design that is revealed deep within the chaos of their materials" (27). The reader of *The Journalist*, then, bears witness to the journalist's efforts to bring order to the disorderly experience of life and to impart a covert or deeply embedded logic through the act of translating experience into language. According to this interpretation, the theme of immanent design emerges at the surface of *The Journalist* and becomes the source of tension in the text. Conte describes it thus: "Synergy in literary design arises when the complex dynamical system initiated by the constraint has the capacity to exceed authorial control" (84). In other words, the struggle between author and constraint produces an unforeseeable result that cannot be attributed solely to the "individual genius" of the author. A reading of *The Journalist* as a dramatization of this scenario would present the novel as a morality tale of the author who sought to control too much, which seems to be Conte's argument when he remarks that "*The Journalist* is the perfect study of this principal of proceduralism" (103). While Conte does point to the "insoluble problem [...] of an always unclassifiable 'other'" in the journalist's system, he does not explore the form this "other" takes in the novel, but rather compares it to "the scalar geometry of mapping" (102). As we will see, gender plays a significant role in the problem of the "other" at the level of narrative and form.

In *Cognitive Fictions* (2002), Joseph Tabbi proposes a reading of *The Journalist* that resembles Conte's, though Tabbi attends to the way the novel mirrors

cognitive processes. Tabbi describes Mathews as participating in a “neomaterialist climate” that is characterised by a deliberate effort to bring to the surface of the novel “those aspects of a cognitive system that have sunk below the level of operational awareness” (*Cognitive* 130). The method of constrictive writing, argues Tabbi, “does not give over the creative process to either the unconscious or mathematical formalisms but rather forces the co-conscious, language-based composing mind to put itself into contact with formal and procedural conditions that are always present, always constraining, supporting, tweaking, and unconsciously controlling the creative process” (130). This view contends that the objective is not scientific mastery of the writing process, but rather a heightened awareness of the conditions that predetermine the language we use. Mathews suggests something similar when he remarks that the constraint or rule “distracts the ego and the superego sufficiently to keep them busy on this arbitrary problem so that the unconscious is made available to the writer” (Ash, 28). Tabbi’s description contrasts with Mathews’ in the diminishing significance he places on the unconscious in writing under constraint. Where Mathews’ allusion evokes the dynamic and fluid structure of the Freudian unconscious, Tabbi traces the unconscious back to “formal and procedural conditions” (*Cognitive* 130) that suggest its origins are rational, orderly, and knowable. According to Mathews, the constraint serves to liberate the unruly and unpredictable unconscious in writing, while Tabbi envisions the constraint as a model for the unconscious. Although Tabbi’s cognitive reading of *The Journalist* seeks to avoid a suspicious interpretation by attending to the materiality of the novel as a representation of cognitive processes, in doing so the anxieties motivating the journalist are naturalised and left unquestioned.

In drawing on cognitive science for his argument, Tabbi aligns the language of *The Journalist* with the modes of cognition and imparts to it a moral significance. He remarks that the novel “makes a frank admission of its own materiality and so establishes a ground on which authors and readers can meet as equals and communicate without false illusions” (*Cognitive* 130). This claim contrasts significantly with Chis Andrews’ remark that the use of “formal encoding” in Oulipian literature encourages “paranoid interpretation” (669, 672). While Tabbi asserts that *The Journalist* provides a neutral space—a “ground” that is neither surface nor depth—for the author and reader to meet, this claim does not take into account the practice of encryption of order and meaning in Oulipian writing, including Mathews. Although the cognitive basis for Tabbi’s argument resists the interpretive conventions of surface and depth, the claim that the materiality of *The Journalist* provides a more truthful narrative fails to account for the capacity of materialist (or neomaterialist) fiction to encode and encrypt meaning. Indeed, the proximity of the reader to the journalist’s inner thoughts is disorientating. By starting his journal *in medias res*, there are significant contextual and historical details that are unavailable to the reader but which the journalist alludes to in the casual tone that he assumes in writing for himself. Additionally, Tabbi’s cognitive framework does not account for the significance of gender in the journalist’s diary—whether it is the masculinist ambitions of his journal or his identity as a father, husband, and friend.

While it is unclear whether Mathews encrypts *The Journalist* with meaning beyond a basic organising constraint, the possibility is always present in an Oulipian

work.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, failing to identify concealed meaning is a threat that counterbalances the liberatory potential of the Oulipian constraint from the author, as it reasserts the author's claim to privileged knowledge. The journalist displays a similar anxiety to a paranoid reader in his concern that he will fail to capture accurately the quality of an event or that his categories will not illustrate the complexity of a situation. Reflecting on the limits of chronology, the journalist remarks that it "can only oversimplify. It sticks to the obvious and reasonable, avoiding all the lies outside its 'inevitable' progress, avoiding what I *most* hope to record, the *then* and *then* that might not have led to here at all" (20, emphasis in original). The journalist wishes to capture elements that stand outside the deadening cause-and-effect logic of chronology in order to capture the full complexity of events; he seeks to open up a space that keeps alive the conditions of possibility that the passage of time has foreclosed upon. The journalist's method rejects a hermeneutics of progress for a hermeneutics of potential, a notion that recalls the idea of topological space in *The Conversions*. Clarifying his ambitions, the journalist describes the alternative to a chronological form, which "means fitting things into place, making sure that nothing has happened" as the ability to "see things out of place" (20). Here, the journalist's wish to read against the grain of progress suggests that he is practicing a hermeneutics of suspicion whose objective is to uncover "things out of place" (20). One might argue that the journalist merely wishes to give a greater context to events, to illuminate the complexity of the

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<sup>45</sup> In an interview with Shaw, Mathews describes *The Journalist* as "sort of half-Oulipian. I used Queneau's 'X takes Y for Z' to set up a field of relationships and then let the story work out of that" (43). In another interview, however, Mathews aligns himself with Oulipo writers who prefer "not to let on" (*Paris Review*) about the encrypted elements of a text. Thus, it remains unclear if there are other formal constraints concealed within the novel.

networks that make living in society possible for his own understanding; however, the progress of the narrative reveals the encroachment of suspicion and anxiety.

At various times in the text, the journalist reminds himself of the purpose of the journal: “If nothing else, this account of myself (whoever he may be) should make me pay attention to priorities. My priorities: Daisy, Colette, Paul, work. And Gert?” (30). These four characters form the primary relationships in the journalist’s life: Daisy, his wife; Gert, his son; Colette, his mistress; and Paul, his closest friend. While much of the journal concerns encounters with or thoughts of these individuals, the journal itself becomes increasingly a mediator between them—a barrier that sets up his private inner life in opposition to his performance of identity. Just as the journal will come to occupy the priority designated “work,” it begins to take the place of his intimate relationships by bringing them inside its pages. At one point, the journalist wonders “[w]here are the people I care about? Gert out of the house, Daisy off in her room, C. out of even telephone reach, Paul and Jago lost to their new athletic mania. Here I can make and keep them present, remembering how they were, envisioning how they are” (36). The journal serves as a surrogate for these relationships, supplementing the journalist’s need to evaluate and control. This is not strictly a bad thing. The journalist reflects that “I’m beginning to think that these notes, whether or not they’re ‘doing me good,’ give me a hold on reality that I could never achieve otherwise and so console me for the little losses that punctuate any ordinary day” (36). In contrast to the insecure sensation that he is merely “a thing other things happen to” (22), the journal provides a space where he may assert control, although the “reality” that he grasps may be an illusory form. Instead of a topological space, a region that is both inside and outside and where proximity

replaces any question of measurement, the journal develops into an isolating space that takes in perceptions of external phenomena, such as the behaviour of his family and friends, but does not reciprocate this action by reaching out. Once marked down in his journal, the external phenomena become objects of suspicion for the journalist, who probes for their occulted meanings. In this sense, the journalist resembles the isolated narrator of *The Conversions*, for whom the external world is uninterpretable.

The structure of the journal begins to expand with the introduction of a new organisational device, the “incept” (32), which allows for a writing style that corresponds to the fluctuating movement of thought. The journalist also presents the first subdivisions of his categories, which designate “what concerns others and what concerns only myself” to the primary categories of the subjective and the verifiable. With this new sense of mastery, however, the journalist decides to stop taking the lorazepam. He writes, “No pills tonight. Stopping the lorazepam entirely makes me apprehensive, but I noticed no bad effects from halving the dose. (Two nights ago. Did I mention this?)” (32, emphasis in original). The journalist hides this development from his wife and friends, knowing they would have insisted he start taking them again. The decision to give up the medication and replace it with the structured support of the journal reveals the way that the journalist imposes upon himself a rationalist and independent ideal of masculinity. Where taking medication requires an admission of helplessness and submission to a medical authority, the journal is an acceptable masculine alternative that employs “language as a means of self-protection” (Seidler 135). The barrier of the journal not only organises and neutralises the sense of the external as threatening, but it also allows the journalist to act out a measured and rational identity.

Although Tabbi does not comment upon the role of masculinity in the novel, he does note the peculiar distance between the controlled language of the journal and the unstable mental state of its author. Tabbi remarks, “[s]o logical and calm are the notes that, although readers are given plenty of indications as to the journalist’s deteriorating state, we are as surprised as he is when he breaks from his obsession long enough to observe himself” (132). There are, indeed, few moments when the journalist focuses his attention on himself; instead, he focuses his energies outwardly, into the journal or onto other people. When he forgets the routine Monday morning meeting, he expresses frustration with himself but quickly imposes a rational order to his emotions: “I calmed down. I asked myself: So what’s the point – the point for *you*? This: your dismaying earlier mistake – forgetting the meeting – is no reason for fruitless self-recrimination. It will be redeemed not by some anguish-ridden atonement but simply by being recorded here” (*The Journalist* 69). Confession, here, fits into an orderly and unemotional structure of self-examination and critique that must be applied to one’s self as well as to others.

An alternative to the language of rational self-restraint emerges in the novel through the journalist’s son, Gert, and his friendship with a student radical named Maganoff. The journalist acknowledges a level of tension in his relationship with Gert and remarks on feeling left out of his life. Although sceptical of Gert’s admiration for the university student Maganoff, the journalist listens. Gert summarises Maganoff’s attitude in their discussion: ““You know Pascal says, “We try to live in other people’s ideas. We neglect what is real in us” – isn’t that great?’ ‘What’s supposed to be real in us?’ ‘Maganoff says first of all your desires – they’re real and they’re all yours.’ ‘But I can desire anything.’ ‘Exactly. *Exactly.*’” (66,

emphasis in original). At Gert's request, Maganoff visits the journalist at his work where he explains his ideas in a language that echoes the '68 generation.<sup>46</sup> During one of their discussions, the journalist tells Maganoff:

‘I’m not sure what kind of new world you’re planning, but I don’t think I could take it.’ ‘No plans. Except to get rid of planners – hierarchy is what survives every struggle. It’s what has to go. [...] Everything else we need is already here. Sex should saturate life, the way it does. My cock is longing to find a universe it can love the way it loves itself.’ (94)

The journalist's reinforces the disparity between himself and those like Maganoff by allocating the category "B I/b.2" to the account of their encounter. In fact, the material space taken up in the book by the titles of categories begins to squeeze the content of the diary into an increasingly narrower column of text on the page. The visual effect of this technique invites the reader to see the category designations, like "B I/b.2," as a kind of metonymic shorthand that somehow contains the passage it identifies. At the same time, the space on the page allocated to these categories constrains or even represses the contents of the journal. The ideal of "free love" and an end to hierarchy runs in opposition to the systems of order that the journalist relies upon for security. Although he is carrying on a long-term affair with Colette, who is also a close friend of his wife, the journalist relies upon this secret to support his happiness in the other areas of his life. He admits that "giving [Colette] up would shut down my life in permanent curfew, and I would then love Daisy and Gert *less*" (6, emphasis in original). The journalist reveals no guilt in his behaviour, and, in fact, relies on the patriarchal norms that sanction such activity for a sense of fulfilment.

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<sup>46</sup> Although *The Journalist* does not reveal the location or time-period in which it takes place, details in the novel lead Conte to suggest "that the journalist resides in a central European city such as Bern, Munich, or Innsbruck" (101). Given Mathews' biographical details, the location might also be a city in the south of France, which would support the novel's description of student activism.

While the journal has given a sense of purpose and order to its author's life, the technique of close examination also results in an increase of suspicion, directed towards both himself and others. Early in the journal he remarks, "Daisy's eyes suspiciously pink" (31) and later wonders at Gert's unusual behaviour, which leads him to present a speculative list of "four possibilities" (76) that might explain it. The journalist displays a measured tone and self-directed critiques that encourage the reader to trust that there is substance to his suspicions. As the journal becomes increasingly the focus of his activities, he, too, becomes an object of suspicion at work, where his journaling has raised concern. When the journalist asks a colleague what he is suspected of, he receives the reply, "I don't know, but obviously it's more interesting than your job. It's not just him. He has eyes" (90). This prompts the journalist, in turn, to treat his colleagues with suspicion.

The journalist has faith, however, that solving the question of the journal's system will have enable him to better live his own life. He reflects, "so many other concerns are practically forced on me, and one of my goals in perfecting my recording technique is to accept them without resentment" (89). The journal has become an external forum where he can examine and ameliorate himself. This method leads the journalist to direct his gaze towards himself, which produces "a first list of signs and warnings gleaned from my sinful body after inspecting it from bottom to top" (119) made up of twenty-one observations. Although the journalist makes this statement with a certain amount of sarcasm, his application of confessional techniques clearly aligns with Foucault's identification of "an intensification of the body—with its exploitation as an object of knowledge and an element in relations of power" (*Will to Knowledge* 107). The journalist's description

of “signs and warnings” that are legible on his body situates his journal within the larger discourse of knowledge and control that he believes will bring him relief from the psychological strain he is under.

The simple act of writing down these sins of the body, the way it weakens and betrays him, does provide the journalist with some reassurance. After compiling the list he writes, “[t]his is a good start. Why do I find writing down these trivialities so comforting” (120). The journalist has come to rely on the satisfactions provided by the discursive circuit of the journal, where the clarity of external linguistic conventions contrasts with the unpredictability of life. The journal, he reflects, “is the only place I succeed in thinking or at least in sustaining a reactive sequence of words while my body and mind carom (or succumb) off (or to) one thing and another” (121). In this description, the journal is a point that mediates between body and mind, a kind of external interiority that resembles a topological space. Indeed, this interconnection of inner and outer recalls Lacan’s concept of “extimacy,” which, Jacques-Alain Miller notes, “was used by Lacan to designate in a problematic manner the real in the symbolic” (122). The rational, independent authority of the journal serves as a conduit to a Lacanian real—an otherness that resides in the most interior and secret part of the self. The circuit of power embedded in confession, however, undermines the journalist’s efforts to attain the real.

Nevertheless, the journalist’s claim that the journal is meant only for itself, and not for him or for the world, is borne out as its demand for a comprehensive accounting takes an increasing toll on his health. Tabbi argues that “[a]t no time does the journalist apply any of his numerous and detailed acts of self-observation to the improvement of his condition” (*Cognitive* 132). While one might argue that his

decision to stop consuming alcohol is a positive change, Tabbi's claim does point to the journalist's resistance to a "deeper" level of self-improvement, one that confronts his psychological state. When the journalist catches himself in a manic state, it is not his thoughts that he recognises as irrational but rather the way he appears outwardly: "I saw myself as if through an eye in the ceiling, fidgeting and sweating like a demented inmate, a disgrace. I calmed down" (129). This moment of self-awareness reveals a sharp divide between the control and reason that the journalist exhibits in his writing, and the disorder that characterises his interpersonal reality. He clings to the journal's embodiment of reason, unable to confront his deteriorating mental state.

The sensation of being closer to others and the spatial perception of depth that the journalist experienced early in the text ultimately collapses. When Daisy confronts him about his peculiar behaviour, the journalist is not forthcoming about the energy he is devoting to his journal. He realises:

In this task I've set myself I'm totally alone, and it cannot be otherwise. I have nothing but the vaguest help and support. How can I ever explain to anyone the high principle that governs my commitment – a commitment to the "perfectability" of my methods? It may now concern only myself, but ultimately it extends far beyond myself because it is the condition of the noblest of all acts, that of rescuing the precarious imprints of reality; and reality is the world's, not mine. (153-4)

His inability to address the emotional issues that overwhelm him pushes the journalist towards an ever more abstract, complex, and unrealisable goal. The journalist's obsessive efforts to define a comprehensive system of self-interpretation reveal the tension and anxiety associated with cryptic masculinity. Seidler describes this sense of insecurity in terms that encapsulate the journalist's behaviour when he writes that men perceive themselves as "failures who need to prove our adequacy through showing that we are more able or more competent than others" (199).

Although the journalist's life bears all the marks of success and fulfilment, his drive to create a system for the rational organisation of experience points to some underlying sense of failure or inadequacy, one that he cannot face. Articulating their "proceduralist" and "neomaterialist" interpretations of *The Journalist*, Conte and Tabbi unintentionally reinforce the rationalist masculine ideal of order by attending to the logic of the journalist's system rather than the question of its creation. They overlook the personal crisis that the journalist attempts to conceal beneath his quest to identify all the forms organising his life.

In the midst of his decline, the journalist comes to a profound realisation. He describes that while lying in bed "there rose into view, with no other warning than the tremor of anxiety that I had scarcely noticed earlier, the recognition of the somber truth that I had so stubbornly been shirking during the past days – a truth so obvious that ignoring it could only be explained by unconscious terror" (189). The reader is encouraged in this moment to expect a genuine moment of self-criticism and an abandonment of the journal; but, instead, this fear comes from the recognition of the journal's inadequacy. He states:

What I discovered is this: all the care I have brought to organizing this journal has been misspent; my laborious classifications have proved worthless; my efforts at competence are an illusion. Why? Because I have left out the chief activity of my life and the chief fact of my project: the keeping of this journal. [...] the main story of the journal is the journal itself. (190-1)

The "Journal of the Journal" (194) produces paradoxical effects. It appears, at once, to focus in more accurately on the journalist's practice and potentially illuminate his obsessive behaviour; but at the same time, it increasingly distances the journalist from himself. The journal is now a barrier to understanding and self-improvement—it is rationality for its own sake.

The journalist's heightened self-surveillance corresponds with the intensification of his suspicion towards his closest friends. He sets out a series of possible scenarios describing their machinations. He notes, "Daisy with Paul, Colette with Gert, Daisy and Paul with Colette and Gert, with Jago picking up the tab, and here I sit holding the steering wheel that long ago came off in my hands" (218). This passage alludes to the first entry in the diary and provides a metaphor for his efforts to control areas of his life that require him to trust others. He cannot let go of his suspicions and so he hides himself in Colette's garden where he hopes to catch her with his son. However, he witnesses more than he anticipated, more than he can absorb. He collapses and awakes to "a sensation, unfamiliar but not disturbing, of absolute emptiness – an emptiness bathed in light. My body was fingered by uncanny, sweet uneasiness, as though a delicious secret were being disclosed" (229). The collapse exposes his unsustainable mental disorder and serves as a confession of his vulnerability. Everything he has put into the journal was a barrier to this sense of "emptiness" and loss of control. His "sinful" body, finally, is made to speak its "delicious secret": that it obscures a mind in torment.

The event of his collapse and transport to the hospital is the final passage of the journal, although not the conclusion of the novel. When the text begins again, the narrative shifts to a third-person perspective, and the speaker refers to the journalist as "the patient." However, slips between the first- and third-person—for instance, when the third-person narrator, commenting on the journalist, notes, "the book my mother had sent" (232)—reveal the journalist is still holding the pen. Tabbi interprets the interactive third-person voice of the journalist as a positive development, despite his unwillingness to communicate with family and friends who are trying to alleviate

his suspicions. The journalist recedes into a child-like state, only speaking when he reads along with an orderly to a children's book. Tabbi describes that, with this change, "[t]he journalist is now poised for *re-entry* into his environment at another level, in a wholeness of interiority and exteriority and a dialogue that is not so much a communication between two people as a creation of a new narrative object outside either one of them" (*Cognitive* 136, emphasis in original). Here, most obviously, Tabbi's adherence to a rationalist cognitive interpretation of the novel impedes a sense of empathy. Attempting to recuperate the authority of reason over emotion in *The Journalist*, Tabbi fails to recognise that the journalist has collapsed under precisely the pressure created by reason's efforts to dominate emotion. If we are to read the novel as a "perfect study of this principal of proceduralism" (Conte 103), it can only be as a critique of the fetishisation of Oulipian compositional structures and the desperate search for order in the depths of the irrational.

As this analysis of *The Conversions*, "Roussel and Venice," and *The Journalist* demonstrates, the form of the self and the pressures of masculine identity are recurring thematic concerns for Mathews, and evident from the outset of his literary career. Mathews, in fact, confirms this notion in an interview with Shaw, where, commenting on the representation of castration in *The Conversions*, he reflects, "what interests me retrospectively about that first book is that even though I thought I had handled the topic overtly (for instance, in the legend of the king), in fact the book became a kind of embodiment of my own inability to face the subject, which became explicit in the character of the narrator and the way he told his story" (38). In an autobiographical essay, Mathews notes that he underwent a personal transformation while working with Werner Erhard, a public speaker whose intensive

seminars on personal development involve “a demanding exercise called the ‘Truth Process’” (“Autobiography” 165). Mathews explains that this confessional practice helped him to understand the psychological tensions that had been inhibiting his relationships with family and friends. While it may be tempting to treat Erhard’s methods with suspicion and view it as an exploitative outgrowth of confessional culture in the United States, Mathews expresses appreciation for what it helped him to learn about himself and for the positive growth in his personal relationships. Confession is an ambivalent technique that must be evaluated within the particular context of its use. Each of the preceding chapters has explored the difficulties that men encounter in practices of self-examination and their reluctance to confront attitudes or behaviours that may be viewed as misogynist, bigoted, or racist. By contrast, the narrator of William H. Gass’ *The Tunnel*, to which we will next turn, is unafraid of exploring the buried depths of his biases. Indeed, Gass’ novel performs an excavation of the aesthetic and social forms associated with the “dark” side of the surface/depth dichotomy and reveals how these forms support a profoundly troubling model of masculinity.



## Chapter 4: The Madman in the Cellar

### *Digging up the Past in William H. Gass' The Tunnel*

Although William H. Gass began publishing sections of what would become *The Tunnel* in 1969, it is perhaps only now, in the era of Donald Trump and his “basket of deplorables,” that we can truly understand Gass’ monumental novel.<sup>47</sup> There is undoubtedly a family resemblance between the narrator of *The Tunnel*, William Friederick Kohler, who envisions a “Party of the Disappointed People” (266), and the Americans that attend Trump’s rallies wearing red hats emblazoned with the slogan, “Make America Great Again.” Yet *The Tunnel* is a novel preoccupied with the past, with history, both personal and public. Kohler, we learn, is a historian and professor who is nearing the completion of a vast work “concerning Nazi crimes and German guilt” (5), but has found himself unable to write an introduction to the book. Out of frustration, he begins to compose a confessional account of his own personal history that reveals the private life behind the voice of the official narrative. With his characterisation of Kohler, Gass sets out to explore “the fascism of the heart” (366) which is a social form that may be found in the Nazi sympathiser as well as the contemporary disappointed American citizen. While critics have devoted much attention to the historical concerns of *The Tunnel*, the significance of its confessional features has not received sufficient analysis. This chapter will argue that it is, in fact, the juxtaposition of public and private forms in the novel that illuminates the source of Kohler’s profound resentment: the binary

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<sup>47</sup> The phrase “basket of deplorables” was used by Hillary Clinton to describe some supporters of Trump at campaign event during her run for the presidency in 2016 (Chozick). The phrase was quickly taken up by Trump’s supporters to show the contempt with which they felt the political establishment treated them.

opposition of masculinity and femininity. Turning from public history, traditionally the domain of the masculine, to personal history, the sphere of the feminine, Kohler confronts the insecurities and resentments that represent the private foundation of his public persona.

In its depiction of embittered white masculinity, its lengthy gestation, and its considerable size, *The Tunnel* bears an uncanny, though coincidental, resemblance with the diary of Arthur Inman. Much like Inman, Kohler writes his confessional narrative from a darkened space—the cellar of his family home, which he describes as his “cell” (148)—that facilitates the confession of his petty resentments, his bigotry, and his misogyny. And, much like Inman, Kohler is an American fascinated with Hitler and Nazism. Finally, there is this, the last entry in Inman’s diary before his suicide:

This, neglected to relate until now, after midday, a dream, a scarifying nightmare. Was underneath huge city. Had with me unaccountable score of people, tremblingly old, dependently young. No way up to surface. My responsibility. Miles upon miles of reasonable-appearing yet delusive tunnels, not lit by any specific lights, rather by bright, disconcerting effulgence. Down steps. Up steps. Through drains. In arched-over back alleys. Up, pulled by cables, flumes of crowded air. Down chutes. Never, ever arriving anywhere. (1597)

Inman’s recollection of a dream in which he found himself leading a group of people through an underground realm evokes the relationship between Kohler and the reader of *The Tunnel*, who follow Kohler’s murky, labyrinthine narrative as he leads the reader through the buried matter of his past.

The use of such spatial imagery here is not merely for rhetorical flourish. *The Tunnel* takes as its organising concept the spatial metaphor of “digging down.” Not only does Kohler excavate the “dirt” of his personal history, but he also attempts to dig a tunnel out of the cellar where he works in order to free himself from the

pressures of his unfinished history of Nazi Germany and his disappointing family life. These physical and psychological activities overlap in the novel, collapsing thematic and formal concerns into one and the same thing. *The Tunnel* draws the reader's attention to this relationship between the ugly content of Kohler's writing and its heterogeneous, though frequently pleasing, aesthetic form.<sup>48</sup> Kohler's confession stands in opposition to the clarity and linearity of his official history. His confession presents the reader with the disorder and complexity of lived experience. Thus, in contrast to the Nazis method of concealing the repugnance of their ideology beneath powerful and persuasive aesthetic imagery, Kohler writes truthfully in his confession about the misogyny and bigotry that he omits from the public record.

The metaphor of "digging down," of course, recalls previous remarks about Felski's assessment of contemporary practices of literary interpretation. In her examination of "suspicious reading," Felski defines "digging down" as a mode of interpretation in which "[t]he text is envisaged as possessing qualities of interiority, concealment, penetrability, and depth," and thus "[r]eading is imagined as an act of diving down to arrive at a repressed or otherwise obscured reality" (*Limits* 53). It is worth noting that the emergence of this method corresponds with the postmodern epoch and a crisis of temporality that, as Radstone notes, involves "a loss of a sense of depth and a flattening out or spatializing of experience" (8). The impulse to "dig down" into and beyond the text may be a response to this lost sense of external referents of order and value, the flattening of the cultural sphere in postmodernity. While Felski argues that it is necessary to develop new methods of interpretation lest critics lose a sense of self-awareness of the historicity of their own practices, she

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<sup>48</sup> *The Tunnel* employs a variety of textual forms and devices, including limericks, typographic puns, and designs.

presents a limited account of how literary works might, themselves, address these hermeneutic and historical concerns. Drawing on Levine's methodology, we will find that *The Tunnel* does, in fact, address the critical dependence on suspicion.

In light of Felski's evaluation of "suspicious reading" and the adversarial conditions of literature and criticism in the post-World War II period, the ambivalence and scepticism with which *The Tunnel* was met by reviewers and critics upon publication is, perhaps, due to Kohler's unsettling confessional mode. Gass' exploration of the metaphor of "digging down" in the novel pre-empts the critic's efforts—Kohler is already waiting with a list of his sins. While Gass, a devoted formalist writer and reader, has expressed his view that "the artist's fundamental loyalty must be to form" ("Finding 35), this does not mean that he views literature as beyond the domain of ethics. For Gass, the form of the text, rather than its content, is the feature that must be considered in relation to the world around it. In "Goodness Knows Nothing of Beauty" (1987), Gass presents a familiar formalist claim that "[a]rtistic quality depends upon a work's internal, formal, organic character, upon its inner system of relations, upon its structure and its style, and not upon the morality it is presumed to recommend, or upon the benevolence of its author, or its emblematic character" (42). However, Gass goes on to explain,

Writing a book is a very important moral act, indeed, consuming so much of one's life, and that, in these disgusting times, a writer who does not pursue an alienating formalism, but rather tries to buck us up and tell us not to spit in the face of the present, this is to serve a corrupt and debauched society in any way, is, if not a pawn of the system (a lackey, we used to say), then probably a liar and a hypocrite. (44)

Gass, like Levine, recognises the moral and political significance of form, and he wants readers to understand the subtle, coercive power of conventional narrative form to pacify and to subjugate.

Yet the outwardly hostile, and even repulsive, attitudes and ideas that Kohler records in his confession—particularly his treatment of the Holocaust—have proven divisive for critics of the novel. Even sections of *The Tunnel* published prior to the completed novel elicited ambivalent views from critics. Hassan Ihab remarks in a 1982 article for the journal *Salmagundi* that he is “disquieted by ‘The Tunnel,’ admittedly a fragment; for it gives me no pleasure, and I find its treatments of the Holocaust frivolous, hence dismal. Perhaps, as Gass grants, metaphor has become too much his fate” (117). Framing his review of the novel in the form of a trial with arguments for and against the text, Sven Birkerts ultimately cannot resolve the tensions at play in the text, concluding that “I find much in *The Tunnel* that I deplore, and much that I celebrate, and I cannot see that either cancels the other” (120). While some critics, like Michael Silverblatt, have championed the work, others, like James Wolcott—who writes that *The Tunnel* is “modernism’s last gasp, and way too late” (63)—have been unambiguously critical. However, the most common response to the novel upon its publication appears to have been ambivalence, with many critics unwilling to provide a definitive assessment of *The Tunnel*.

In her essay “An American Faust,” which appeared two years after *The Tunnel* was published in its entirety, Susan Stewart remains cautious about passing judgement on the novel, stating that “*The Tunnel* is a work whose meaning will not become manifest until many readers have reflected upon it and shared those reflections over time” (399). This tone of uncertainty also characterises many of the contributions to Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin’s collection, *Into the Tunnel: Readings of Gass’s Novel*, published in 1998, which includes Stewart’s essay. In his “Anti-Introduction” to the novel, Irving Malin asserts that “*The Tunnel* deliberately

shuns rational order ‘academic criticism’” (11). Malin’s observation suggests that there is something of the “irrational” in *The Tunnel*, which, as we will see, is an important feature of the text. Both Stewart and Malin express reluctance, even fear, about how *The Tunnel* might be interpreted if critics do not allow for sufficient distance from the immediate, emotional reactions to the text. However, despite Stewart’s anticipation of debate to come, very little scholarship has since focused upon *The Tunnel* in subsequent years.<sup>49</sup> For such a strikingly divisive text, the silence that surrounds *The Tunnel* is suggestive of a wish to ignore it, to block out Kohler’s vicious and spiralling confession. There remains, then, much to be said about *The Tunnel* and its depiction of isolated and embittered white masculinity.

However, approaching *The Tunnel* as a literary “detective” and interrogating the text for what it conceals is at odds with the confessional efforts of Kohler’s narrative. We do not need to dig down or stand back to decipher what lies beneath his remarks. Kohler is explicit in the subversive pleasure that he takes in revealing the sentiments of disappointment, resentment, and hate that motivate him. This is not to suggest that we read *The Tunnel* uncritically, but, rather, to focus our attention on the forms the novel employs, both aesthetic and social, in its depiction of Kohler’s fascist heart and what we can learn from their configuration. Thus, given *The Tunnel*’s preoccupation with metaphors and images of dirt, detritus, and excavation, this chapter will examine the representation of form and formlessness in the novel. The binary opposition of form and formlessness corresponds with a gender binary that aligns masculinity with form and femininity with formlessness. In *Embodying the Monster* (2001), Margrit Shildrick explains that the binary opposition of form and

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<sup>49</sup> Jeffrey Pence’s “After Monumentality” is one of the few pieces of academic criticism devoted to *The Tunnel* in the twenty-first century.

formlessness—or, in Shildrick’s terms, limit and limitlessness—has long characterised the difference between male and female bodies in the Western cultural imagination. Shildrick remarks, “[i]n a tradition dating at least from the Pythagorean Table, the masculine has been associated with the limit, the feminine with the limitless, where the latter implies a failure of the proper, an unaccountability beyond the grasp of instrumental consciousness” (31). Men, too, may display feminine characteristics, which can give rise to insecurity and anxieties about their status within the hierarchy of masculinity. Thus, Kohler’s confessional exploration of dirt and disorder may be read as a confrontation with the femininity in himself that he had previously sought to suppress. This is evident in both the thematic and aesthetic qualities of the novel.

*The Tunnel* shares many of the typographical experiments and visual devices utilised in Gass’ novella *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife*, including the use of multiple fonts, type that is enlarged, decentred, or made almost illegible, and drawings. In contrast to *The Tunnel*, however, *Willie Masters’* is a self-consciously metafictional text that explores the metaphor of the “body of the text” as a female body.<sup>50</sup> The narrator of *Willie Masters’*, however, breaks the comparison that the imagery of the text evokes by addressing the reader directly and calling attention to the illusion of a coffee stain on the book: “[t]he muddy circle you see just before you and below represents the ring left on a leaf of the manuscript by my coffee cup. Represents, I say, because, as you must surely realize, this book is many removes from anything I’ve set pen, hand, or cup to” (41). The typographical techniques and images that appear in *The Tunnel* are not, as in *Willie Masters’*, meant to reveal the

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<sup>50</sup> Gass is credited with formulating the term “metafiction” in the essay “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction” (1970).

artificiality of the text, but, rather, to support the authenticity of Kohler's confessional narrative. Gass remarks, in an interview with Heide Ziegler, that he included visual elements in *The Tunnel* "to make sure that the text which the narrator is engaged in creating is as personal, odd, and as far from the historical research he has been doing as possible" (12). He admits, though, that he could not fully realise the "unbound unbooklike character" (13) he had envisioned for *The Tunnel*, which might have resembled something like B. S. Johnson's novel in a box, *The Unfortunates* (1969). Gass' efforts to create a personal text, to have Kohler's manuscript appear to the reader of the novel like an authentic manuscript, reinforces the importance of the confessional mode for a reading of *The Tunnel*.

It might be argued that *Willie Masters*' is also a confessional text, though of a different variety than *The Tunnel*. The confession that the novella makes to its reader is that artificiality is its primary condition – Babs, the narrator, declares, "I am that lady language chose to make her playhouse of" (61). *Willie Masters*' plays with the reader's desire for verisimilitude, but ultimately rejects the notion that the naked woman who appears in the text is also the narrator. *The Tunnel*, however, does not break with the illusion of realism. Yet Gass complicates the confessional nature of *The Tunnel* by supplementing the formal elements of the "authentic" manuscript with characters, events, and details drawn from his own life. In an interview with Tom LeClair, Gass explains his decision to include these personal elements:

I think that for a long time I was simply emotionally unable to handle my parents' illnesses. My mother was an alcoholic and my father was crippled by arthritis and his own character. I just fled. It was a cowardly thing to do, but I simply would not have survived. [...] What is perhaps psychologically hopeful is that in *The Tunnel* I am turning back to inspect directly that situation and that means I haven't entirely rejected it. (154-5)

For a reader aware of the theory of fiction to which Gass subscribes, significantly influenced by the New Critics and their critique of interpretations that look past the details provided within the text for another authoritative source, such as the author's biography, one might suspect that Gass is deliberately inviting such confusion of literary and personal realms.<sup>51</sup> Like Gass, Kohler's mother is an alcoholic and his father a bigot.<sup>52</sup> For Gass, the literary text is "a work that can be read nonreferentially. There is nothing esoteric or mysterious about this. It simply means that you want the work to be self-contained" ("Interview with LeClair" 164). Despite this claim, Gass' admission that, prior to *The Tunnel* he resisted using personal details for content in his writing suggests that he may not have always had such confidence in the boundaries of the "self-contained" work or the boundaries of the self.

Despite the inclusion of disconcerting personal elements in *The Tunnel*, Gass asserts that this does not affect the nonreferential attitude he holds towards language and his own writing. Later in his interview with LeClair, he asserts,

In *The Tunnel* I am going to use a lot of homemade material, but I am mainly interested in how I can transform that material until it will have the same status as stuff found in an encyclopedia. Or a newspaper. Or invented out of that fabulous whole cloth. It's the true-confession I suspect. The ME. I was THERE. And what was THERE? ME! Wholly unprofessional. Totally inartistic. The so-called confessional mode has an immediate rhetorical power (is he/she really telling me that?) which is fake, cheap. In these works the subject matter does your work for you, but the aesthetic qualities are all left out. (165-6, emphasis in original)

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<sup>51</sup> Holloway notes that while studying philosophy at Kenyon College, "Gass audited some courses taught by John Crow Ransom, a leader of the then predominant school of literary theory known as the New Criticism," whose influence "prompted Gass to view fiction as a self-enclosed realm" (6).

<sup>52</sup> Gass also wrote about his family and childhood in "Finding a Form" (1997), where he explains how literature provided a reprieve from his environment: "I read to escape my condition, I wrote to remedy it" (32).

This claim by Gass contains a fascinating commentary on the construction of authenticity and value in fiction. He argues that the true-confession, a mode that assumes a primary relation to an external reality and history through the authority of the author's own voice is "fake," while, we may infer, fiction possesses a greater authenticity precisely because it makes no such claim to the world outside itself. Attempting to represent the material world in language is, for Gass, a betrayal that relies on the privileged status of the author to guarantee the value of the account. The text is an autonomous, "self-contained" entity that cannot provide an authentic record of the world.

Yet Gass envisages the possibility of converting the content of the confessional narrative into art by applying the rules of form, which de-naturalises the material and makes it impersonal. In doing so, the "true-confession" acknowledges the fictional quality of its performance in language, and therefore achieves a greater level of authenticity. For Gass, then, "the problem is to get *in* the confessional mode, take *away* the confessional power, and reclaim that power in language" ("Interview with LeClair" 166, emphasis in original). If the power of the confessional mode resides in the relationship between the text and the author as the guarantor of an external, experiential authenticity, we might wonder why Gass bothers to preserve the confessional mode if he wishes to undermine the fundamental relations that generate its particular intrigue and power. Why not simply write the narrative in the third-person? It would appear that in disrupting the rhetorical power of the confessional text and "reclaim[ing] that power in language," the confessional text does not lose all of its power. Gass' adoption of the confessional mode in *The Tunnel*

suggests that there is some quality that the confession narrative possesses that, in the transfer of authority from author to the self-contained text, persists.

Gass' emphasis on the terms "in" and "away" in the above quotation recalls Felski's description of spatial metaphors used by critics in "suspicious reading". By writing "in the confessional mode" and taking "away the confessional power," Gass emphasises the spatial form of *The Tunnel* and draws attention to the spatial dynamics of confession. However, *The Tunnel* itself cannot, it would seem, assert its status as a de-naturalised confessional text; for Gass to describe his ambitions in an interview is one thing, but to prescribe such a reading of the novel itself is quite another and would destabilise his claims about the autonomy of the text. Instead, the novel itself represents this process of "going in" to the narrator's past and "taking away" the personal material reality with which it is associated. *The Tunnel* enacts this excavation through its language and within the limits of its pages.

This brings to mind Felski's scepticism towards interpretations of the self-detecting or internally de-naturalising text. It would seem, then, that *The Tunnel* adopts the metaphor of "digging down" from the structuralist tradition in order to perform a poststructuralist revelation of its own artificiality. Felski's reservations about such an interpretation find their basis in the critic's approach rather than the text and it would seem, therefore, that *The Tunnel* would validate a poststructuralist interpretation. However, by empowering language, as Gass does, and preserving the confessional mode, *The Tunnel* does not encourage an interpretive stance that relies on the second cluster of metaphors that Felski identifies, that is, of distance from the text. Rather, it is the tension and confusion between these two metaphor clusters that *The Tunnel* incorporates and invites in its reading, rather than, as Felski suggests,

mistrust shared between critic or reader and text. Gass juxtaposes the generic proximity of the confessional narrative with the aesthetic distance of his stylistic effects to create a text that is both provocative and problematic for its readers and critics.

Before the text of the novel begins, even before the author's acknowledgments page, *The Tunnel* presents two images that we later learn are Kohler's designs for his apolitical party, the Party of the Disappointed People. The two "Pennants of Passive Attitudes and Emotions" celebrate qualities like "envy," "spite," "bigotry," "self-pity," and "sullenness"—all of which are characteristics of Kohler's personality. The pennants display corresponding designs, with the nine attitudes on one pennant aligned with the nine emotions on the other, with "bigotry" matching "vindictiveness," and "envy" matching "jealousy." Kohler includes two more designs in this section: a "PdP banner" and a "Medal for ingratitude." Both of the designs include patterns of nine abstract forms, echoing the attitudes and emotions of the pennants. The images and, in particular, the identified symbol that faces the opening page of Kohler's writings evoke Nazi imagery and propaganda, although the asymmetrical shapes of Kohler's designs contrast with the sharp, defined lines of the swastika. While this is a minor difference, it alerts the reader to the conflict between form and formlessness in Kohler's narrative.

Kohler's narrative begins with an explanation for this text: "[i]t was my intention, when I began, to write an introduction to my work on the Germans" (3). We learn that Kohler has achieved "a certain dismal renown as the author of the Kohler thesis concerning Nazi crimes and German guilt" (5) and for his work "as a consultant on 'dirty Fascist things' at the Nuremberg Trials" (4-5). Having nearly

completed “‘the Big Book,’ the long monument to my mind I repeatedly dreamed I had to have” (3), Kohler now finds himself unable to write the introduction to the authoritatively titled “*Guilt and Innocence in Hitler’s Germany*” (14, emphasis in original). Instead of the introduction, Kohler begins to compose a text whose focus is not public history, but private recollections. As Kohler’s narrative shifts from its ostensible subject, the Holocaust, to his own personal memories, *The Tunnel* establishes an initially alarming parallel between the history of the Nazis and Kohler’s own past.

It is difficult, at times, to read passages from *The Tunnel* and not reflect on the origins of Kohler’s views in the mind of his author. Kohler writes, for instance, that his research involved looking at “the journals of those who mourned their possessions more than their murdered and violated wives, in the callous words of those for whom a piece of the fat pork they abhorred meant more than their children’s deboned bodies” (14). Kohler’s lack of empathy and overt anti-Semitism in passages like this are deeply troubling, and Gass does little to alleviate the reader’s concerns about *The Tunnel* in his public remarks. In the interview with LeClair, Gass remarks that, if pressed to explain why he writes, he would admit:

I write because I hate. A lot. Hard. And if someone asks me the inevitable next dumb question, ‘Why do you write the way you do?’ I must answer that I wish to make my hatred acceptable because my hatred is much of me, if not the best part. Writing is a way of making the writer acceptable to the world—every cheap dumb nasty thought, every despicable desire, every noble sentiment, every expensive taste. (155)

In light of such remarks, it is difficult not to identify Gass with Kohler and, instead, preserve the objective critical distance from *The Tunnel* that the tradition of the New Criticism demands. Yet Gass remains committed to the idea that “when you take language out of the realm in which it is produced and put it in poetry and fiction, you

transform it completely” (160). As a result of such assertions, scholars have been critical, if not openly hostile, towards Gass’ apolitical attitude.

Marcus Klein, for instance, objects to the implied parallel between Kohler’s account of his personal offenses and the history of the Holocaust. Klein argues that “[w]hile to say that deep in his heart this tawdry Kohler is a Fascist, maybe even just potentially—like all of us—and is a vessel for the kind of guilt that made the Holocaust, is to put another construction upon ‘banality of evil’ [...] It is to reduce the horror itself to a banality, and thereby to dismiss it” (87). Klein’s critique responds to *The Tunnel*’s irreverent commentary on the Holocaust and its ahistorical treatment of fascism—its failure to acknowledge the millions of people who suffered and died. There may, however, be another way of understanding what *The Tunnel* is attempting to achieve. The novel may, in fact, be making precisely the point that it is impossible to represent historical events in an encompassing narrative form—to transform the world into the word. Who are the authors of history and how can they possibly give adequate expression to the experiences of so many people? The word used to describe the Nazi atrocities, “Holocaust,” is, of course, incommensurate with the scale of violence and cruelty that was committed—language cannot communicate the events that took place. In this sense, the violence that Gass commits when he disconnects the word from its historical referent may be understood as a reminder to the reader of language’s capacity to placate, subdue, and overwrite the reality of historical events. The danger of this argument is that it promotes a relativist attitude towards history and discourages any attempt at truth. Yet we might also interpret Kohler’s confessional counter-narrative as a necessary supplement to the official record; in other words, *The Tunnel* may be read as an argument for a mode of

historical writing that holds the author to a greater level of scrutiny and responsibility.

The relationship between language and history is a central preoccupation of *The Tunnel*, as Kohler remarks upon the significance of recording history. This is evident in an excerpt from his conclusion to *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*—this is the longest glimpse that we have of Kohler's "Big Book":

Thus, neither guilt nor innocence are ontological elements in history; they are merely ideological factors to which a skilful propaganda can seem to lend a causal force, and in that fashion furnish others [...] a superficially plausible apologia for tomorrow's acts of robbery or cowardice, revenge, rape, or other criminalities already under way; because the past cannot promise its future the way a premise stands in line with a ticket good for its conclusion (the past is never a justification, only a poor excuse; it confers no rights, and rights no wrongs; it is even more heartless than Hitler); and if there is a truly diabolical ingredient to events, in the victims and vicissitudes of Time, as has been lately alleged, it lies in the nature of History itself, for *it is the chronicle of the cause which causes, not the cause ...* as has herein been amply deduced, clearly and repeatedly explained ... cruelly proved. (13, emphasis in original)

For Kohler, history is beyond the realm of morality and ethics; it exists outside of a sphere of justice. The historian may, of course, retrospectively apply the terms of guilt and innocence to events, which then enables readers to trace a coherent narrative over the course of the past, or even justify future actions based on interpretations of past events. The historian thus occupies a powerful position in determining the significance of the past for the future, but history itself is ambivalent and inaccessible. Yet we must not forget that Kohler makes these statements in his book on Hitler's Germany. He does not display a sense of the historian's moral obligation to record and remind the future of the human potential for such extreme atrocities, but seems, instead, to exhibit a similar ambivalence to the role of the historian. When he writes, "*it is the chronicle of the cause which causes, not the cause*" (13), it is notable that the chronicler is absent from this statement. The

historical document itself is the actor in this scenario and it operates through its influence upon our interpretation as readers.

Kohler's extreme pessimism is nowhere more apparent than in his appraisal of Hitler. He describes Hitler as "probably history's most sincere man" (39) for revealing "that men are capable of anything; that all of the things possible to men are therefore possible for me" (103). Kohler does not take Hitler at his word; rather, it is what he "unintentionally teaches" (454), "what he inadvertently taught" (455) that is significant. Kohler derives the following conclusion from Hitler's actions:

**1. That Mankind is not redeemable.**

**Perfection is impossible. Utopias are foolish. All projects must be undertaken with the understanding that human flaws are likely to undo them. The notion that mankind is morally improvable is as silly a superstition and as lacking in any evidence as the belief in the supernatural. The only enemy of man is man.** (454, emphasis in original)

Kohler's conclusion, which evokes the unexpected insight of Arendt's "banality of evil," posits that Hitler's error did not lie in the particular character of his utopian or moral beliefs, but in the inadequacy of such projects more generally is a disturbing claim. Kohler's only objection to Hitler, it appears, lies in his selection of a particular group for discrimination. Kohler's bigotry, on the other hand, extends to all humans, without prejudice. He declares with pride, "I'm the human-racist. I play no favorites. I leave no one out" (362). Kohler's scepticism towards the possibility of realising any great collective project, towards any attempt to elevate humanity, drives him to his state of underground isolation in the basement of his house, where he writes his fragmented, disorderly tract.

In his essay on *The Tunnel*, “After Monumentality,” Jeffrey Pence observes a formal shift in the design of contemporary public monuments from grand, imposing structures that emphasise a nationalist ideology or narrative to monuments dedicated to the subjective experience and the “valorization of memory over abstracted public history” (97). Pence aligns *The Tunnel* with this new form of monumentality which is suspicious of grand narratives and argues that the techniques of fragmentation, typographical experimentation, and linguistic play all contribute to a Heideggerean “critique of unconstrained instrumental reason, in the figure of technology” (99). It is not a coincidence that Pence identifies Heidegger as an influential thinker for *The Tunnel*; as a student in Germany prior to the Second World War, Kohler studies history under Magus Tabor, a Heidegger-like figure, who instructs his students that history is amoral, purely fabricated, and therefore ought to be conquered so that “the future shall speak only German!” (272). Heidegger’s philosophy and his support of Nazi ideology are also significant examples, Pence notes, of the paradox at work in *The Tunnel*. Noting that the critical debate surrounding *The Tunnel* has largely focused on the tension between the bigoted views of the narrator and Gass’ adamant claims that his interests with the text are primarily formal, Pence remarks that instead of “a suitcase of moral content, the book offers an experience of ethical self-reflection predicated upon taking seriously the medium in which this reflection occurs” (102-3). In this sense, Kohler’s critical awareness of the power that forms and informs historical narrative has much in common with contemporary reflections on historiography and the writing of history in, for example, Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973). Both Foucault and White are alert to the significance of narrative for history as, at once,

fundamentally necessary for the transmission of knowledge and, at the same time, deeply flawed in the subjective condition of the ostensibly objective historian.

The formal techniques Gass employs are thus not merely unstable for the sake of instability, or purposeless remnants of “a postmodernist orthodoxy already waning” (Klein 85), but rather function as a particular method of opposition to history as “a cognitive mode for instrumentally revealing and ordering being” (Pence 101). Thus, “*The Tunnel* relentlessly resists laying a template—a technology—of narrative, historical or memorial, across the wreckage of Kohler’s consciousness” (103). According to Pence, the aesthetic form of *The Tunnel*, its fragmentation and discontinuity, embodies a mode of thinking that resists the exploitative conventions of technology, which seek to organise the world according to the logic of reason and value. Pence states, “Kohler disengages history from instrumentality by concentrating on its materials. History’s true object of study is not the event or the actor of the past; rather, it is: ‘the study of symbols and markers, of verbal remains [...]’” (120). It is language in various permutations, rather than the illusion of direct access to the past that the historian’s narrative invites its readers to imagine, that is the true object of study. It is necessary, then, to examine language as the substance of history in order to interrogate the particular motives that support the historian’s narrative. Failure to regard the form of historical narratives critically, observes Robert Eaglestone in *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, leads to a process of “normalization,” which,

Represents the ways in which the assumed neutrality or objectivity of discourses, such as the discipline of history, has a meaning beyond that detachment: they place the reader or writer ‘in a situation not unrelated to the detached position of an administrator of extermination: interest is fixed on an administrative process ... words used for record keeping. And that’s all.’” (4-

5)

The conventions of the historical narrative diminish the significance of the actual historical reality as it is filtered into language and retroactively organised according to likely causal forces. Kohler supports this scepticism towards historical narratives when he states “historical chronicles are chronologies of crime, and [...] any recital of the past constitutes an indictment” (84). Thus, as Pence argues, Kohler’s tunnel and his diary are examples of alternative modes of thought that emphasise the spatial over the temporal in relation to history.

For Pence, the spatial metaphor of Kohler’s tunnel evokes Hegel’s Temple of Memory, as both are spaces of resistance to the teleological impulse of orthodox history. Pence notes that both Hegel and Kohler “foreground spatiality as an anodyne for a self-reflexive and paralytic consciousness of the inexorability of temporality in all its dimensions. If history is an unavoidable burden of thought [...] then, rendering it as a beautiful space answers [...] a need to retreat from the process of time and our awareness of it” (122). Resisting the forward thrust of time allows Kohler to assess and challenge the manner in which history is “enframed” by reductive narrative conventions. Despite “the sheer distastefulness of Kohler’s normal memories and bloody history” (124), Pence argues that Kohler ultimately succeeds in his construction of a “counter-monumental memory” (123); that is, a space, and a form, of resistance to the instrumentality of historical narrative. Pence’s recovery of Kohler’s counter-monument from interpretations that cannot reconcile the indecency of the text with its often compelling formal elements might even satisfy Gass’ criteria for literary interpretation, as well as the conditions of Felski’s critique of suspicious narratives.

Pence's analysis is, notably, the first to articulate Kohler's narrative as recuperative. Resisting the initial impulse to recoil at Kohler's anti-Semitism, racism, and misogyny, Pence considers how these terms function in Kohler's critique of instrumental history as symbols of his defiant irrationality and resistance to the "logic of technology" (101). It is in this way, however, that Kohler's aesthetic approach veers disturbingly close to the very methods of instrumentalisation that Pence argues he resists, and this is also significant for Gass' own idealisation of the literary work as "self-contained" ("Interview with LeClair 164). Rejecting all conventions that enframe and instrumentalise experience, Kohler nears an abyss where the link between signifier and signified is abandoned, a state of amorality. Kohler remarks that "[t]he abyss doesn't gape; it doesn't yawn; it has better manners [...] the abyss is the obliteration of the sign; it is reality without disguise, without appearance, without remainder" (184-5). This void, this pure reality, cannot be described nor can it be instrumentalised. But this philosophy produces subjects who become susceptible to fantasies of the abyss, the abandonment of politics and morals for access to the purity of Being. Kohler's description of the abyss continues: "The abyss [...] is the utter absence of significance; it is the world as unread and unreadable. It is *das Ding an sich*" (185). To enter the abyss is to pass beyond meaning, beyond value. For Kohler, this does not lie in an outward space, but an internal condition. He states, "I will not strike the abyss in my basement," but "I may become the abyss myself [...] I aspire to the abyss" (185). Like Pence, we might read Kohler's aspirations to the abyss as an effort to resist instrumentalisation; however, the aspiration to be "unreadable" does not preclude the abyss being misread and meaning attributed to its illegibility.

This vulnerability to misinterpretation is an important issue in *The Tunnel*.

The “self-contained” object that Gass idealises in the apolitical nature of the literary text is conspicuously also attributed by Kohler to the Nazis:

They rose as gods from the graves of their middle-class lives; anointed, they left their little businesses behind, the normal world with all its petty laws, for sainthood. These laws, these rules, these lies which lips at least for centuries had served—they did not need them; they were so self-contained, so internally secure, they were above even the ancient hypocrisies of heaven; and they lived in the realm of the spirit, of *de Heilige Geist*, as they’d been taught by their religions and philosophies; what were bodies? meat and bones to be disposed of [...]. (309-10)

Kohler views the Nazi project as an example of *resistance* to the technology of history and, in that sense, not wholly barbaric—that their motivations, in this sense, emerge out of an ethical response to oppression. While Kohler’s tutor, Magus Tabor, is most often aligned with Heidegger in his attitude toward history, here Kohler also seems to embody a Heidegger-like persona.

Kohler’s fascination with the “self-contained” ideal of the Nazis is not without precedent. In *Male Fantasies*, a study of the journals and diaries of members of a German interwar paramilitary organisation and precursor to the Nazis known as the Freikorps, Klaus Theweleit identifies a common preoccupation among the soldiers with images of self-containment. Theweleit cites, for instance, a passage written by Ernst von Salomon: “I love unbroken people: men. The kind who have no problems; the kind who are self-contained, powerful, calm” (59). In addition to such idealised descriptions of masculine self-possession, Theweleit also discovers corresponding images of bodily “dissolution” (228) that were the source of much anxiety and fear in the diaries of the soldiers. Drawing on psychoanalytic concepts from Freud and Reich, as well as the theories of Deleuze and Guattari, Theweleit posits that the soldiers’ fears of physical corruption, disorder, and dissolution, are

analogous to national fears about national sovereignty. Indeed, Theweleit asserts that these personal and public fears share a common origin in the social production of desire and the relations between men and women. Theweleit examines the historical construction of German masculine identity and how this is tied to images of the orderly, self-contained male body and the amorphous, corrupt female body. This analysis leads him to conclude,

The male body came in the course of these developments to be isolated from, set off against, and exalted above the female body, until as Faust the Colonizer it stood (active or merely watching) above an ocean waiting to be drained, and finally, as the fascist male, became a rock amid the raging sea (defending) or one of Jünger's men-of-steel (destroying) in the intoxicating whirlpool of reality. At this point, the mingling of human bodies became an unresolvable dilemma. (362)

Thus, according to Theweleit, fascism was not simply the consequence of an exceptional confluence of social, political, and economic circumstances, but, also, the outcome of developments in the psychological relations between men and women.

Theweleit's study pays careful attention to the language and images that the Freikorps soldiers use in their descriptions of bodily states. Among the images that Theweleit examines, and of particular significance for Kohler's narrative in *The Tunnel*, is dirt. In the section devoted to images of dirt, Theweleit presents a quote from Christian Enzenberger, who remarks,

Dirt is, first and foremost, anything that impinges on the tidy insularity of a person, on the person's anxiously guarded autonomy. This explains the individual's reluctance to let anything into, or out of, her/himself. Besides avoiding dirt associated with contact and secretion, people regard anything that is only ambiguously part of themselves as unclean. By analogy, they are disgusted at the prospect of contamination, heterogeneity. When confronted with such contamination, they become afraid of falling prey themselves to ambivalence and amorphousness, of losing themselves, of being harmed by a process of amalgamation, insertion, addition, extraction, seepage, or infiltration. That is why [...] people so often name commingling and in-

between states when asked for examples of dirt. This is probably also the basis for the indelible connection between dirt and the primary type of commingling: sex. (qtd. in Theweleit 385)

Dirt, as Enzenberger explains, symbolises both a quality of others that threatens the security of the self, as well as a feature of the self that must be suppressed or ignored. Theweleit observes that “parts of the body that prohibitions rendered inaccessible” came to be associated with dirt, with the “dark territories, sources of terror and anxiety, in and on people’s own bodies and the bodies of those they desired” (415). And, as is the case throughout Theweleit’s study, femininity is associated with dirt in a variety of ways, including “those moist (and ‘female’) depths into which fascists firmly believe non-fascists want to transform the whole world” (387). For the fascist, then, dirt—along with the mire, the morass, and slime—symbolises formlessness, heterogeneity, and femininity. Theweleit’s examination of the relationship between fascism, femininity, and images of dirt provide a useful model for considering Kohler’s confessional narrative in *The Tunnel*. Yet Kohler’s confession diverges from the diaries of the Freikorps soldiers in its direct confrontation with dirt. The tunnel that Kohler digs out of his cellar is not so much an attempt to escape from the life he has built, as it is an exhumation of the identity that he has tried to conceal. And, as we will see, much of the dirt that Kohler digs up concerns his relationships with women and his experiences of emasculation.

Working in the basement of his house, Kohler is quite literally under the foot of his wife, Martha, who is the object of both his fear and resentment. The grand historical work that Kohler has nearly concluded functions as a symbol of virility and a symbol of resistance against the marital pressures he seems unable to confront. He remarks that “in my introduction, raised above me like an arch of triumph, I meant to

place a wreath upon myself” (3), yet this arch would merely provide insulation from his wife above. Kohler describes the impulse to pursue this ambitious project, a final verdict on the guilt and innocence of Nazi Germany, first in military terms: “duty drove me forward like a soldier” (4). Then, just a few lines later, he writes, “[d]uty drove me the way it drives men into marriage” (4). He believes, at first, that his historical project will affirm a sense of masculine identity. Although he sees himself as among the “flabby maleless men,” he envisions his historical work as fulfilling an overtly masculine objective: “it was time for ‘the Big Book,’ the long monument to my mind I repeatedly dreamed I had to have: a pyramid, a column tall enough to satisfy the sky” (4). Yet the creative, productive impulse is bound up with violence and fear in his mind. He remarks that “[b]egetting is expected of us, and in those days of heavy men in helmets the seed was certain, and wanted only the wind for a womb, or any slit; yet what sprang up out of those foxholes we fucked with our fists but our own frightened selves? with a shout of pure terror, too” (4). The war does not, it seems, articulate or reinforce a clear sense of masculinity for Kohler; instead, it destabilises his sexual energies and exposes him to an image of himself that he had previously repressed, a sense of self-destruction in the violence he had sought to keep down below in the foxholes. It becomes increasingly clear that Kohler’s fascist ideology and Nazi fetishism obscures the misogyny that is, in fact, the origin of his hate.

Germany and the war are formative elements for Kohler’s sense of his own identity, although, he admits, “there is nothing genuinely German about me” (4). The implication here is that while he possesses many of the signifiers that characterise German identity – he speaks the language fluently, has a German name, spent many

years in the country, and even looks the part, “fat and fair, with a dazzling blond wife and a troop of stalwart children fond of—heaven help them—hiking about with bare knees” (5) – Kohler is ultimately a fraud, inadequate, impotent. The motifs of impotence and inadequacy form a basis for Kohler’s bitterness and resentment to which his history of Nazi Germany appears a counter-weight. In this text, Kohler claims to have “written off the Reich” (32) and he derives pleasure from organising the events of the Holocaust into a coherent and systematic form, suggesting the very bureaucratic methods employed by the Nazis in their extermination of millions.

However, as he approaches the end of his labours, Kohler identifies a weakness in his project. He reflects,

Despite my care, my misgivings...I’m afraid that willy-nilly I’ve contrived for history a book’s sewn spine, a book’s soft closure, its comfortable oblong handweight, when it ought to be heavier than Hercules could heft. History is relentless, but now it has a volume’s unisistent kind of time. And hasn’t the guilt and innocence I speak of there become a simple succession of paper pages? (33)

Kohler’s reluctance to complete his manuscript reveals his concern about whether a text can adequately convey the nonlinear movement of events as they occur in time. It also suggests the ideas, as Radstone observes, “that all creative or fictional writing may be regarded as an attempt to come to terms with or stave off an encounter with death [which] may be derived from the philosophical writings of Heidegger, for whom the most important perception was of the ultimate human necessity of facing death [...] a perception which could be deflected, however, by the idea of temporal infinity” (65). The idea of death, as we will see, has a particular association with the feminine for Kohler that is also bound up with the confessional narrative.

Kohler realises that he does not have a language adequate for his subject. He reflects, “[this is] not the way I feel I want to speak now, and I realize (I’ve come to

it as I write) that my subject's far too serious for scholarship, for history, and I must find another form before I let what's captive in me out. Imagine: history not serious enough, causality too comical, chronology insufficiently precise" (106-7). It is not something in history that is absent from the text but, instead, something held "captive" in himself. It is interesting, then, that Pence dismisses the private nature of Kohler's confession as of secondary importance. He remarks that "despite the biographical surface of his writing, the deeper goal of the text is not the reclamation of ordinary experiences but rather liberation from the modes of thinking generated by these experiences and compelling his return to them" (110). While Pence's assessment of Kohler's textual experiments as forms of resistance to the modes of instrumental thought illuminates the complex nature of language in *The Tunnel*, the autobiographical or confessional character of Kohler's text is not merely a "surface" feature—it is intimately bound up with the question of the historical narrative and with the spectre of femininity.

It is in the intimate experience of time, the present of the subject, that Kohler formulates his counter-narrative to the totalising history of his *Guilt and Innocence*. Yet the counter-narrative is not meant to replace or oppose the official history; rather, it is meant to supplement it, to coexist with it:

My present pages slip between the sheets of my heroic history—my courageous revamp of the Third Reich and what it was—and complete them with their cancellation. My history is objective and orderly and factual and keeps military step with Time, whereas these notes are scrambled and secret and even more sordid, abuzz as they are with honest lies, and they straggle after Time like whores after soldiers. (301)

Time, as the organising principle upon which history depends, need not dominate the private. Yet Kohler's analogy of whores and soldiers reiterates the motif of sexual division in his account of history and time. For Kohler, women possess a

fundamentally different relationship to time than do men. In this sense, we can read Kohler's account of the pages of his unofficial, private history slipping between the sheets of his official, empirical history as a kind of coupling. Kohler acknowledges his desire to match his private history in with his public: "I have an increasing hunch that I'll want to have a private page to hide between each public page of *G & I* to serve as their insides, not the tip but the interior of the iceberg, so to speak" (92). Here, once again, Kohler makes use of a depth metaphor to describe his grand project that brings together the male and the female in order to expose some new reality through their dialectic relation. Yet Kohler takes up what he acknowledges as a feminine mode of narrative to counter the masculine dominance of historical time.

Kohler's attitude towards the confessional text is, initially, ambivalent, even hostile. Amidst quotations from the diaries of Katherine Mansfield, Alice James (the sister of Henry and William James), and Virginia Woolf, Kohler declares, "Women write them. They've nothing else to do but die into diaries...subside like unpillowed fluff" (11). The denotation "unpillowed fluff" indicates Kohler's view that women's writing is both formless and inconsequential. The accounts of ordinary events and personal, everyday experience that appear in the diaries of the women that Kohler cites and dismisses as insignificant are precisely the elements that Kohler comes to describe in his own writing. However, he continues to resist defining the mode of writing he has undertaken even after he has committed many of his confessions to the page; he remarks, "[t]his sort of thing—confession—this father-forgive-me stuff—is not in my line" (106), implying that the scholarly tone and subjects that he shares with his male colleagues in the History department is more appropriate. But

there is something liberating in the narrative mode of the diary that compels him onward, deeper into the tunnel.

Kohler reflects that “[i]n a diary you may go to greet death in the most slovenly state of undress and disease, your language out of reach of any public reading, your own eye kind, accustomed to your own wastes and malodorous ailments, almost incapable of offense, incurably forgiving. You may write without anyone’s whining that the day was not only ‘mild’ but ‘warm’” (9). The scenario that Kohler describes here does not refer to the historian accessing death through the diary, but, instead, it is the diary’s author who confronts death in his or her own confessions and self-reflections. The confrontation with death in the diary is important. Kohler states that his mentor Tabor, in a Heideggerean mode, “maintained that death was History’s only subject, and he returned to it again and again” (278). If death is history’s only subject, the diary seems to offer privileged access. Yet what Tabor regarded as the very essence of history frightens Kohler. He admits, “[d]eath has always embarrassed me, and every sickness sickens” (372). While Kohler is reflecting on the memory of his father’s death when he confesses this sentiment, it is applicable outside of the material realm, too, in the intimacy of the diary and the confessional narrative. Here, the diarist must confront a different kind of death, but one that is no less intimate. Indeed, Kohler’s description of greeting death in the process of writing a diary employs the language of illness to describe this encounter between the writer and his or her past, aligning death and confession as intersecting subjects of discomfort for Kohler.

In this account of the slights and insults that have led to Kohler’s current state, it is the affronts committed by women that come to the fore. The reason why

Kohler's bitterness towards women has been overlooked by critics is, perhaps, because of the familiar, unconcealed, even cliché character that it takes. For example, Kohler presents a passage, beginning "My women" (92), in the shape of a penis and testicles, with two women—his wife, Martha, and his former mistress, Lou—separated into each of the testicles according to the qualities that define them. The repetition of such base male hostility towards women exceeds what might be considered humorous to become infantile, grotesque, and repugnant. These sections cannot but elicit an affective response in the reader, which, again, raises questions about why critics have chosen to ignore such themes in their interpretations and to dig for the "highbrow" qualities of the text—references to Heidegger and Rilke, allusions to Dostoevsky and Thomas Mann. Just as Gass exploits the tension between form and content in a manner that is not "playful" but political, he also contrasts base misogyny with elaborate philosophical concerns in order to provoke. As such, the representation of women in Kohler's account warrants much closer consideration.

He directs his bitterness at the three most likely subjects: his alcoholic mother, Margaret; his wife, Martha; and the lover who ultimately rejected him, Lou. In a passage that anticipates the account of his mother's death, a repetition that is characteristic of his rhetoric, Kohler describes how as a child they survived a tornado while visiting his Uncle Balt. Kohler recalls how the tornado "though umbilicated to its cloud, dependent as a lamp string, quirky as a camp guard (I have read it said), this violent tunnel turning through the sky is really a swollen prick the earth, our Mother, spews on, and covers its shame at this response with these other symbols; it forms from implausible figures plausible, phallus-saving lies" (113). The tornado is an early incarnation of Kohler's tunnel, though a tunnel in the sky rather than the

ground. The phallic tornado in this passage is likened to a petulant male child, who rebels against the maternal earth—the same earth that Kohler will finally confront as an adult when he digs his tunnel. Kohler’s account of the destructive phallus is comical in its exaggeration. It is an obvious but insistent symbol in Kohler’s manuscript that, perhaps because it is so very obvious, has been unexamined by critics. The parallel between Kohler “Big Book” and his inability to complete it is a gag that is repeated throughout the text. Kohler recounts a comment his wife once made: “You really don’t want to finish that Big British Book, Wilfred. What would you do then?” (87). Indeed, as Kohler himself admits on the first page, “[e]ndings [...] possess me” (3). Kohler’s compulsion to prolong his writing mirrors the extended period of more than twenty-five years that Gass spent composing *The Tunnel*.

The deferral of completion is a theme that Jean-Francois Lyotard examines in *Libidinal Economy* (1993), where he discusses this theme in relation to Marx’s writing of *Capital*. Lyotard notes Marx’s “perpetual *postponement* of finishing work on *Capital*” and describes it in psychoanalytic terms as “[t]he *jouissance* of infinity,” that is, “the intensity of discharge instantiated in a genital couple, but is the intensity of an inhibition, of a putting into reserve, of a postponement and of an investment in means” (96, 98-9, emphasis in original). In one of his recollections, Kohler thinks back to the first year of his marriage to Martha and how they had “fought like children about whether we should spend or save” (335). Kohler realises that the tension over expenditure or conservation had to do with their differing relationships to time: “I suddenly realized, considering this, that perhaps I spent so readily because I felt more secure in my future, while Martha conserved because she felt she hadn’t

any” (337). As their relationship dissolves, a shift occurs and Martha becomes the one who spends. Kohler remarks that,

The cash we were conserving slipped away like our affections, literally through our fingers, as our touch became callous and mechanical. Martha grew testy about the money because she was the one who was spending it; and she grew testy about the loss of affection, because she had stopped bringing me up and never would bother again, as if her own large beauty should henceforth be enough. (341)

Kohler comes to “resent every erection” and he “dislikes the effect [of] her nakedness” (341). The absence of intimacy in their relationship becomes a point of resentment for Kohler, and in resisting his desires he compounds this tension until he cannot contain it any longer and must find new conduits for the dispensation of his excesses. He finds the additional space he requires on the page, where he digs his tunnel and prolongs his resistance. Kohler’s underground existence embodies this postponement, emphasised in his pronouncement “[b]uild a barricade” (243). His anxiety at being discovered by Martha, his wife, is the necessary counterpart to his writing. Kohler’s refrain, “I would hate to have my wife see this” (106, 111, 219), is a source of illicit pleasure. It is this anxiety that spurs him to continue writing and to postpone confrontation.

The supplement to Kohler’s anxiety that he fears Martha will discover in his private writings is the figure of Lou, a young woman with whom he had an affair for “one shortened summer month” (107). In contrast to the postponement and build-up in his marriage to Martha, he recalls his time with Lou as “the simplest sort of life, empty of everything except ourselves” (108). The “emptiness” is a fluid state in which, Kohler notes, he “wrote the section of *Guilt and Innocence* on...on secondary schools...almost entirely out of my head—easily—even the songs” (108). Kohler realises that he and Lou “were happy because we had no history,” yet this is also a

state of plenitude. Kohler writes, “[w]e spent whole days consuming an hour. We were rich” (110). It is the absence of history and a focus on the present that creates a generative condition. But this outpouring is not sustainable and it soon comes to an end. Kohler reflects, “Lou satisfied me and Lou is lost” (362). This loss of satisfaction drives him towards the ideal of the self-contained state. He writes, “Loss in life: that’s what I mourn for; that’s what we all mourn for, all of us who have been touched by the fascism of the heart” (366). Kohler’s barricade, his tunnel, is an extension of the fascism of the heart. He fortifies his tunnel, instead, with resentment and bitterness. He does not find another outlet to redirect his energies into—for example, his children. Kohler’s hatred is not only self-contained, it is self-perpetuating: “I plan to inherit my own estate, retire on it [...] Don’t invest in a future you will never see, a future which will despise you anyway, a future which will find you useless” (466). The hole that Kohler digs in the basement of his house, a tunnel towards an object that is never disclosed, is “the ultimate inactive act” (467). The tunnel is self-fulfilling; it is expenditure in postponement. Kohler places the earth that he removes from the tunnel into the drawers of the antique cabinets that his wife collects—he sullies her investment with his own waste. Kohler’s tunnel eventually becomes its own sin and an object of guilt in its own right.

The moment finally comes when Martha confronts Kohler about his tunnel: “I turn to meet Martha big as a bureau in the doorway, not a knock, and bearing in her arms, cradled as though she were carrying a large log or the body of a slain warrior, a dresser drawer I can even from my chair see the soil seeping from in slight puffs” (644). Kohler finds himself “more than a bit transfixed by what I have been so long fearing, often rehearsing, postponing like the end of the world, yet finally now

nearing its fatal realization” (645), but he interrupts this description with another memory. Even at the moment of confrontation, he seeks to postpone the event just a little longer. Finally, Kohler tells us, “Martha rather rudely brushed by me and with a heartfelt hoof tipped the entire drawer over my manuscript” (648). The two tunnels, his manuscript and the dirt from the hole he has been digging, are united. The dirt that Kohler has accumulated, the dirt that he is unsure how to dispose of, is returned to him. Kohler reflects, “[m]y life’s work lies beneath a heap of yellow, gray, and bluish dirt, under what a hole held, the center of zip. Nothing is enough” (649). Kohler’s monumental work and his private confessions are buried together under their own excess.

Ultimately, Kohler’s project collapses under its own weight. It is curious, however, that Martha does not acknowledge Kohler’s private writings, but only the dirt he has put into her antiques. Even Kohler himself remarks, “this dénouement is disappointing” (649). Kohler does not find comfort beyond the rhetoric of his manuscript, but realises that, like one of his former loves, he is “success in the pure form of failure” (651). Although Kohler does not understand his hatred any better than he did at the start of his dig, the reader has had the opportunity to gather a great deal from his confession. Kohler reflects, “[w]hat a journey, though, to crawl in earth first, then in filth swim; to pass through your own plumbing, meet the worms within. And realize it. That you were. Under all the world” (651). This conclusion is unexpectedly life affirming. Kohler has faced his fears, both past and present, and has survived a confrontation with the ugliness, the formlessness, that is a part of him. This is not to say that the Kohler we find at the end of *The Tunnel* has undergone a conversion and is repentant for his past transgressions. Yet the process of self-

excavation has led Kohler to a state of self-acceptance, which is, at the very least, truthful. This confessional act is something that the soldiers of the Freikorps could not face, but only write about in ambiguous terms.

The relationship between public narrative and private beliefs, between communal surface and personal depth, is also the central concern of Peter Dimock's *George Anderson: Notes for a Love Song in Imperial Time*. Much like *The Tunnel*, Dimock's novel explores the private and public obligations of the author behind the official historical record, though *George Anderson* takes as its focus the legal record of abuses committed by the American military during its "war on terror." In contrast with *The Tunnel*, however, *George Anderson* is not exclusively concerned with excavating the depths of the past; instead, the novel explores how a secular confessional practice might generate an ethical path forward for the "inside man."

## Chapter 5: Looking into Another Man's Eyes

### *Confession and the Ethics of Exchange in Peter Dimock's George Anderson: Notes for a Love Song in Imperial Time*

On 9 December 2014, the United States government published *The Senate Intelligence Committee Report on Torture*, a document of over six thousand pages that examines “the abuses and countless mistakes made between late 2001 and early 2009” (“Foreword” 2). The report details the Central Intelligence Agency’s use of “enhanced interrogation techniques” that included waterboarding—which left the CIA’s first detainee, Abu Zubaydah “completely unresponsive, with bubbles rising through his open, full mouth”—as well as “[s]leep deprivation [which] involved keeping detainees awake for up to 180 hours, usually standing or in stress positions, at times with their hands shackled above their heads” (“Findings” 3). *The Senate Intelligence Committee Report* is a damning account of the CIA’s attempt to cover up these activities and its misrepresentation of its actions to other branches of government. In contrast to its criticisms of the CIA, the report displays leniency towards other government agencies that, perhaps unknowingly, enabled the CIA to proceed with these methods. The Office of Legal Council (OLC), for instance, is reported to have “relied on CIA representations regarding specific interrogation techniques that were incongruent with the operational history of the program” (“Executive” 422). On the use of waterboarding, the CIA asserted that “as far as can be determined, [detainees] did not experience physical pain or, in the professional judgment of doctors, is there any medical reason to believe they would have done so” (422-3). Despite the explanations provided in *The Senate Intelligence Committee Report*, however, the OLC was already the subject of much criticism in the media for

authorizing these cruel methods and for ignoring earlier reports of torture carried out by the CIA.

A story emerged, however, about one particular member of the OLC and his conflicting responses to reports of torture during this period. A *New York Times* article from 6 June 2009 reports that the Acting Assistant Attorney General of the OLC from 2004 to 2005, Daniel Levin, “won public praise with a 2004 memorandum that opened by declaring ‘torture is abhorrent.’ But he also wrote a letter to the CIA that specifically approved of waterboarding in August 2004, and he drafted much of [a] lengthy May 2005 opinion authorizing the 13 methods” of enhanced interrogation, many of which are now condemned as torture. Levin’s contradictory views were further complicated when it was revealed in 2007 that prior to writing his memorandum condemning torture, he “went to a military base and asked to undergo waterboarding.” Even with this first-hand experience and his statement condemning torture, however, “[a] footnote to the 2004 interrogation opinion signed by Mr. Levin [...] said that despite the shift in legal reasoning, interrogation techniques authorized under previous Justice Department opinions remained legal,” including the use of waterboarding. Although this footnote may have been included under pressure from the White House and the CIA, Levin ultimately made the decision to sign the memorandum. As a result, he has come to represent a conflicted nexus where personal accountability runs up against concessions to power and the preservation of a national myth of judicial integrity.

The tension between the two poles of Levin’s actions—the one private and ethical, the other public and political—is the inspiration for Peter Dimock’s *George Anderson: Notes for a Love Song in Imperial Time*. This novel brings together many

of the key concerns and forms discussed in previous chapters—including, the binary opposition of public and private, or surface and depth; hegemonic masculinity and social hierarchy; and the dilemma of open communication between men—within the contemporary context of the “War on Terror.” The narrative form of *George Anderson* may best be described as hybrid: part-epistolary novel, part-legal document, part-historical narrative, and part-confessional guide. The novel is composed as a letter addressed to David Kallen, a thinly disguised Daniel Levin, written by a man named Theo Fales, who claims to have been a student at Harvard at the same time as Kallen.<sup>53</sup><sup>54</sup> Fales utilises this shared past as a way to open a discourse with Kallen that explores the possibility of achieving harmony between many competing social and aesthetic forms. Fales proposes that a concord can be achieved between forms as seemingly divergent as global capitalism and marriage on the basis of an ethical practice. *George Anderson* is a novel that invites the reader to participate in a hermeneutics of faith, a hermeneutics that is “the manifestation and restoration of a meaning” (Ricoeur 27), but it also appeals to a hermeneutics of suspicion.

Fales writes to Kallen out of a deep concern for his contributions to, and responsibility for, “the document that contained a footnote that found the policies and acts of torture committed by the officials of the George W. Bush administration legal” (*George Anderson* 9). Kallen, we learn, in contradiction to expectations, and his own experience, signed a document, known now as part of the “Torture Memos,”

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<sup>53</sup> The novel does not hide its allusion to Levin; in fact, it includes the 2004 OLC memorandum as an appendix.

<sup>54</sup> The name “Theo Fales” may be an allusion to “Theophilus,” which is “Greek for ‘lover of God’” and is “the person to whom the third gospel (Luke 1: 3) and the Acts (1: 1) are dedicated” (*Dictionary of the Bible*). The allusion may be intended to evoke a modern, secular equivalent of this biblical relationship.

that prevented members of the Bush administration from being held legally accountable for their decisions regarding the methods used to extract information from prisoners of war. It would appear, at first, that the novel's concerns are primarily political and address the behaviour and excessive powers of the American government in recent years. Fales' critique, however, exceeds the bounds of what we normally define as political and appeals to Kallen outside of his role in government to engage in ethical reflection. Fales' letter to Kallen continually invokes the ethical dilemma that Plato attributes to Socrates, which wonders how best to live in the world. *George Anderson* provides no simple answers, but it does pose an important question: can we still conceive of, and practice, a form of ethics amidst the economic and political conditions of the twenty-first-century world?

The boundaries that typically delimit our experiences between private and public, local and international, present and historical – the limits that we accept, but are often less clearly fixed – are brought into question in Fales' narrative. The use of historical documents, events, and public figures in *George Anderson* positions the text at an uncertain margin between fiction and criticism, which problematises any interpretation of *George Anderson* as entirely one form or the other. As a result, an analysis of the novel must always be performed with this limit in mind. Additionally, the historical component of Dimock's novel is not a simple retelling of past events, or an imaginative work of historiographic metafiction; rather, Dimock's novel engages directly with a still active historical narrative and seeks to create a dialogue—fictional or otherwise—with a central figure in these events. The novel attempts to create a space for authentic discourse and draws attention to the need for a common, consensual language between Fales and Kallen. This is an important

element of the novel and reflects the need for such an understanding in larger discussions of ethics. As such, the text addresses a variety of fundamentally ethical questions, not only about the reasons for Kallen's decision to sign the document that validated the past and future use of methods held by most international courts as torture, but the issue of every individual's complicity in the perpetuation of this action as members of national and international communities. *George Anderson* probes where responsibility lies and who determines how it is applied.

Although Dimock does not invoke the thought of Emmanuel Levinas directly among the many literary and historical allusions that appear throughout the novel, the themes and ethical debates found in *George Anderson* share with Levinas a profound belief that each individual, through his or her experience of the relationship between subject to Other, may counter oppressive political and economic forces and recover an ethical life. However, while Levinas situates his work within a tradition of moral philosophy, Dimock's novel disturbs the comfortable spaces of such debates. He achieves this both through his blend of fiction and historical narrative, and through our interpretation of the novel's narrator, whose rhetoric is at once jarring and inspiring, and, at the same time, possibly the work of a man our culture would deem "mentally unstable." Is *George Anderson* satire or is it a sincere ethical critique of our historical moment? How we read these elements significantly influences the economic and political messages of the text.

The opening lines of *George Anderson* suggest the confluence of three or four different voices, a jumble of fragments that, as the novel develops, progressively build into a compatible and coherent order. Fales begins,

Dear David Kallen,

My name is Theo Fales. In the vision I had two years ago I came to the end of myself and found other people standing there—and knew that the present was a gift of time in which to sing a true history of equal historical selves. That’s why I’m writing to you now—to request an interview. We were undergraduates together at Harvard though our paths never crossed. (9)

The spiritual language that follows from Fales’ brief introduction is abrupt and immediately alerts the reader to the possibility that the narrator’s mental condition may be unstable. Despite this idiosyncratic beginning, Fales proceeds to articulate in clear, direct language the specific events that prompted his letter to Kallen. Fales remarks that it was Kallen whose “signature made torture the official policy and accepted practice of my government” (9). This in itself is not remarkable; there are many other members of the Bush administration who were involved with the adoption of interrogation methods that contravene human rights laws. What Fales does find significant is that Kallen signed the document “after [he] directed Special Forces trainers to torture [him]” (9). Fales remarks to Kallen, “[r]ightly you did this in search of an experiential basis for the words of your legal finding. In the event, you named what they did to you as torture and immediately ordered the procedures stopped with a special hand signal” (9). For Fales, Kallen is both a courageous figure for his efforts to fully grasp the consequences of the measures that he was to sign into law, and a representative of the failure to preserve an ethical basis in the modern world against the push for what Fales calls “imperial” – that is, economic and political – dominance. However, rather than appealing to Kallen as a political actor, Fales’ interests lie in how Kallen the human being, the ethically accountable person, could permit the egregious footnote that overlooked acts of torture to be inserted into the legal document. The letter inquires into the modes of subjectivity that political forces, out of economic ambitions, impose on individuals and examines how through

the recovery of some form of ethics we might be able to transform the social direction we have taken.

Dimock's use of the epistolary form—in this instance, a single, lengthy letter—and use of the second-person pronoun “you” are deliberate efforts to implicate the reader of the novel into the events of the text. The second-person pronoun “you” in *George Anderson* insinuates, at times, both David Kallen and every reader of the text. Dimock draws the reader into the nexus of relations at the core of the novel that are at once personal, between the two men, and at the same time concern political and ethical themes, concerns for us all, that expose the place of the individual as a party complicit in national and international actions. The reader, like Fales, must reckon with his or her ambivalent acceptance of a world in which governments authorise the use of reprehensible tactics, such as torture, that normalise these methods and define the historical context in which we live.

The weight of this complicity overwhelms Fales to the point where he can no longer remain silent. Employing a complex, even disorientating, rhetorical strategy, Dimock creates a text in which the distinctions between individual subjects deliberately break down in an attempt to realise an alternate form of relationality. Fales envisions a world where the logic of economic possession and the oppressive differentiation between subjects is exchanged for one where reciprocity and responsibility to others is the basis for all relations. For example, Fales remarks early in the text, “I cannot distinguish myself from you” (12); the implication of this phrase is not of confusion and loss of identity, but rather a sense of shared responsibility. From this common basis, Fales wonders “[h]ow do we devise a method for living the present moment within a frame of redemptive, universal

history?” (12). This question embodies the fundamental ethical dilemma of how we, as human beings, should live in the world. The method that Fales produces is not an ethics in itself, but the basis for the possibility of recovering an ethical mode. In the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas we find a similar attempt to uncover the grounds for an ethics of responsibility amid the unprecedented violence of the twentieth century.

In *Totality and Infinity* (1961), Levinas remarks that, “[t]he peace of empires issued from war rests on war. It does not restore to the alienated beings their lost identity. For that a primordial, an original relation with being is needed” (22).

Levinas asserts that it is possible to “proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other” (24).

Totality, for Levinas, is the experience of subjectivity within a hostile social frame that admits no space for reflection on other possible ways of being. In contrast,

though not strictly in opposition, to the objective, reified condition of totality,

Levinas introduces the notion of infinity. For Levinas, infinity “is reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience” (23, emphasis in original), and at the same

time it exceeds these boundaries. Thus it is through the recognition of the excess, or surplus, of infinity that cannot wholly be grasped, yet reveals it to be the basis for all

possibilities, that the limit of totality can be breached. Levinas states,

It is produced in the improbable feat whereby a separated being fixed in its identity, the same, the I, nonetheless contains in itself what it can neither contain nor receive solely by virtue of its own identity. Subjectivity realizes these impossible exigencies—the astonishing feat of containing more than it is possible to contain. (26-7)

According to Levinas, it is through an openness to the Other—the irreducible quality that is not simply the condition of subjectivity, not “Being” in general—that the grounds for the recovery of ethics is possible. Diane Perpich observes, “Levinas’ thought, both early and late, insists that the ethical relation precedes the possibility of reason in us and by reason he means the possibility of critical and rational activity or thinking ... Rationality, like subjectivity itself for Levinas, is a distinctly social product” (27). The Other, in Levinas’s formulation, is therefore the very condition that makes the experience of subjectivity and our individual engagement with the world possible. Furthermore, as the precondition for reason and critical thought, social structures like government and the economy also emerge from an ethical basis. Economists, such as Amartya Sen, have noted that economics was historically understood as an aspect of the study of ethics.<sup>55</sup> Levinas suggests that the recognition of the ethical and our formative relationship to ethics may alter the destructive path that Western civilisation has taken. It is through the acceptance of our obligation to the Other, both in the undifferentiated sense of all Other that is exterior to our own subjectivity and in the sense of each individual Other, that we might produce a new ethical mode of social and personal action. It is this openness to those exterior to our own subjectivity, but also recognised as “the same,” that Fales wishes to awaken in Kallen through his historical method.

In his letter to Kallen, Fales describes in great detail a practical method that will support resistance to the attractions of empire. The format of Fales’ “historical method” provides the organising principle of the novel, though his instructions are

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<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Sen’s *On Ethics and Economics* (1987), where he observes, “the subject of economics was for a long time seen as something like a branch of ethics” (2).

rife with asides and digressions. Fales provides various definitions for his historical method throughout the letter. He writes, for example: “[b]y historical method I mean every exercise possible—physical and mental—by which the self can learn to rid itself of inordinate attachments to empire and, once they have been removed, search and find ways to refuse empire and create reciprocity among equals” (13). The “self” in Fales’ account does appear to align with Levinas’s idea of subjectivity as something that is essential to each of us yet not limited to the idea of the “self” that is exclusively the intellect accessible through reasoned thought. The self in this sense encompasses something greater that exceeds our conscious knowledge. Fales echoes the language of Levinas when he recounts how he “came to the end of [himself] and found other people standing there” (9). But, importantly, he acknowledges that in this moment a choice is made. In a later repetition of this phrase, Fales writes “[n]o American lacks this moment: recognizing the person we meet when we come to the end of ourselves and know that everything can be possessed” (16-7). This passage suggests that in this moment of recognition, the individual is forced to choose between recognition of the Other in the Levinasian sense of our obligation to the Other, or the capacity for possession that runs against our responsibility. This notion of possession, taken to its extreme, is apparent in the American legacy of slavery, a subject that is central to Fales’ sense of ethics. In Fales’ account, the logic of slavery persists in the American national identity. Fales articulates this line of argument through reflections on his own past actions.

Fales recounts to Kallen the events that led him to the creation of his historical method and, eventually, to the letter we are reading. Fales describes a first awakening at the funeral of a colleague where he realised that “a New World history

of true love was both possible and inevitable” (16). The death of his co-worker, Mary Joscelyn, is not itself the impetus for his awakening; rather, it is the link between Mary’s Jamaican ancestry and a figure from Fales’ childhood. Like most of the sub-narratives in *George Anderson*, this story is slowly divulged in fragments over the course of the novel. Fales recalls himself “standing behind my mother, clutching in my fists the folds of her black and yellow skirt ... appearing in the doorway, was a woman’s radiant face—piercing, dancing light shot from behind her head” (15). He continues,

The woman’s eyes found mine there where I stood behind my mother’s skirt. They asked without using words—without fear—(they assured me she was willing to bear the knowledge of whatever answer I gave without restraining the reach of my infant terror and glory)—‘How are you?’ ... In the event (I learned later I had not yet begun to speak though I had just turned four) I answered with my gaze ... I was valuable and full of light because she had come back. (16)

A dialogue occurs without verbal expression between the two that affirms the ethical responsibility. This expression of love for another outside of familial obligations, self-interest, or pragmatic duty forms the basis of reciprocity and responsibility in Fales’ ethical practice. Only later in the text does Fales add that his mother would not let the woman enter their home. The woman, Fales explains, is “Melisande Chandless, a Jamaican nurse who cared for me as an infant when my mother couldn’t take care of her newborn for the first thirteen weeks of its life. (My mother wrote in her diary that she turned to the wall and would not speak when her baby was offered her to hold)” (85). The memory of Melisande Chandless’s generosity is embedded in Fales’ historical method as the refrain “I am valuable because she came back” (21). We see here how the idea of value might recover its ethical, rather than economic,

significance through the recognition of the other as the formative source of our own subjective experience.

Fales' conception of reciprocal value in the scene with Melisande Chandless resembles the account of ethics that Judith Butler formulates to in *Precarious Life* (2004), which identifies humans as "from the start, given over to the other, [...] in which we are, from the start, even prior to individuation itself and, by virtue of bodily requirements, given over to some set of primary others" (31). The fundamental vulnerability that Butler describes as being "given over to the Other," and which she derives from Levinas, is also the origin of Fales' own recognition of mutual responsibility. This fundamental vulnerability is characterised as a state of transcendence that occurs in the "face to face" (Levinas 39). For Levinas, the face-to-face is a moment of profound recognition of the Other, where "the *infinity* of the other whose otherness exceeds the limits of any order whatsoever" (Waldenfels 66, emphasis in original) is made known to us. This face-to-face is "no mere metaphor transporting a figurative sense into a higher sphere, delivering it from its corporeal chains. Levinas's ethics are rooted in a phenomenology of the body" (65). Fales discovers in his childhood memory the spirit of responsibility that counteracts the isolating experience of totality. Edith Wyschogrod writes,

The totality can be disrupted only by that which lies outside it, a dimension Levinas does not hesitate to call eschatology. The term is not to be understood teleologically as referring to the aim of some future time but rather as the instituting of a relation that is beyond the totality and as a drawing of beings out of history, beings who always already speak. (191)

Fales' ethical awakening, achieved through the memory of the nurse who cared for him as a child and who formed a bond that could be conveyed "without using words" (*George Anderson* 16), suggests a Levinasian conception of the interaction with the

other where, “[a]lthough beyond discursive formulation, the face discloses itself as language” (Wyschogrod 191). There is a clear parallel between this concept and Fales’ account. Despite this experience, the totality of society would dominate Fales’ subjectivity until he was finally able to reconnect through a transcendent awakening.

The narrative movement from Fales’ experience of this vision to the articulation of his argument against the violence and oppression of empire is perhaps best understood through a Levinasian interpretation. As we will see, Levinas, too, perceives in the responsibility to the Other the conditions for a world that resists the dehumanising violence of nationalism and the masculinist ideal of modern economic individualism. For Fales, the convergence of economic and political forces disables the capacity for ethical thought and action at both the personal and global levels. The message Fales delivers is optimistic, even confident, but the form of his ethical approach runs counter, perhaps necessarily, to more familiar modes of discourse. The reaction by literary reviewers to Fales’ rhetorical strategy—though not the novel itself—has been ambivalent: for example, in her review for the *New York Times Book Review*, Heidi Julavits suggests that “Fales fails. *George Anderson* concludes in fear and impotence, and the irrevocable fact of Fales’ guilt by association. Our guilt by association. My guilt by association” (20). We are meant to share in the guilt that Fales recognises for his indifference, but the novel does not end on a note of completion that we may judge a success or failure. This is precisely the nature of *George Anderson*: a novel of potential. The reader does not have access to Kallen’s response, nor do we know if he ever replies. That is secondary to the potential that the letter opens and does not foreclose upon. We, the reader, are made aware of our own potential for action. We are privy to the historical method and may even take it

up if we so desire. The text defers its own resolution; it is ever open to a reply, to be read in a new light.

The “fear and impotence” (20) that Julavits recognises, however, is a characteristic of much of human history, a failure to act ethically when it may be simpler to bow before the dominant impulse. Fales draws out this tension through historical and personal examples that reveal the dynamic relationship between these two spheres. We do not have David Kallen’s reply to Fales, but the potential for a response — from Kallen and from the reader — remains. Dimock suggests as much when he writes in the “Author’s Note” appended to the novel, that “[t]he success of my ambition, it seems to me, will rest upon the reader’s response to my invention of a form that purports to create the internal imaginative condition for the refusal of American national triumph” (159-60). Fales’ letter and his historical method exemplify the tension between language, meaning, ethics, and economy that forms the unstable nexus of contemporary life. Is the language we have inherited adequate to describe and account for our actions and behaviours? Is the language we have available sufficient to account for the atrocities that human beings have perpetrated upon one another? What conditions have led us to these social, political, and economic circumstances? And, significantly for Fales, what can we do to counteract our failures and inadequacies? Fales’ historical method presents one model that may help humans to respond to these questions, though not without challenging our comfortable boundaries. Indeed, as Julavits notes, Fales’ effort risks falling into “absurdity and madness” (20). The question of Fales’ sanity cannot be ignored, but a new critical light is needed to expose its significance in the text and to Dimock’s overarching literary project.

Despite the utopian or eschatological language that Fales employs in his critique of imperialism, he introduces a distinctly practical method to counteract these forces, which he developed on his own and continues to practice. He envisions Kallen, too, adopting his historical method in order to grasp the full significance of his contribution to the implementation of torture. In fact, Fales has a specific goal in mind when he writes to Kallen; he has learned that the two men will both be attending a ceremony celebrating the “public opening of the new Charles Jason Frears Memorial American Music Archive and Performance Center” (10) in four months time. Fales hopes to take this opportunity to engage Kallen in conversation and writes that he is “requesting the touch of your words in the moving air [...] in the hope that they will help me learn to live my complicity honourably. I send you this historical method in good faith” (10). The phrase “touch of your words in the moving air” conveys a materiality to language that we often take for granted. This attribution assigns a value to words as objects, not merely as arbitrary signifiers, that should be used responsibly and employed with due care. Complicity, too, is bound up with language in Fales’ account. It is a theme that Fales’ addresses throughout his letter and it may be understood as a component of “responsibility,” which forms the basis of Levinas account of the relationship between the subject and the Other.

Dag G. Aasland observes that for “Levinas both freedom and the dream of freedom is something that is experienced within the frame of the restraint implied in being responsible for the other” (39). Complicity, in this sense, implies a Levinasian sense of obligation to the Other that elevates one’s own responsibility above what one might expect in return from the behaviour of another. Hilary Putnam remarks that “Levinas stresses the asymmetry of the fundamental moral relation. ‘I see myself

*obligated* with respect to the other; consequently I am infinitely more demanding of myself than of others” (39, emphasis in original). For Fales, this means stepping outside of the limits of social conventions and creating discourse where propriety may make it seem inappropriate or strange. Fales acts out of an obligation to the Other, inspired by a momentary expression of love and recognition from his childhood nurse.

However, as Putnam notes, an important distinction must be made between a sense of duty to the Other and reciprocity. Putnam writes, “[b]efore reciprocity must come ethics; to seek to base ethics on reciprocity is once again to seek to base it on the illusory ‘sameness’ of the other person” (39). Levinas cautions against the assumption of ‘sameness’ in his critique of Heidegger’s philosophy, stating that “[p]ossession is pre-eminently the form in which the other becomes the same, by becoming mine” (*Totality* 46). This is a significant passage for the understanding of the link between ethics, economics, and social relations as it articulates how assumptions drawn from one’s own desires or interests impose a judgement that is not, in fact, based upon the ideal of reciprocity and does not create the conditions for equality. This recalls Fales remark, cited above, where he acknowledges the choice at the moment of recognition between the Other and possession. This notion of the “sameness” of all subjects is also evident in economic discourses that efface individual subjectivity in the interest of orderly calculations. Certainly, this is necessary to meet the basic needs of a large population; but, the severity of economic reason works to undermine the very freedoms that it purports to make available. When Fales appeals to Kallen as equals, or “the same person” (*George Anderson* 10), he does so in order to draw Kallen’s attention to others, not in the interest of

‘possession.’ In his engagement with Kallen, Fales endeavours to achieve some sort of mutual recognition as equals and, through that, to atone and move beyond their failures towards a new mode of ethics. Through the historical method, which elevates secular language to the status of the transcendent, Fales hopes to guide Kallen towards just ends.

The narrative that Fales delivers to Kallen in his letter weaves historical and economic concerns, global and personal narratives, into a private method to make authentic conversation possible between the two men. In an interview with Eugene Lim, Peter Dimock remarks that the historical method is adapted from *The Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Fales not only mimics the structure of *The Spiritual Exercises* in his own method, he appropriates language from that text. For example, St. Ignatius writes: “spiritual exercises are methods of preparing and disposing the soul to free itself of all inordinate attachments, and after accomplishing this, of seeking and discovering the Divine Will regarding the disposition of one’s life” (37). In *George Anderson*, Fales writes: “By historical method [...] acts by which a person prepares and disposes the self to rid its coherence and integrity of all inordinate attachments to empire and, after their removal, by which he or she creates reciprocity and joins with others in a society of equal historical selves (SOEHS)” (28-9). What is apparent in this comparison is the exchange of “soul” for “self” in *George Anderson*, and “Divine Will” for “society of equal historical selves.” Where St. Ignatius’s method sought to overcome sin, Fales’ approach encourages Kallen to resist empire, a new approach for the secular world.

Fales adopts many elements from *The Spiritual Exercises*, including the idea of a month long process and the subdivision of elements for meditation; however, his

approach is distinctly secular, despite the language of “transcendence” that the account of his awakening suggests. This seems a deliberate attempt to reclaim some form of transcendence for the secular world that has its roots in the recognition of the Other. Instead of reflections on the life of Christ, Fales grounds his method in historical events and personal experiences. His method is broken down into several component parts that make up each day’s meditation: a master narrative, a historical subject, a governing scene, a truth statement, and two constructive principles (one positive and one negative). The objective of Fales’ meditative practice also differs from that of St. Ignatius: while the ultimate goal is “another history in the New World” (*George Anderson* 51), or a vision of collective social change, the assemblage of elements in the daily meditation form what Fales describes as “notes” in a love song. He remarks that “[b]efore pictures in the mind are worn away by inattention, they may be converted into the mental sounds of musical notes. This procedure is designed to preserve the capacity of the governing scene to create new understandings and put them into a rearranged reciprocity of words” (51). The combination of each element into a whole, Fales asserts, will achieve the quality of a musical note. Fales is genuine in his idea of creating a love song composed out of the historical method and believes that it is, in fact, necessary. He writes, “[a] historical method of true virtue is necessary to create love songs out of music that comes to you first in words whose syntax has already betrayed you” (33). Language, for Fales, has already been corrupted by economic or “imperial” motivations. He writes that “[t]he words of our love song will not mean anything until we find the music with which to make them true. The words with which we collude with empire are used for advantage, not reciprocity” (36). Fales’ believes that through his idea of a “love

song” that divorces language from its social and cultural constraints he, and others, will finally be able to adequately respond to these same constraints.

The musical note at once exceeds the bounds of language through a cumulative effect and at the same time is a method of retaining the words of the method, recalling their essence to mind. This method resembles a type of mnemonic device, but it also contains elements of a synesthetic transformation of the words into sounds that retains the strength of the original. Fales writes, “words are sound and vision before they’re written forms—open not just to interpretation but also to embodiment” (86). This description of language, again, attributes to it a sense of materiality. Words, for Fales, are powerful and active objects. Language occupies an important role in the construction of ethics for Levinas. He writes, “the *relation* between the same and the other—upon which we seem to impose such extraordinary conditions—is language” (*Totality* 39). Levinas continues, “[t]he relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as a conversation, where the same, gathered up in its ipseity as an ‘I,’ as a particular existent unique and autochthonous, leaves itself” (39). This is precisely what Fales aspires to in his letter to David Kallen. But it is this awareness of the power of language that also prompts Fales to be cautious of the potential for misappropriation and misuse. Fales accounts for his approach in this way: “The words in which the history of the present we are living first comes to us, we have to assume, are unreliable. The betrayal built into syntax in which most experience is steeped makes spontaneous speech un-useable for

reciprocity” (20).<sup>56</sup> Fales is suspicious of the corruption of language in the contemporary world, but also capable of manipulating it to his advantage by jumping from one rhetorical register to another in order to upset our expectations of how meaning is conventionally constructed and conveyed.

From the outset, the language that Fales employs in his letter is unusual, with noticeable divisions between an intimate voice, an official or judicial voice, and a spiritual voice. Dimock employs a similar approach in his first novel, *A Short Rhetoric for Leaving the Family*, which, as the title suggests, is written in the form of directions for a rhetorical strategy by a man named Jarlath Lanham to two young members of his family in order to confront the historical transgressions of the Lanham family. Indeed, many of the elements of *A Short Rhetoric for Leaving the Family* reappear in *George Anderson*, including themes of inheritance, state sanctioned violence, and the dynamic relationship between family and nation. However, *George Anderson* develops and expands on these themes in a complex manner, which introduces the complicity of the reader into the text in a way that his previous novel did not attempt.

*George Anderson* undertakes this inquiry through the multiple narratives that Fales delivers in fragments throughout the text. Fales employs disjuncture, as noted in the analysis of the opening passage of *George Anderson*, in order to disrupt the oppressive discourse that Kallen, as a former member of the Office of Legal Council

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<sup>56</sup> In his “Author’s Note” to *George Anderson*, Peter Dimock describes the historical research that he had once performed as a doctoral student: “My research was part of an effort to recover an American sense of history before the dominance exercised by the triumphant narrative of a redeeming national American greatness became popularly established with the success of George Bancroft’s multi-volume *History of the United States, from the Discovery of the American Continent* that began to be published in 1834. I have been convinced for a long time now that Americans lack a language adequate to the history we are living” (159).

to the Government of the United States, knows all too well. Yet the formal structure of the historical method follows a logical, though not chronological, order that he believes will successfully attract Kallen's attention. If Kallen practices the historical method successfully, he will be able to "make it [his] own by applying it to daily life" (46). Yet the letter, distinct in itself from the method it contains, is frequently interrupted by reflections and commentary that do not seem to follow from the subject of the previous passage. Despite the ambitious, formal tone of Fales' method, the actual content he presents, drawn from historical documents, personal experience, and works of literature, contradict what expectations we might bring to a "historical method." In much the same way as *A Short Rhetoric for Leaving the Family*, Dimock attempts to unite personal discourses with impersonal techniques in order to form language of resistance against external forces as well as the narrator's own vulnerabilities.

Fales' master narrative, we learn, comes in the form of a newspaper article "appearing in the Trenton, New Jersey State Gazette on April 6, 1925" (24). The article recounts events from the life of a former slave, George Anderson, who is one-hundred-and-eight at the date of publication. When he introduces this document into the body of the novel, Fales includes only the first three paragraphs, which do not actually refer to George Anderson by name and only allude generally to the history of slavery. Instead, the passage that Fales selects sets up Anderson's narrative through an extended metaphor about value. The author of the article, Marion C. MacRobert creates the metaphor through a description of Anderson's dilapidated home and contrasts this image with the comment that the building "is the home of one of Trenton's very richest men" (25). MacRobert clarifies that,

His wealth does not consist of anything so commonplace as money. If he wanted a dollar right this minute it is extremely doubtful if he could find it [...] but he has a store house, and in it are treasures that only a man who has lived a whole century may possess—it is the storehouse of memory. (25)

While later in the text Fales will reflect upon other events from the article, moments disturbing and uplifting, this passage is left unexamined. In a book where passages frequently contrast or interrupt sequential logic, the symbolism of wealth here warrants attention. For Fales, the extended metaphor of value and wealth must be read within the narrative of the history of slavery in the United States. Although the author of the article attempts to diminish the social value of money, the narrative of the former slave, once treated as a possession himself and now impoverished but free, exposes how economic terms structure our understanding of the value of a human life. Despite his past experience of being treated as a commodity object, Anderson's life is still framed by economic language that places him outside the dominant system. MacRobert continues, “[n]ow that age has robbed him of his once healthy body he can fall back upon this wealth and distribute it to those about him, and, after all, no man is quite so rich as the man who shares” (25). It would seem that Fales wants us to read this in light of his own effort to share his historical method with Kallen and, additionally, to “share” the authentic narrative of slavery's history in the United States. However, the metaphor of “wealth” that the author employs also reinforces the rhetoric of economic value that, in the example of slavery, can efface the inestimable value of human life. The “wealth” that MacRobert attributes to Anderson seems an affront to the experiences he endured as a slave, turning human suffering and torture into a salvageable learning experience. Although Fales adopts this apparently ambivalent article about George Anderson as his master narrative, the

structure of the historical method will disrupt the assumptions that underlie such rewritten narratives of slavery.

The inclusion of George Anderson's story in text that at first appears to be about the torture of prisoners by the government of the United States in the twenty-first century is not a coincidence. Although Dimock risks collapsing historical events into a convenient narrative, *George Anderson* makes a convincing case for the interpretation of the use of torture by the United States as part of a social and economic historical narrative that is bound up with the institution of slavery. Fales writes that he "knows now that it is our investments in slavery—I mean our investments in each and every one of its forms—that makes us confuse freedom with empire" (47). Slavery, according to Fales, remains embedded in the social structure and modern identity of the United States. Although the events that Fales addresses are clearly connected to politics and the state apparatus, his concerns are themselves prior to any politics—they are ethical.

In this way, Fales shares a conception of ethics that has much in common with Levinas, who writes "[t]he art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means—politics—is henceforth enjoined as the very exercise of reason. Politics is opposed to morality as philosophy to naïveté" (*Totality* 21). John Llewelyn observes that, for Levinas, "[t]he political renders the ethical invisible. The State effaces the face" (67). The state all too frequently disables the ability of its members to recognise the humanity in people of different backgrounds, racial, religious, or otherwise. Fales, similarly, observes that "[t]here is no way to lodge an equally valued body inside the abstraction of nationality" (*George Anderson* 24). The oppressive and competitive nature of the state has, for Levinas as for Fales, the effect

of delimiting the capacity of the individual to recognise the ethics of the Other.

Levinas observes that the violence of war “establishes an order from which no one can keep his distance; nothing henceforth is exterior. War does not manifest exteriority and the other as other; it destroys the identity of the same” (*Totality* 21).

The condition of war and the periods of peace that temporarily hold war at bay foster a non-ethical concept of being.

According to Levinas, “[t]he visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy” (21). We are unable to see the Other from our vantage within the divisive and competitive structure of identity created by the state. It is such a condition that Fales perceives in the contradiction of Kallen’s actions. Levinas remarks, in a statement that captures the nuances of Fales’ critique,

Violence does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy the very possibility for action. (21)

Kallen’s failure to act, despite undergoing torture in order to fully grasp the decision he was making, is the condition that Fales wishes to understand and amend. Why did Kallen not speak out against the decision to include the footnote in the document?

Fales recognises in this a condition that extends beyond this one incident to a history of inaction. Foucault identifies this form of subjectification embodied in the structure of the state as governmentality. He argues that we must attempt “to liberate [ourselves] both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this

kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries” (“The Subject” 785). According to Fales, we can achieve this through a return to ethics.

The experience of the ethical is “*exterior to the totality*” (*Totality* 22, emphasis in original) that we most often identify with the state, and is the fundamental condition for the realisation of an authentic human subjectivity.<sup>57</sup> An experience that is exterior to the totality of the state and the subjectivity it produces seems to be what Fales hopes to achieve through the practice of his historical method. Levinas uses the term “infinity” to describe the condition of the ethical, which at once transcends totality and, at the same time, “is reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience” (23, emphasis in original). The ethical, for Levinas, functions as the formative stage for human beings and it is a concept that cannot be wholly encompassed by thought. Fales appeals to an alternative path forward, but one that finds its source in history. Not so subtly, Fales inserts in his letter to Kallen the statement from the Declaration of Independence: “Remember: Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of the unalienable natural rights that all people hold equally, it is the right of free persons to alter or abolish it and to institute new Government” (24). Fales’ ambitions are distinctly outside of the current political structure, but he also demands that his method respond to the history of that system and its effects on real people.

Fales’ supports the stress he places on honesty and ethical action with a personal narrative that he weaves into the instructions for his historical method. He confesses to his involvement, both professional and personal, in activities that he has come to recognise reinforce inequality and even contribute to the deceptions of the

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<sup>57</sup> Edith Wyschogrod observes that “[t]otality is for Levinas a freighted term that includes epistemological, historical and political meanings” (190).

American government. He notes, for instance, how he “acquired and edited” the memoir of Frederick Avery, who was the “Director of Central Intelligence” (17) for the United States government.<sup>58</sup> In this capacity, Fales helped to present an image of Avery that was misleading: “[p]ower’s pleasures were written as self-sacrifice in the public interest. Devotion to family and country were written to suggest they entailed the burdens of atrocity in fighting savage wars a moral man could not refuse” (60). Avery’s memoir was a success, and Fales concedes that this was a source of pleasure for him.

Fales confesses that he was complicit in the construction of a deceptive narrative that glossed historical events or excluded details that might have compromised Avery’s reputation. He describes helping to craft a narrative whereby the reader would be led to believe that “Frederick Avery’s strength and discipline [...] spared the ordinary citizen the moral consequences of dominion” (60). In this account, political forces intervene in moral or ethical debates and assure individuals that the state will make the correct, though at times difficult, decision so that they need not concern themselves. By encouraging citizens to believe that it is the state’s responsibility to determine consensus, take action, and reckon with the outcome, the state takes ethics out of the hands of individuals. The orderly operation of the state, just as in the operation and logic of the economy, prefers a model of human behaviour that is rational, egoist, and driven by self-interest (Groenewegen 16). However, ethics and morality pose a threat to this model of human behaviour.

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<sup>58</sup> Like Fales, Dimock has had an extensive career in the publishing industry as an editor at Vintage Books and later as “a senior editor at Columbia University Press and in charge of their history and political science books” (“Interview”). Dimock also edited the memoir of former CIA Director George J. Tenet.

Aasland offers one possible explanation for this divide in his examination of Levinas and economics. Aasland writes, “[r]eason is based in the self while ethics comes to the self as a disturbing element in the encounter with the face of the Other” (63). Similarly, in *Postmodern Ethics* Zygmunt Bauman remarks that “[f]rom the perspective of the ‘rational order’, morality is and is bound to remain *irrational*. For every social totality bent on uniformity and the soliciting of the disciplined, coordinated action, the stubborn and resilient autonomy of the moral self is a scandal” (13, emphasis in original). Fales demonstrates his stubbornness to pursue the ethical over the political or economic in the very fact of his message to Kallen. Yet Fales’ ambitions appear irrational even in light of what we commonly recognise as ethical thought. Is Fales delusional and extreme in his efforts? Or, is the audience of this text irrationally, and unethically, comfortable with actions such as those taken by Kallen? Faced with this dilemma, the reader must choose between a hermeneutics of faith and a hermeneutics of suspicion.

Fales describes his encounter with Jesse Bishop as “the event in my life of which I am the most ashamed” (72). He proceeds to describe to Kallen in a more or less sequential narrative how he met Bishop while she was working at a strip club in Kentucky, where he was attending a conference. Fales remarks, “[w]hen I first saw Jesse Bishop, she was naked on a table in front of six white men sitting there around her. (I was at the bar.) The men’s lust transfigured them.” The language in this passage emphasises the objectification of Bishop, and Fales’ succinct description has the scene resemble some sort of disturbing ritual is taking place. Furthermore, the inclusion of race in his description of the “six white men” suggests that Jesse Bishop

may be of another ethnic background, though Fales does not state this outright. He continues,

I thought I saw the men feel in her movements the truth of their own desire of which their fear deprived them and for whose sudden public display and knowledge, I thought their smiles and money said, they would never forgive her. I thought I saw her answer their money with the abandon of contempt. She was very young. (72-3)

Fales' narrative seeks to humanise Bishop by disclosing that she was a single-mother who could not afford to have someone look after her son while she worked. Her son, Robert, is allowed to call her at work, but no more than twice each evening. Here, Fales extends his critique of slavery, in all of its forms, to the cultural commodification of women as objects of desire. In Fales' description of his perceptions at the strip club, he remarks upon how the interaction is emblematic of a disturbing dynamic between men and women. Once again, money, power, and race figure in Fales' narrative. At the strip club, Fales pursues Jesse, having her perform for him, and he gains her confidence enough to allow him to drive her home. The next day he drives by her home again out of some sort of undefined moral impulse, but does not knock at her door.

While Fales' participation seems relatively innocuous given the widespread acceptance of misogynist behaviour, the event had a profound effect on him. He writes the formula as it appears in his historical method for Kallen: "The second element of my governing scene for the method's second historical subject is myself watching Jesse dancing on the table in Lexington, Kentucky to the accompaniment of the lust of seven white men" (73). Whereas the previous passage described six white men and Fales, in the historical method Fales acknowledges his complicity in the

social and economic oppression of women and does not set himself apart. His subjectivity, the privilege of the white, masculine identity, is effaced in this equation.

This sequence ends abruptly and the narrative begins again with a commentary on Kallen's legal finding. The sudden shift is disconcerting to the reader and prevents a consistent and immersive experience of reading. Dimock seems to want the reader to consider this juxtaposition and to form his or her own link between the two passages, to grasp what is unwritten. A significant element of Fales' objection to Kallen's actions lies in his betrayal of language. Misuse of the authority of the written word poses an affront to Fales and it exposes the depth of the corruption of language to political and economic imperatives. Fales employs a narrative technique that, while unusual, resists the coercive power of such rhetoric. Social structures, like politics and economics, rely upon a limited, rational form of language that, at the same time, imposes its rational order onto the material world. Fales' practice seeks to recover the ethical basis of language in the other.

Wyschogrod remarks that, according to Levinas,

Speech in conferring signification brings the world to the other, thereby creating a common world. Far from endorsing an infra rational dissolution of speech in favour of a primordial relation to the world as sensible quality, Levinas sees signification, the capacity to generalize, as an ethical event. An individual receives a universal meaning through the word that designates it to another. (195)

It is out of a desire to communicate as equals that Fales encourages Kallen to take up the historical method. Fales perceives in language the potential for genuine equality in a manner that Wyschogrod identifies in Levinas. She writes, “[b]y disengaging the self from objects, language contests relations of possession, the realm of economy understood in terms of money, ownership and exchange” (194). It is through the Other that responsibility displaces the economic logic of wealth and possession.

Interestingly, both Fales and Levinas look to the most intimate relationships for the source of the ethical amidst the totality.

In his commentary on the genealogy of Levinas's ethics, John Llewelyn observes that "[t]he true and just plurality of society is concretely produced in hospitality extended to the Other from within the economic base of a home in which the subject that enjoys and maintains itself in separation says to the Other 'Peace'" (67). Wyschogrod identifies the home as the sphere from which the subject may recognise the Other in somewhat different language, though with a conclusion that is fundamentally shared with Llewelyn. Wyschogrod writes:

The world as signification opened up by utterance is given to the other as language, a signification that challenges the life of economy. Far from analysing the globalization of economy or the commodification of discourses, Levinas envisages economic relations as rooted in more basic world relations that may be traced to Heidegger's description of the primordial compartments that characterize being in the world, compartments that for Levinas include need, enjoyment, habitation and, as arising out of habitation, work. (194)

Wyschogrod, more so than Llewelyn, identifies a tension between the economic base in the home and the relation to the Other that is external to this space. However, it is from the interiority of the home, the space where the subject confirms possession that Levinas contends is the realm where the encounter with the Other takes place.

Levinas states,

In order that I be able to free myself from the very possession that the welcome of the Home establishes, in order that I be able to see things in themselves, that is, represent them to myself, refuse both enjoyment and possession, I must know how *to give* what I possess ... But for this I must encounter the indiscreet face of the Other that calls me into question. The Other—the absolutely other—paralyzes possession, which he contests by his epiphany in the face. (*Totality* 170-1, emphasis in original)

The unwillingness of the subject to welcome the Other into the home, to renounce possession and to accept the Other, characterises the resistance to alternative social

and economic models. Possession, from which society locked in its totality emerges, is the refusal to acknowledge our responsibility to the Other. In light of this idea, Fales' letter may be understood as an act of responsibility and welcome to Kallen.

Fales also looks to the intimacy of the home as an ethical model to counter the dominance of totality. He writes, "the goal [of the historical method] is a reciprocity based on an ideal of married love serving as the basis for a just society of equal historical selves. The original logic of the abundance of capitalism was another way of being" (22). In the first part of this passage, Fales distinguishes the "ideal of married love" from marriage itself, and implies that this mode of reciprocal, responsible love may be achieved among all members of society. This description surpasses even Levinas's own model, which has been the source of debate regarding his distinction between the masculine and the feminine. Stella Sandford, building on critiques of Levinas by Simone de Beauvoir and later Luce Irigaray, argues that "[w]ithin this economy the feminine other is not thought in her alterity or specificity *qua* feminine but only as the dependent opposite of the masculine, the not-masculine" (143-4). While other critics, such as Tina Chanter, argue that Levinas problematizes femininity in order to expose the necessity of finding another way of understanding this social division. Chanter writes that "Levinas, by taking to the extreme the otherness of the feminine, can be said at the same time to have recognized a space for some kind of thinking of the other outside its opposition to the same" (53). While the subject of the feminine remains contentious in discussion of Levinas, the ideal of married love that Fales proposes does not engage with questions of gender and sexuality, but takes from the concept the ideals of duty, responsibility, and love for others and applies them across all of society equally.

The second portion of the above quotation from *George Anderson* reads “[t]he original logic of the abundance of capitalism was another way of being” (22). The juxtaposition of this socio-economic statement with Fales’ previous remark on the ideal of married love draws the seemingly unrelated ideas into ambiguous proximity. By placing these ideas side by side, Fales wants to read the one through the influence of the other. Here, he draws a link between the potential for social harmony in a model that we recognise as a familiar social bond and contrasts it with the reality of our fractious, competitive economic and political selves. Despite the incompatibility of these two forms both persist, which suggests that some balance between these social forms is necessary. However, we have lost control of this equilibrium and, according to Fales, we must impose the spirit of married love onto the logic of empire in order to retrieve a just and ethical life. The success of the modern neoliberal economy need not have been the result of “the abundance of capitalism,” he contends. The transformation of the concept of the individual’s right to social and political freedom into the individual’s freedom to accumulate as much wealth out of self-interest was not the end that Enlightenment economists had in mind, Fales contends. Yet it is the spirit of self-interest and individual ambitions that, economists have long claimed, makes progress and achievements in various spheres of society possible.

With the exception of the appended documents, Fales concludes his letter with directions for the final two days of the historical method’s cycle. Concise and without a personal appeal, the final words of the letter direct Kallen to “[r]emember that in subsequent cycles of this method [...] you will be asked to make yourself the historical subject of the fourth week’s exercises” (113). Fales reminds Kallen, here,

that it will be necessary to become self-aware of his presence in the manifestation of history. We must recognise that “[h]istorylessness is now the condition of everyday life,” and for “the ecstasy of absolute possession” we have exchanged “a past and future of absolute loss” (40). The economic logic of possession, the ideal of individual liberty in the freedom of the markets is a deception, Fales claims. If we are to renew a common history, it must be through an ethics of responsibility to the Other. It is left to the reader to decide how to respond to *George Anderson*: with a hermeneutics of faith and a sense of hope, or with a hermeneutics of suspicion, and a sceptical outlook.

*George Anderson* provides a compelling argument for the continued value of confessional practices in the twenty-first century. Although this form of self-examination has been greatly criticised by critics like Foucault and parodied in novels like *Lolita*, confession remains a potent and necessary technique, particularly within the political climate of the United States in recent years. *George Anderson* was published early in the presidency of Barack Obama, a period of renewed optimism in American politics, but the novel’s call for ethical dialogue is perhaps more relevant now than ever. While politics has long been associated with evasive language, or “spin,” political discourse in the United States has witnessed a precipitous decline in sincerity under President Donald Trump. Indeed, Trump’s antagonistic rhetoric and weaponisation of social media have collided with familiar social and political forms in the United States, resulting in a disorderly environment that will take years to settle. We must hold out hope that the lessons and social forms of the past that have preserved the ideal of equality and justice in the United States will remain strong.



## **Conclusion: Confession and the Digital Dark Box**

This study has been guided by two principal suppositions: first, that experimental American male novelists have engaged with confessional narratives in their fiction not merely to parody the popular genre and mock a culture preoccupied with the intimate lives of others, but also to probe the boundaries of textual self-representation and the constraints of masculine identity. And, second, that by adopting a methodology that resists the allure of a hermeneutics of suspicion and attending, instead, to the aesthetic and social forms on display, analysis of these texts will generate new insights into the organisation of masculinity. In each of the preceding chapters, I have sought to demonstrate how the confessional narrative registers masculine identity as internally divided and conditioned by the place that the individual occupies within a plurality of social, historical, and aesthetic forms. Thus, by examining the confessional narrative as a malleable form within which men can practice self-examination and explore the boundaries of subjectivity, we come to a better understanding of the conditions that encourage men to reject the injustice of social hierarchies and pursue new forms of equality, as well as the conditions that inhibit them from doing so.

In the conclusion to the final chapter, however, I remarked upon the dramatic shift in social and political discourse that has taken place in the United States since *George Anderson* appeared in 2012. Published during the first term of Barack Obama's presidency, Dimock's novel is buoyed by his message of hope, along with a pragmatic view of the hard work of self-examination and accountability required of men in the United States if the country is to revive the foundational values tarnished under George W. Bush. Now, in the second year of Donald Trump's presidency,

such optimism is a distant memory. An angry, resentful, and aggressive masculinity has come to thrive in the Trump era, exemplified by “the openly white nationalist alt-right” (Nagle 7). Both Trump and the alt-right owe their success to the pervasiveness of a particular social form: the Internet. While the Internet has facilitated communication and the sharing of knowledge, it has also destabilised many familiar social and cultural forms, for better or worse. In closing, I wish to briefly address the continued significance of confessional narratives by men at a time when masculinity appears to be undergoing a particularly turbulent transformation.

In *Kill All Normies* (2017), Angela Nagle examines the combative online culture that enabled the rise of the alt-right. This was not, Nagle observes, the outcome many had envisioned for the Internet. She notes that “[w]riters like Manuel Castells and numerous commentators in the *Wired* magazine milieu told us of the coming of a networked society, in which old hierarchical models of business and culture would be replaced by the wisdom of crowds, the swarm, the hive mind, citizen journalism and user-generated content” (3). Yet these writers could not anticipate how far this disruption to conventional forms would extend or the resistance it would meet. Nancy Baym and Danah Boyd outline some of the destabilising effects of social media, which “blur boundaries between presence and absence, time and space, control and freedom, personal and mass communication, private and public, and virtual and real, affecting how old patterns should be understood and raising new challenges and opportunities” (320). While social media has brought about many positive developments, notably the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements, there was also “a spirit of deep nihilistic cynicism and reactive irony [that] bubbled up to the surface of mainstream Internet-culture” (Nagle 4).

Alongside the empowering collaborative efforts of many socially and politically progressive groups, social media has also enabled a hostile counter-movement. Nagle explains that seemingly innocuous online forums like 4chan and Tumblr provided an outlet for ugly expressions of racism, misogyny, and anti-Semitism. Nagle writes, “this leaderless anonymous online culture ended up becoming characterized by a particularly dark preoccupation with thwarted or failed white Western masculinity as a grand metaphor” (22). While the networked society has made it possible for greater numbers of men to unite around a shared sense of resentment, this is, as this thesis has shown, hardly a new phenomenon. Much of Arthur Inman’s diary would not be out of place were it transcribed for a blog today; *The Tunnel*’s Kohler would likely identify as a “deplorable” alongside fellow Trump supporters—indeed, Kohler’s Party of the Disappointed People is a strikingly prescient image of the alt-right; and we might very well be able to trace the lineage of online trolls, “whose dark humor and love of transgression for its own sake made it hard to know what political views were genuinely held” (Nagle 2), all the way back to Humbert Humbert. Despite the unexpected ways in which the Internet has promoted a deeply toxic masculinity, the concerns that underlie this nascent movement are already very familiar.

In an article entitled “Trump’s Angry White Men,” Michael Kimmel characterises the circumstances of contemporary American men in terms that highlight the role forms play in their social lives. He remarks on the fantasy of the enclosed whole that once secured a masculine public sphere: “Like a fairy tale: ‘once upon a time’ the whole world outside the home was a locker room – a place where guys could be with other guys, relaxed in a casual camaraderie. The office was a locker room. The law firm, the hospital operating theatre, the academy – all locker

rooms” (16). Now, however, “there are women everywhere, not just ‘entering’ the public arena but ‘invading’ what had been a formerly all-male space.” Another once secure form, the economic hierarchy, has also been rendered disorderly for men. Kimmel remarks that this hierarchy no longer promises a secure status for white American men. The order has been revised for middle class men, who must now compete on equal footing with women and minorities. Unable to fulfil the conventionally masculine role of breadwinner, “[t]hese men feel like they are seen as failures; they are humiliated – and that humiliation is the source of their rage” (16). The collision of newly powerful social forms, including gender and race, with traditional economic and social ideals has led to instability in the lives of many “inside men.” While anger and resentment may be the immediate response for many white American men confronted with forms that unsettle the narratives that they had come to expect, this approach is unsustainable and unhealthy. What the texts discussed in this study have shown is that for contemporary American men to overcome their sense of humiliation and rage towards a nation that will not assume its former shape, they will need to look inward in order to develop new forms of masculinity.

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