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Publication Date

2011

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

History's Unmentionables:
Reference and Interiority in the Contemporary American Historical Novel

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Dorothy Hale, Chair
Professor Ann Banfield
Professor Lyubov Golburt

Fall 2011

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Abstract

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My dissertation, *History's Unmentionables: Reference and Interiority in the Contemporary American Historical Novel*, analyzes what I argue are traces of historical referents, specifically the minds of historical figures, in the works of Norman Mailer, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon. The project critiques postmodern theories of narrative that, citing their equivalence as texts, attempt to undo the distinction between histories and fictions. While such claims are predicated on the assumed irrecoverability of historical referents, I argue that we can only account for a network of stylistic peculiarities in these authors' works as disruptions created by such referents.

My first chapter, "'Strange Even to Himself': History, Characterization, and the Absence of Interiority in *Libra*," accounts for a self-alienation unique to the historical figures in DeLillo's novel. I argue that DeLillo skirts the epistemological limit posed by the minds of historical figures by folding that limit into his characterizations; that is, unlike the novel's purely fictional creations, his versions of Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby lack access to their own interiorities. Failing to identify with a text that does not correspond to their referential selves, they register their own fictionality as a result.

My second chapter, "The Devil's in the Details: The Mundane Symbols of *The Executioner's Song*," combines theories of description with recent work in thing theory to show how the recalcitrant materiality of the story's details undercuts any symbolic reading of the text. Mailer's presentation of his material certainly begs for such readings at moments; even Hugh Kenner has, somewhat ghoulishly, linked the coroner's initial inability to recognize Gilmore's heart (the actual organ) to "the truth that…the heart of man is very often desperately wicked." The resistance of Gilmore's corpse to this distasteful metaphorization marks, I claim, an ethical limit to fictionalization.

My third chapter, "The Abstracted Ladder: *Mason & Dixon*'s Model of History," examines the purpose underlying the multiple returns to literal meanings and material objects staged

over the course of the novel. As the text reveals the arbitrariness of the organizing principles governing historical narrative, it frees up areas of the past such narratives have obscured and suggests their recuperation depends on a multiplicity of imperfect frames.

For my mother

What use is an idol
	once its maker has shaped it—
	a cast image, a teacher of lies?
For its maker trusts in what has been made,
	though the product is only an idol that cannot speak!
Alas for you who say to the wood, "Wake up!"
	to silent stone, "Rouse yourself!"
	Can it teach?
See, it is gold and silver plated,
	and there is no breath in it at all.

<div align="center">—Habakkuk 2.18-19</div>

INTRODUCTION

Reference and Representation

As against solipsism it is to be said, in the first place, that it is psychologically impossible to believe, and is rejected in fact even by those who mean to accept it. I once received a letter from an eminent logician, Mrs. Christine Ladd-Franklin, saying that she was a solipsist, and was surprised that there were no others. Coming from a logician and a solipsist, her surprise surprised me. The fact that I cannot believe something does not prove that it is false, but it does prove that I am insincere and frivolous if I pretend to believe it. Cartesian doubt has value as a means of articulating our knowledge and showing what depends on what, but if carried too far it becomes a mere technical game in which philosophy loses seriousness. Whatever anybody, even I myself, may argue to the contrary, I shall continue to believe that I am not the whole universe, and in this every one will in fact agree with me, if I am right in my conviction that other people exist."

— Bertrand Russell, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits*

      In his famous essay on personal identity, "The Self and the Future," Bernard Williams comes close to but ultimately cannot decide whether intuitions about the self's continuity are determined by the body or by the contents of the brain (memories and character). Williams poses a thought experiment involving two persons, A and B, who exchange bodies. Rather than using variables, let's refer to them as Rebekah and Eliza (brain content), and to the Rebekah-body-person and the Eliza-body-person. These two women are connected to a machine to "extract information" from each of their brains and transfer it to the other's (180), such that following the experiment, the Rebekah-body-person will have the contents of Eliza's brain and vice versa. To make sure his subjects have some incentive governing their choices, Williams adds that after undergoing this treatment one person will receive $100,000 and the other will be tortured. Given these circumstances, both participants are asked to make a self-interested choice as to which body should receive the money and which the torture.

      If both women believe the body switch is real, then Rebekah would want the Eliza-body-person to receive the money and the Rebekah-body-person the torture; Eliza, likewise imaginatively tethered to the mental features now housed in the Rebekah-body-person, would want the reverse. Williams goes through several possibilities contained in this setup, and each, relying as they do on the testimony of the two women, confirms the switch actually took place. If the experimenter, having elicited the preferences of the two, performs the procedure and then tortures the Eliza-body-person and gives the Rebekah-body-person the money, then the Eliza-body-person, having Rebekah's memories, can complain that the experimenter failed to honor her request while the Rebekah-body-person, having Eliza's memories, will confirm that her choice was

honored. Williams exhausts the possibilities, each time describing how, on the basis of observed mental features, the body switch took place.

However, when Williams presents virtually the same scenario from a first person perspective, he arrives at the opposite conclusion. He begins, "Someone in whose power I am tells me that I am going to be tortured tomorrow" (185). Williams then describes from a first person perspective a series of steps that correspond to those in the original version of the experiment, explaining that he has cause for fear at each one. He's told that before the torture occurs, something will happen to make him forget it's going to take place. Then it's revealed that he will have the entirety of his memory erased, that he will be given new memories, and finally, that the new memories will be those of another living person. He finally concludes, "no degree of predicted change in my character and beliefs can unseat the fear of torture which, together with those changes, is predicted for me" (188). Near the conclusion of the piece he notes that the outcomes run counter to our expectations. The first-personal version would seem to favor "mentalistic considerations" while the third-personal would focus on "bodily continuity," yet the opposite seems true on the basis of his imagined outcomes (197).

I want to suggest that this thought experiment bears out a tension inherent in representations of referential individuals—a tension between the textual markers of character and the reader's sense that the model for the representation must necessarily be in excess of those markers. The body does not submit to an information transfer, or to any discursive reduction. It has no language of its own; if tortured, it feels the same pain, but can only express that pain through an individual's speech and mannerisms.

As Williams' essay makes clear, this body needn't be referential in order for readers to imagine how it might be at odds with discursive character. In his study of minor characters, Alex Woloch discusses the opposition between structural and referential models of fictional character, arguing that this opposition disappears in terms of the distribution of characters across the text: "The opposition between the character as an individual and the character as part of a structure dissolves in this framework, as distribution relies *on* reference and takes place *through* structure (17). When these features cancel out, however, I'm not sure what remains to distinguish fiction from nonfiction insofar as both have to distribute characters across a text. Catherine Gallagher, on the other hand, maintains that one of the primary pleasures of reading fiction derives from the reader's own sense of inexhaustible personhood against the textually bound literary character: "In short, the attraction grows less out of a sense of identification than out of the ontological contrast the character provides. The character's very knowability, as D.A. Miller has remarked, produces a subtle sense of relief when we reflect on our own comparative unfathomability" (357). In works of nonfiction, or works of historical fiction that represent historical figures, however, we encounter the reverse sensation, necessarily imagining the vast unknowns in the referential individuals underlying their textual renderings. We sense the individual's own unfathomability in contrast to his knowable, textual representative.

Of the three texts this dissertation focuses on, *Mason & Dixon* dwells most on the inevitability of attaching a consciousness—with all that entails—to the barest outline of a human being. As Mason and Dixon journey south aboard the *Seahorse*, headed, for lack of time, to Cape Town rather than Sumatra for the transit of Venus, they occupy themselves daydreaming about their original destination. They travel the coast, they smell the nutmeg harvest; however, when it comes to the women of Sumatra they are unable to completely abandon themselves to fantasy. Though they imagine "Ev'ry woman in 'Sumatra' is comely and willing," these mental fabrications are nevertheless "not without attendant Inconvenience, Dixon's almost instantly developing Wills and Preferences of their own despite his best efforts to keep them uncomplicated" (57). Though possessing an opportunity to fabricate a world entire, Dixon cannot refrain from endowing its female inhabitants with their own unique perspectives on that world. Indeed, within the novel this tendency extends beyond the phantasmatic creations of a lonely sea voyage to physically realized creations like Vaucanson's mechanical duck, who gains self-awareness and falls in love with court chef Armand, the chef then fleeing to American to escape her advances. Armand conjectures that the extreme authenticity in the duck's construction, "passing some Critickal Value, enabl'd in the Duck that strange Metamorphosis, which has sent it out the Gates of the Inanimate" (372). While Bertrand Russell's inability to stop believing in the existence of other people appears to reside in himself, in *Mason & Dixon*, the consciousness of others asserts itself despite great efforts at disavowal.

Each of the texts in these chapters conjures, in its own way, life beyond the textual rendering. To the extent that they attempt to represent the lives of their central, referential characters through assemblages of facts and details, these books create a counterforce: referential ghosts that haunt the texts. *Libra*'s reliance on the hundreds of thousands of documents surrounding the investigation into Kennedy's assassination provides the basis for Oswald's characterization. He is the product of discourse, of data, and he has the interiority to match. So alienated is Oswald from himself that he fails to recognize himself when not provided with external cues. In his rendering of the life of Gary Gilmore in *The Executioner's Song,* Mailer insisted on even greater adherence to fact than DeLillo. Mailer doesn't attempt to impose interpretations on his materials; he shapes them but does not embellish. He does, however, subtly maneuver details to suggest symbolic leaps to his readers that he himself will not make.[1] Displaying a faith in his keen scrutiny of setting, Mailer ultimately prefers to let the details speak for themselves and say nothing at all about the motivation underlying Gilmore's crimes. *Mason & Dixon* has far less historical data to drawn on, fleshing out the thin profiles of its characters with fantastic detail. In so doing, Pynchon's text simultaneously gestures towards history's unknown spaces – from the private lives of its characters, which get overwritten as their rising fame reverberates back in time to the vast cultural expanses obliterated by emerging global capitalism and the slave trade. Like the unmentionables the slaves of Cape Town wash daily, in which they read "biography in its pure form,"

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[1] This chapter's working title was "Surprised by Symbolism."

each day washes clean these subtler histories, making them unavailable to discourse, and rendering the figures that remain, constructed, it seems, out of a historical highlight reel, as circumscribed, as knowable, as fictions.

CHAPTER ONE

"Strange Even to Himself":
History, Characterization, and the Absence of Interiority in *Libra*

Was there a Caesar or an old Hamlet, before their ghosts appeared? Yes – but are the ghosts *of* those persons, those names – or are they new originals? Are they, in fact, not originals at all, but signs of the lostness and unrecoverability of origins, figures *instead*, loosed to power and authority *because* of their belatedness?

— Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers*

I.

When, recently arrived in Moscow, Don DeLillo's Lee Harvey Oswald learns his application for Soviet citizenship has been denied, he ponders the forces that prevent recognition of his carefully constructed identity:

> Lee tried to explain that the first official had not given a deadline, had held out hope that his visa might be extended. He could not recall the man's name or the department he belonged to…He began to describe the man's office, his clothing.   He felt a rush of desperation. The second official didn't know what [Oswald] was talking about.
> It was this blankness that caused his terror. No one could distinguish him from anyone else. There was some trick he hadn't mastered which might easily set things right. Other people knew what it was; he did not. Other people got along; he could not. He'd come so far on his own. Le Havre, Southampton, London, Helsinki—then by train across the Soviet border. He'd made plans, he'd engineered a new life, and now no one would take ten minutes to understand who he was. A zero in the system. (*Libra*, 150-1)

Blankness induces terror in Oswald, not simply because it threatens to derail his plan to defect, but because of the underlying suggestion that the official's blankness merely reflects his own. Initially, the failed exchange appears to prompt Oswald to contemplate the self that the official overlooks: "[h]e'd come so far on his own" suggests a psychological journey as much as a physical one. However, his own response to the question of "who he was" merely leads him to the verifiable facts of his journey: "Le Havre, Southampton, London, Helsinki." While the terminus of this geographical trajectory, Moscow, should correspond to an endpoint in Oswald's personal development, for him the literal journey conjures nothing beyond itself when the official fails to register those details as the external manifestations of a particular identity. His journey is a feat

of "engineering"—the course of action he hopes would entail not the formation of an inner self, but the appearance of such a self.[2] Introspection plays only a nominal role in this crisis of identity, as Oswald merely surveys the facts available to any outside observer. Though these facts might provide the only possible coordinates of his identity, as suggested by the near-anagram "Le Havre," he, too, fails to recognize himself in them.

Mere description does not amount to nominalization, or identification; it only instills incomprehension and results in the subject's anonymity. Indeed, from the beginning of the novel, description is treated as a form of alienation, as the young Oswald "has a vision of himself" narrating an event to a friend as it transpires: "he experienced what was happening and at the same moment, although slightly apart, recounted it all for Robert. … He saw himself narrating the story…relishing his own broad manner of description even as the moment was unfolding in the present, in the larger scheme, arms going like crazy, an animated cartoon, and he felt slightly superior in the telling" (45). Narrative superiority comes at the cost of psychological interiority, as Oswald the storyteller transforms himself into a two-dimensional, nameless "cartoon." Returning to the scene at hand, Oswald's protest, his allusion to the hope held out by the first official, is ineffectual since he neglects to distinguish that official by name and rank, reduces him to the vagaries of costume and setting, renders him a nobody, a "zero in the system," untraceable. This is the trick he hasn't mastered, which allows other people to get along: making personal, not simply geographical or narrative connections. As he cannot name one official to the other, he cannot relate his earlier conversation to his later one, produce a coherent, or familiar, account of himself. The effort to cross the border into Russianness is abortive, and he remains "a foreigner here" (151) as he does an outsider throughout the novel.

The double bind Oswald faces in Moscow—he is not the sum of the facts surrounding his journey, yet he does not know who he is if not the sum of those facts— dramatizes the double bind DeLillo confronts in his characterization of Oswald. If one assumes the answer to "who Oswald was" is buried within a rich inner life, necessarily inaccessible to anyone else, then DeLillo's decision to model his representation as closely as possible on available historical data would seem to preclude the possibility of fabricating an interiority to answer that essential question. Indeed, DeLillo's commitment to maintaining a high degree of fidelity to the actual Oswald has made him reluctant to admit simply fabricating any portions of his character. He gives the sense of having deduced what must have been from the extant store of facts: "Oswald is as close

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[2] The mention of engineering hearkens back to Guy Banister's sneer at President Kennedy: "We're supposed to believe he's the hero of the age. Did you ever see a man in such a hurry to be great? He thinks he can make us a different kind of society. He's trying to engineer a shift. We're not smart enough for him" (68). Engineering a new society is seen as a megalomaniacal act, one poised to falter, as the verbs "thinks" and "trying" indicate. Interestingly, the impulse is also cast as the product of impatience—being in a hurry to be great, not becoming great—and thus the change is just cosmetic. "Perfect white teeth," Banister continues, "It grates me on me just to look at him" (ibid). To engineer a new society, or a new life, as Oswald would like to do, is not to produce one.

as I could make him to what I perceived to be the real person. I really didn't take liberty with fact so much as I invented fresh fact, if you can call it that. I tried very hard to create a unified structure with no seams showing. That was my major technical challenge" (*Conversations*, 50). Armed with a strategy reminiscent of Thucydides' in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, DeLillo positions himself, somewhat paradoxically, as creating the truth instead of bending it.[3] Though he does, in the Author's Note, proclaim *Libra* "a work of imagination," the "invention of fresh fact" differs from invention as such, is constrained by the desire to work within the outlines of real people and events. Under this aspect we might be inclined to say DeLillo's Oswald comprises something like the surface of the actual Oswald, with some invented details jigsawed to custom fit any gaps in the historical record. However, in effectively confining himself to the domain of the discursive remnants of "the real person," DeLillo necessarily denies himself any speculative forays into Oswald's consciousness; he sets himself the task of answering the questions those remnants raise without attempting to insert any definitive answers: "Why did Oswald shoot President Kennedy? I don't think anyone knows, but in the book I've attempted to fill in that gap, although not at all in a specific way" (*Introducing,* 62). DeLillo's two statements might seem at odds: how can his Oswald constitute a sincere attempt to provide a unified representation of "the real person" while eliding the question of motive?

Criticism since the novel's publication has accounted for Oswald's apparent lack of motive—his blankness in general—in terms of the logic of coincidence that governs *Libra*. The novel's bifurcated narrative progresses in alternating sections, one providing a narrative of Oswald's life, and the other an account of a conspiracy to make an attempt on Kennedy's life. It is the convergence of these two narratives—a near-mystical coincidence beyond human understanding (think of Hardy's "Immanent Will")—that replaces motive in the novel. Both sections are interspersed with occasional interludes describing the work of Nicholas Branch, the CIA analyst charged with molding the endless data surrounding the case into the Agency's secret history of the assassination, a task so monumental and encyclopedic in its range that it belongs to its own, purely hypothetical genre: "the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred. … the Joycean Book of America…the novel in which nothing is left out" (181-2). Branch's project represents the horizon against which the projects of both the characters' and the author can be measured.

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[3] As Thucydides explains in Book 1, "With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one's memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said." DeLillo's aim, like Thucydides', is to present his "general sense" or, as he puts it, "perception" of historical actors and events. "Inventing fresh fact" is akin to "mak[ing] the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions."

The purely fictional half of the narrative concerns the conspiracy plot. Conceived by disaffected CIA officials and veterans of the Bay of Pigs invasion, it is initially intended to provide a "spectacular miss" and galvanize support for another U.S. invasion of Cuba (51, 148). Win Everett, the disgraced CIA officer who orchestrates the plot, begins fashioning a pro-Castro assassin who will become the face of the crime: "He would script a gunman out of ordinary dog-eared paper, the contents of a wallet" while T-Jay Mackey, a Bay of Pigs veteran, "would find a model for the character Everett was in the process of creating" (50). However, when Mackey finds his model in Oswald, Everett feels that the creation has preempted the creator, a Frankenstein come into the world by his own accord: "It was no longer possible to hide from the fact that Lee Oswald existed independent of the plot. … Lee H. Oswald was real all right. What Mackey learned about him in a brief tour of his apartment made Everett feel displaced. It produced a sensation of the eeriest panic, gave him a glimpse of the fiction he'd been devising, a fiction living prematurely in the world" (179). While Everett "had wanted only a handwriting sample, a photograph" on which to premise his "illustrated history of his subject" (180), instead he comes face to face with an excess of personal effects: revolvers, Communist leaflets, flash cards, stamps, journals. Moreover, though he had eagerly anticipated fabricating names for the assassin (147), he discovers, to his dismay, that Oswald already comes equipped with many of his own: "Oswald had names. He had his own names. He had variations of names. He had forged documents. Why was Everett playing in his basement with scissors and paste? Oswald had his own copying method, his own implements of forgery" (180). Oswald has beaten Everett at his own game. True to his childhood habit of melodramatic self-fashioning, of seeing himself from the side, he has primed himself for emplotment. But if he is an actor, he is an aspiring one. Since his own efforts at engineering are consistently botched (reference the application for Soviet citizenship), he must await casting in someone else's production.[4]

Following this discovery of Oswald, the conspiracy begins to take on a life of its own. Mackey's group, still embittered at Kennedy's handling of Cuba, decides to go through with the assassination and splits from Everett. Oswald disappears, turns up again, decides not to take part in the assassination, but ultimately changes his mind when he learns Kennedy's motorcade will coincidentally take him right past the book depository where he had already been working. DeLillo refrains from providing Oswald a motive; his involvement is precipitated by the force of the coincidence itself, a fact David Ferrie emphasizes: "You see what this means. How it shows what you've got to do. We didn't arrange your job in that building or set up the motorcade route. We don't have that kind of reach or power. There's something else that's generating this event. A pattern outside experience….That building's been sitting there waiting for Kennedy and Oswald to converge on it" (384). Ferrie plays into Oswald's aspirations of greatness, the

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[4] The KGB official Kirilenko proves insightful on this point: "Lee H. Oswald was taking shape in Kirilenko's mind as some kind of Chaplinesque figure, skating along the edges of vast and dangerous events. Unknowing, partly knowing, knowing but not saying, the boy had a quality of trailing chaos behind him…" (194).

source of his susceptibility to the conspirators' machinations, by putting him on an equal historical footing with the President. And he cleverly lends this absurd equivalence objective validity by effacing his cadre's power and pointing to a higher one, of which he acts the oracle. "It was all about him," Oswald muses. "Everything that happened was him" (385).[5] Ferrie's seduction works. DeLillo, however, has the assassination play out with Oswald merely wounding Kennedy, and Raymo, a Cuban national, firing the fatal shot from the grassy knoll.

A pattern beyond experience. As the title of the novel indicates, implicitly endorsing David Ferrie's belief in astrology as "the truth at the edge of human affairs" (175), Oswald's fate is written in the stars—the product of a constellation of forces outside the scope of his control. In contrast to the "positive Libran who has achieved self-mastery," Ferrie's friend Clay Shaw explains that Oswald, "the negative Libran," "is…somewhat unsteady and impulsive. Easily, easily, easily influenced" (315). In the absence of any intelligible motive, this susceptibility is in itself enough to lead to Oswald's involvement in the conspiracy. Frank Lentricchia offers an appropriately circular explanation: "To take up the question of Oswald's motivation is to take up what motivates the question: not the conspiracy theory that DeLillo invents…but *Libra*'s double narrative structure—the story of two narratives becoming fatally one" (*Introducing*, 199-200). There is, however, another intersection that structures *Libra* and that, I want to suggest, better accounts for the evacuation of motivation from DeLillo's protagonist: that of the fictional and the referential Oswalds.

Though somewhat frustrating in its elusiveness, Lentricchia's answer to the question of motivation is essentially the answer the novel offers. In fact, criticism concerning Oswald's actions generally takes his susceptibility to outside influence, his basic lack of agency, as its starting point. As Michael James Rizza observes in his recent article concerning the displacement of agency in *Libra*, for many critics "the challenging question is how to articulate the connection between design and chance. Finding this link, in effect, is equivalent to locating agency" (175). Rather than interrogate the origin of this lack of agency, such criticism instead locates displaced or attenuated forms of agency that have either been shifted onto the external world or, a la Lentricchia, structure the fiction itself. However, to address the more fundamental question of why DeLillo would exclude agency from his Oswald in the first place requires that we consider the external pressures exerted on the text—specifically the pressure of the referential template on the character.

While we might skim past DeLillo's deceptively simple desire to create an Oswald as close as possible to "what [he] perceived to be the real person," the phrase gestures towards the complications involved in creating a fictional character from the traces of an actual person, the reverse of Win Everett's quest to find an actual person to inhabit a fictional character, which has its own pitfalls, as we've seen. In referencing his own perception DeLillo seems to acknowledge the epistemological limitation he

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[5] Oswald's narcissism is evident from the novel's first page, where "the noise [of the subway] was pitched to a level of pain he absorbed as a personal test" (3).

confronts in the mind of Oswald. As that limitation is a function of the scope of DeLillo's perception, to create a whole character "with no seams showing" from the mere traces of the actual person would require that DeLillo's epistemological limitation be folded into the characterization of Oswald.   Simply put, if we follow out his logic, then if motivation is unavailable to the author it is also unavailable to the character; Oswald's lack of agency becomes a function of DeLillo's scrupulous characterization.

      The relation between the unavailability of the referential Oswald's consciousness and DeLillo's characterization is perhaps most apparent in the way *Libra* presents Oswald's inscrutability as a form of affect—a strategy to hide the fact that he has nothing to hide. While at his most engaged Oswald assembles externals to give the impression of a certain character, the opening of the novel provides an unguarded view of the blank at young Oswald's core when we find him "watch[ing] the DuMont test pattern" (6) on television, rather than assimilating media images as he later will. Lentricchia refers to the "person we dream about from our armchairs in front of the television" as the "universal third person": the ideal image of oneself that advertisers attach to products (194). However, in the absence of external cues to determine his universal third person, Oswald does not reinhabit his first person self; he is nothing, a blank screen.

      We learn from a psychological evaluation at the opening of the novel that the young Oswald "'…feels almost as if there is a veil between himself and other people through which they cannot reach him, but he prefers this veil to remain intact'" (12). This passage, which comes directly from the *Warren Commission Report* (Chapter 7, 380), displays the convergence of DeLillo's methodology and Oswald's characterization. For the character Oswald, this veil takes different forms over the course of the novel, along with different pseudonyms, but its main purpose is to create the impression that there is an Oswald beyond other people's ken. It consistently serves to reconfigure external circumstances to constitute him as something more than a blank, more than a zero in the system. For DeLillo, it provides a factual justification for downplaying interiority by creating a character wholly invested in the manipulation of surfaces, who misses the lesson of his KGB officer: "No plane surfaces here. We are living in curved space" (164). While in high school Oswald "wanted books more advanced than the school texts, books that put him at a distance from his classmates, closed the world around him" (33); after he becomes an FBI informant he sees "himself typing a paper on political theory, basing it on experience no fellow student could match" (319). In a particularly telling scene his friend Robert Sproul notices him smiling after a fight with some high school bullies:

> It was just like Lee to grin when it made no sense.…Some boys had given him a pounding down by the ferry terminal after he'd ridden in the back of a bus with the Negroes. Whether out of ignorance or principle, Lee refused to say. This was also like him, to be a misplaced martyr and let you think he was just a fool, or exactly the reverse, as long as he knew the truth and you didn't." (33)

DeLillo's Oswald is less concerned with knowing something you don't than with projecting the attitude that he knows something you don't. In the assumption of this posture the underlying truth or motive (whether there is one or not) is rendered immaterial; it acquires the status of another blank for him to veil.

On a generic level, Oswald's blankness is the condition of possibility for DeLillo's novel: the psychological equivalent of the pockets of possibility within the historical record that the historical novel has exploited since the genre's inception. Walter Scott compares the historical novelist's task to that of the painter, observing that while there are certain prominent features of the setting that must appear, "the more minute points of light and shadow, are attributes proper to scenery in general, natural to each situation, and subject to the artist's disposal, as his taste or pleasure may dictate" (*Ivanhoe*, 20). In more theoretical terms, Paul Ricoeur fuses Aristotle's definitions of the historian and the poet, "that the one describes the thing that has been and the other a kind of thing that might be" (*Poetics*, 89) to arrive at the formulation that the combination of these forms describes, "What might have been" (191). He explains: "one of the functions of fiction bound up with history is to free, retrospectively, certain possibilities that were not actualized" (190). However, fiction can serve to fill in the blank spaces of history even when they exist within the mind of a character. Brian McHale refers to these spaces as "dark areas," and observes that even in traditional historical fiction, "Some historical novels treat the interior life of historical figures as dark areas—logically enough, since the 'official' historical record cannot report on what went on *inside* a historical figure without fictionalizing to some extent. According to this norm, the novelist is free to introspect his characters, even to invent interior monologues for them" (87, original emphasis). McHale's permissiveness regarding fictional invention is largely in line with that of Scott and Ricoeur; in each case fiction must blend in with the scenery, or remain confined to history's "dark areas." From Ricoeur we might distill the central restriction: that the unrealized possibility not impinge on actuality. However, while McHale notes the actual is no restriction for some postmodern historical fiction (84), DeLillo's characterization of Oswald—its resistance to "tak[ing] liberty with fact"—tends toward the opposite extreme. DeLillo certainly introspects his Oswald, but the significance of the self-consciously impoverished results remains obscured if we automatically view them under the aspect of "fictional creation."

As McHale's account implies, *Libra* is hardly the first novel to represent the consciousness of a historical figure. In *The Distinction of Fiction*, Dorrit Cohn finds instances going back to Georg Büchner's *Lenz* in 1831, and in her impressive catalogue of examples she occasionally conveys boredom or even dismissiveness at what, particularly among the New Journalists, are often self-proclaimed formal innovations: "Closer study would confirm that their fictionalizing devices boil down principally to the consistent application of focalizing technique—sometimes in stream-of-consciousness form—to real-life sports heroes, rock stars, and convicted murderers" (29). Her critiques of the stated achievements of the "True Life Novel, Novel Biography, Nonfiction Novel," rest on their failure to distinguish the genuine epistemological limitation posed by other minds from the literary devices for representing other minds: "biographies that act like novels, far from erasing the borderline between the two genres, actually bring the line

that separates them more clearly into view" (29). Other minds do not become available, they become fictional. While we find the application of these focalizing techniques in *Libra*, where Oswald's letters, notes, the famous "Historic Diary" are transposed into third person narration and very often free indirect style, the text displays a marked solicitude regarding the epistemological constraints the New Journalists tend to transgress.

While the portions of *Libra* that trace Oswald's life are often referred to as a "fictional" or "imaginary" biography, DeLillo refrains from the claims Cohn finds so outlandish in the New Journalists. He makes clear in the "Author's Note" following the novel that *Libra* "is a work of imagination," and he has explicitly resisted comparisons with "the so-called non-fiction novels" (*Introducing*, 57). However, while John Johnston suggests that what distinguishes *Libra* from a "Maileresque 'true life novel' is that it is "complicated by Oswald's depicted entanglement in a CIA-inspired conspiracy"—its integration with pure fiction in other words—I believe it's often those moments where DeLillo stays closest to the historical record that mark Oswald as a fictional creation, on account of his flatness, the lack of an interiority such as fictional characters traditionally possess. Cohn is correct to underscore that "in a novel, it is the reversion to quasifactual discourse, rather than the adherence to arti-factual discourse, that draws attention to itself—especially where moments of radical privacy are concerned" (26). That is, DeLillo's Oswald is most a fiction at those moments when he unsuccessfully tries to identify himself with the facts of the referential Oswald's life; at such moments the character does not possess a fabricated interiority so much as a fabricated reaction to his lack of an interiority. This self-alienation anticipates the kind of critique Cohn levels against authors like Wolfe and Mailer, for if her criticism is grounded in the impossibility of legitimate access to the mind of a historical figure, DeLillo's Oswald seems an answer to the question this criticism naturally raises: What would such a mind have to look like for us to have legitimate access?

As suggested in the reading of the opening passage, access to Oswald's mind seems legitimate to the extent that his self-alienation renders aspects of his experience that are unavailable to any outside observer unavailable to Oswald himself. If we place that passage alongside the historical document from which it was taken, the "Historic Diary" Oswald wrote at the end of his two and a half years in the Soviet Union, we see how blanks in the historical record neither signify an unknown territory (as in conventional history) or a dark space to be filled in (as in a conventional fictionalization); in *Libra* they signify only themselves:

> Meeting with single official. Balding stout, black suit fairly good English, asks what do I want? I say Soviet citizenship. He asks why I give vague answers about "Great Soviet Union." He tells me "USSR only great in Literature," wants me to go back home. I am stunned; I reiterate. He says he shall check and let me know whether my visa will be (extended it expires today).

> Eve. 6.00 Receive word from police official. I must leave country tonight at 8.00 P.M. as visa expires. I am shocked!! My dreams! I retire to my room. I have $100. left. I have waited for 2 years to be accepted. My fondest dreams are shattered because of a petty official; because of bad planning. I planned too much! (*Warren Commission Exhibit* 24, Vol. 16, 94)

Here is its rendering in *Libra*:

> 'USSR is only great in literature,' he said. 'Go home, my friend, and take our good wishes with you.'
> He wasn't kidding either.
>
> *I am stunned I reiterate, he says he shall check and let me know.*
>
> They let him know the same day. The visa of Lee H. Oswald would expire at 8:00 P.M. He had two hours to leave the country. The police official who called with this news did not seem to know Oswald had talked to a passport official earlier in the day. Lee tried to explain that the first official had not given a deadline, had held out hope that his visa might be extended. He could not recall the man's name or the department he belonged to in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. He began to describe the man's office, his clothing. He felt a rush of desperation. The second official didn't know what he was talking about.
> It was this blankness that caused his terror. No one could distinguish him from anyone else. There was some trick he hadn't mastered which might easily set things right. Other people knew what it was; he did not. He'd come so far on his own. Le Havre, Southampton, London, Helsinki—then by train across the Soviet border. He'd made plans, he'd engineered a new life, and now no one would take ten minutes to understand who he was. A zero in the system.
>
> *I am shocked!! My dreams!* (*Libra*, 151)

The first two thirds of this passage from *Libra* primarily transpose material from the diary into third person narration and free indirect style with some minor embellishments regarding Oswald's conversation with the second official. The encounter with the official's blankness in the penultimate paragraph, however, clearly takes us to an undocumented moment of introspection. As mentioned above, the terror that induces this introspection is terror at the fact that there is nothing for introspection to reveal. What Oswald confronts here is not the blankness the historian confronts in the undocumented past or in the consciousnesses of historical figures; such blankness signifies an unknown that, potentially, could have been recorded. The tension between the fictional and biographical modes places him at an impasse as they converge on the representation of

his consciousness: he is not wholly historical, which would allow the text to gesture towards unknown depths, or wholly fictional, which would give DeLillo license to fabricate an interiority whole cloth. In the end, by creating an Oswald who is tethered to this historical record, whose knowledge of himself does not stray far beyond the Warren Report, DeLillo gets legitimate access to his interiority, but on the condition that he find nothing there. Oswald's terror is the terror of confronting himself as a fiction. This is not to say he is a fabrication—quite the opposite, in fact; his terror stems from the realization that, like a fictional character, his identity extends no further than his discursive traces.

Unlike a conventional fictional character, for DeLillo's Oswald these traces originate in a historical referent—a figure overwritten by the narratives (of which DeLillo's is only one) assembled from those traces following November 22, 1963. This assemblage, "Lee Harvey Oswald," gets mythologized and retroactively projected onto the Lee Oswald who had existed prior to that date. (I here follow DeLillo's use of these two names in distinguishing between the character and the historical referent.) When DeLillo presents Oswald in police custody after the assassination, his reaction to hearing his full name on the news emphasizes the disjunction between his felt sense of self and the image starting to materialize in the media:

> Whenever they took him down, he heard his name on the radios and TVs. Lee Harvey Oswald. It sounded extremely strange. He didn't recognize himself in the full intonation of the name. The only time he used his middle name was to write it on a form that had a space for that purpose. No one called him by that name. Now it was everywhere. He heard it coming from the walls. Reporters called it out. Lee Harvey Oswald, Lee Harvey Oswald. It sounded odd and dumb and made up. They were talking about somebody else. (416)

Whereas Oswald succeeded in preempting Everett's urge to manufacture an identity for him, preferring to do so himself, neither his common nor his covert names can serve him here. The use of his legal name, the one he is accustomed to supplying on forms, and specifically the implications of its being *spoken* by others rather than written by himself, is what is so oppressive to him. Formerly afraid of being a zero in the system, of, as with the Soviet official, failing to register at all, he now feels interpellated from every side, a tactic all the more alienating for first being mediated by radios and TVs, coming from the walls, and only then from the mouths of reporters (not policemen), themselves agents of the media. The illustrated history of the subject Everett intended to pen has been coopted by the governing ideology it sought to challenge. In this context, the complaint that the name sounds made up, refers to somebody else, is well-founded, for the call is not addressed to Oswald so much as it is trumpeted for the masses. It refers to the representation of the subject, not the subject itself.

In an attempt to resist the public image (or report) taking shape, he initially contemplates participating in the same interpellative act, "nam[ing] every name if he had to" (418). More eager to be Everett's illustrated subject than the ideological subject he

has become, he wants to admit to being a patsy, implicated in someone else's scheme: "They'd been rigging the thing for years, watching him, using him, creating a chain of evidence with the innocent facts of his life. … Other people were responsible for the actual killing. They fixed it so he would seem the lone gunman. They superimposed his head on someone else's body. Forged his name on documents. Made him a dupe of history" (418). Alternately, he could bear partial blame, claiming to have wanted to make a political point by firing the shots without ever intending to kill anyone; he did miss, after all. But over the course of the two days between his apprehension and his murder, Oswald comes to see himself in the name, assuming the image of the sole actor in the plot. After the first night in his cell he begins to find strength in the role of a capable assassin, accepting more responsibility than is rightfully his. The argument for political motivation—it is, in fact, only an argument—fuses with the media representation of his crime: "He was ready to take it day by day, growing into the role as it developed. …There was a third way he could play it. He could tell them he was the lone gunman. He did it on his own, the only one. It was the culmination of a life of struggle….He had no help. It was his plan, his weapon. Three shots. All struck home. He was an expert shot" (426).

By the following morning, the day Jack Ruby murders him, the identity has fixed itself in Oswald's mind: "Lee Harvey Oswald was awake in his cell" (434). At the moment of his death he achieves a perfect unity with this image as his physical body dissolves into the iconic images of his last moments: "He could see himself shot as the camera caught it. Through the pain he watched TV….Everything was leaving him, all sensation at the edges breaking up in space….The only thing left was the mocking pain, the picture of the twisted face on TV….He watched in a darkish room, someone's TV den (439-40). After a life of attempts to conceal his own blankness – the blankness that first appears in *Libra*'s opening pages as the Dumont test pattern – Oswald can, if only in the last instant before his death, finally recognize himself in television's universal third person, the consumer of his own spectacular finale.

Oswald's televised death consecrates the image that actually begins the narrative of his life. As Peter Brooks observes with respect to Walter Banjamin's "The Storyteller," "only the end can finally determine meaning, close the sentence as a signifying totality. Many of the most suggestive analysts of narrative have shared this conviction that the end writes the beginning and shapes the middle" (22). The narrative of Oswald's life as presented in *Libra* is a function of retroactively projecting the image of the man who achieved mythic notoriety as Kennedy's killer (though the associations attached to that image have continued to multiply and reconfigure after Oswald's death). As we saw above, in the two days between his arrest and murder Oswald weighs whether or not to confess to being "the lone gunman," the term T-Jay Mackey attaches to him just prior to the assassination: "He was sure Oswald wanted to be the lone gunman" (386). Yet these instances of the same phrase did not find the resonance they contain in the novel until after the findings of the Warren Commission, released the year following the assassination. Such crosscurrents created by the intersection of the referential and the fictional Oswald's reveal at once the utter unavailability of the former and the artificiality of the latter. In terms of the case at hand, even if we could verify somehow that the

referential Oswald had the articulate thought "I want to be the lone gunman," from our, and certainly DeLillo's 1988 historical vantage, there's no way to escape the aura that surrounds the infamous epithet. As Oswald's first person self is overwritten by the cultural construction "Lee Harvey Oswald," so here the original sense gets obscured as associations subsequently cluster around the term and reverberate back in time.

     Libra dramatizes this tension in T-Jay Mackey's search for a model for the assassin Win Everett has been scripting. The real Oswald's existence is "premature" insofar as it is prior to and, in its exorbitant, albeit superficial complexity, lavishly independent of the fictional one he is merely supposed to prop up. Everett intends his fiction to obscure the model to which he attaches it, but Oswald's competing self-images give him the capacity to undermine, as he ultimately does, not just Everett's version of him, but the entire plot into which that fiction is woven.

     While on the level of characterization, the referential Oswald also threatens to undermine the character, it is not with his own set of details—details which, as indicated in the comparison of passages from the Warren Report and the novel, are largely shared; rather, the referential figure threatens its fictional correlate with its very inaccessibility. DeLillo seems to suggest that the cultural construction "Lee Harvey Oswald" counteracts the potentially paralyzing influence (culturally and narratively) of an inscrutable consciousness. While Oswald is in custody we see in the description of reporters at the jail the mechanism that papers over this unknown space with a readable surface:

> Blank faces arrayed against corridor walls. Men crouched near the elevators waiting. They sensed the incompleteness out there, gaps, spaces, vacant seats, lobbies emptied out, disconnections, dark cities, stopped lives. People were lonely for news. Only news could make them whole again, restore sensation. Three hundred reporters in a compact space, all pushing to extract a word. A word is a magic wish. A word from anyone. With a word they could begin to grid the world, make an instant surface that people can see and touch together….They were hearing their own reports on the radios and portable TVs. But what did they really know? The news was somewhere else, at Parkland Hospital or on Air Force One, in the mind of the prisoner on the fifth floor. (414)

Oswald's unintelligible actions create a psychic rift that effectively shuts down the country. Reporters who, like the Soviet official, initially only mirror Oswald's blankness, seek an antidote in news. That is, they are not *directly* concerned with Kennedy's condition, Johnson's swearing in, or even Oswald's motive; they are only concerned with the *news* at "Parkland Hospital or on Air Force One, in the mind of the prisoner on the fifth floor. "News of" mediates what appears incomprehensible in and of itself; it allows them to "grid the world," to smooth over the gaps and spaces with an intelligible linguistic surface. Knowledge and news are diametrically opposed: "But what did they really know?" What might actually be in Oswald's mind (and in *Libra* there is, of course, no definitive answer there) is not important; the reporters want news, something to tie the disparate pieces together. They want, in other words, a coherent explanation.

II.

Explanations, while not absent, are conspicuously artificial in *Libra*. Characters often appear alienated from their own actions as they attempt to verbalize some plausible motivation; they wrestle with externals as would any outside observer. During his time in the brig for assaulting an officer, Oswald listens sympathetically as his cellmate Bobby Dupard describes his uncertain relation to the fire for which he was incarcerated:

> "There was a fire to my rack, which they accused me. But in my own mind I could like verbalize it either way. In other way of saying it, the evidence was weak."
> "But you did it."
> "It's not that easy to say. I could go either way and be convinced in my own mind."
> "You're not sure you really wanted to do it. You were just thinking about doing it."
> "I was like, Should I drop this cigarette?"
> "It just seemed to happen while you were thinking it.'
> "Like it happened on its own."…
> "Why did you want to start a fire?"
> "It's a question of working it out in my own mind, the exact why I did it. Because the psychology is definitely there." (98-9)

The intuitive relation between evidence and intention is reversed for Dupard. Similar to Oswald's failed attempt to derive a sense of self from the facts of his journey to Moscow, so Dupard here discovers that the thin evidence of his alleged crime precludes the possibility of determining his own intention. This evidence is not confined to what might be used in a military court (Dupard has already been found guilty); it extends to any discursive traces that might tell Dupard himself why he dropped the cigarette. However, without any concrete bridge between the thought "Should I drop this cigarette" and the act of dropping of the cigarette, Dupard must assume the role of his own interrogator to discover the origin of his actions.

In its own interrogation of the Kennedy assassination, *Libra* continually thematizes the futility of attempting to work back to original causes from their traces. Throughout the novel Nicholas Branch, the retired CIA analyst who has spent the past fifteen years working on the Agency's secret history of the assassination, analyzes these traces as they multiply, hopelessly obscuring the "six point nine seconds of heat and light" he has been charged with explaining (15). Branch "sits in the book-filled room, the room of documents" (14); he "sits in the data-spew of hundreds of lives. There's no end in sight" (15). He has the "FBI's papers on the assassination…one hundred and twenty-five thousand pages" and "notes in three-foot drifts….But of actual finished prose, there is precious little" (59). Though his initial goal, much like Dupard's, is to "follow the

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bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in their dreams" (15), by the end of the novel he "knows he can't get out" (445).

As we learn at the beginning of the novel, after fifteen years in "the room of documents" Branch "sometimes wonders if he is becoming bodiless" (14). He has no human contact; the CIA has paid for the room he had added to his house, and the Agency Curator sends everything he requires. As he observes of the room "everything is here," though this "everything" is composed entirely of language, data: "Baptismal records, report cards, postcards, divorce petitions, canceled checks….an incredible haul of human utterance," "a poetry of lives muddied and dripping in language" (181). The description contrasts the lives of the innumerable people related to the case with their discursive traces. Whatever these lives may have been, they are here nothing more than the language of official documents. In perhaps the most revealing moment of the Branch interludes, the CIA Curator sends him autopsy photos of Oswald, "the results of ballistics tests carried out on human skulls and goat carcasses," and an actual bullet that had been fired through the wrist of a cadaver: "We are on another level here, Branch thinks. Beyond documents now. They want me to *touch* and *smell*" (299, original emphasis). The man who, is his room of documents, of pure language and data, had started to become disembodied – no more than a version of the discursive traces that surround him – finds himself compelled for the first time to engage with the case on a visceral level: "They are rubbing his face in the blood and gunk. They are mocking him….They are saying, 'Look, touch, this is the true nature of the event. Not your beautiful ambiguities….Not your roomful of theories, your museum of contradictory facts. There are no contradictions here. Your history is simple. See, the man on the slab….' They are saying, 'This is what it looks like to get shot'" (299-300). Oswald's autopsy photos and the accompanying material resist the elaborate linguistic framework to which Branch is accustomed. (The image of the corpse remains a potentially disruptive force for the remainder of the novel, particularly at the conclusion when there is a successive series of attempts to place Oswald's actions in an intelligible framework.)

In a series of scenes reminiscent of Dupard's futile self-analysis, Oswald, while in jail, also attempts to piece together some logic for his actions. Upon first being apprehended, he nearly repeats Dupard in musing, "He could play it either way, depending on what they could prove or couldn't prove" (418). But after deciding to assume sole responsibility for the President's assassination, he realizes he will have to devise a plausible motive for the public: "After the crime comes the reconstruction. He will have motives to analyze, the whole rich question of truth and guilt. Time to reflect, time to turn this thing in his mind. Here is a crime that clearly yields material for deep interpretation" (434). He starts to resemble Nicholas Branch more than Bobby Dupard: "It was beginning to occur to him that he'd found his life's work. … They will give him writing paper and books. … He will have time to educate himself in criminal law, ballistics, acoustics, photography. Whatever pertains to the case he will examine and consume" (434). And he finally, though still in the mode of self-objectification, settles his perpetual quest for personal identity: "His life had a single clear subject now, called Lee Harvey Oswald" (435). It is an identity that, feeding off the reflective glory of the President's, lives up to his world historical expectations, bearing out David Ferrie's

flattering slight of hand in drawing Oswald into the conspiracy: "He and Kennedy were partners. The figure of the gunman in the window was inextricable from the victim and his history. This sustained Oswald in his cell. It gave him what he needed to live" (435). Because while Kennedy is famous Oswald is notorious, he readily transforms his confinement into empowerment: "The more time he spent in a cell, the stronger he would get. Everybody knew who he was now. … He no longer saw confinement as a lifetime curse" (435). Oswald has come a long way from "no one [taking] ten minutes to understand who he was" in Moscow; he is an international celebrity.

The journalists waiting at the jail expect to find news in the mind of the prisoner, and that is exactly what Oswald begins fabricating. The identity Oswald begins to conjure up anticipates the novel's final scene, where Marguerite Oswald contemplates her son's death, or rather, the death of the man portrayed in the media as her son: "Lee Harvey Oswald. No matter what happened…this was the one thing they could not take away—the true and lasting power of his name. It belonged to her now, and to history" (456). The name that sounds "odd and dumb and made up" to Oswald when he first hears it on the news only a few days earlier. The one thing they cannot take away from her is the media image available to everyone, to history. The man she had known as her son Lee, her memories of him, are already being displaced. There is a bitter irony in her remark, "'I had to endure a year of silence and now there is family news every minute on the radio'" (423).

Marguerite Oswald's conflation of these two figures in the novel's final lines invites a reading of *Libra* according to which DeLillo self-consciously undercuts his own portrait of Oswald. Those concluding lines, a meditation on the way the mythologized figure displaces the Lee Oswald who had existed prior to November 22nd, 1963 (even his mother cannot see through the aura that now surrounds him) seem to acknowledge that DeLillo's scrupulous characterization is nevertheless a function of that myth. While the text dramatizes the tension between the mythologized figure, Lee Harvey Oswald, and "the real person," Lee Oswald, the text as a whole bears the stylistic traces of the tension between its narrative rendering and the non-discursive interiority that it disavows by way of Oswald's radical self-alienation.

Such tension forces us to reconsider Brooks' notion that the moment of death renders the preceding life a discursive whole. This is not to say Brooks' account is mistaken so much as it is partial; it would be more accurate to say that the moment of death allows for the overwriting of an interiority with whatever intelligible fragments it might have left behind. We can clarify this point when we consider how Brooks must misread Benjamin in order to make his claim:

> Whatever their specific content, and whatever their degree of tragic awareness or melodramatic enunciation, all such [deathbed] scenes offer the promise of a significant retrospect, a summing-up, the coming to completion of a fully predicated, and readable, sentence. It is in this sense that the death of the ending quickens meaning: death in narrative, says Benjamin, is the 'flame' at which we as readers, solitary and forlorn because cut off from meaning, warm our 'shivering' lives. (96)

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The section of "The Storyteller" from which Brooks quotes is not concerned with narrative in general, but with the narrative structure of the novel, which Benjamin clearly distinguishes from that of a story. While the *novel* closes off meaning at its conclusion, "there is no story for which the question as to how it continued would not be legitimate" (*Illuminations*, 100). The novel, Benjamin continues, "is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about" (101). Benjamin calls attention to the stark contrast between lived experience and fictional death, but while Brooks suggests that reading these fictional deaths offers some compensation—as he says, they "warm our 'shivering' lives"—Benjamin's reader is drawn to the novel by the *mere hope* of warming his shivering life. The novel, that is, seems to promise some compensation that it is constitutionally incapable of giving. The very thing that it seems to offer, life as "a fully predicated, and readable, sentence," is precisely what makes the reader incapable of receiving it. In other words, unlike Benjamin's notion of the story, the novel is a discursive totality, and as such it lacks the capacity to integrate itself into the reader's experience.

According to Benjamin, the novel is bound up with the same desire for intelligibility that accounts for the development of the newspaper. Nicholas Paige observes that, for Benjamin, "The novel…was predicated on the existence of an alienated, atomized public whose readers searched for explanation and information" (141). "The Storyteller" contrasts the explanations contained in the news with the experience the classic story transmits to its listeners: "Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation" (89). As I have been suggesting with respect to *Libra*, the tension between the mythologized Lee Harvey Oswald and the referential Oswald can be accounted for in terms of this contrast between intelligible explanation and inscrutable experience, though to make this equivalence clear requires examining Benjamin's account in greater detail.

> When, in the seventh section of his famous essay, Benjamin presents a legendarily enigmatic account of the Egyptian king Psammenitus's defeat, we are made to understand that the lack of explanation, particularly psychological explanation, has kept the story in circulation for over two thousand years. It is, so he tells us, "half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation," and Herodotus's spare rendering of the king's defeat, his restraint in leaving Psammenitus's ultimate show of grief inscrutable, ensures that his audience will feel compelled to complete the story for themselves, and so guarantee its continued transmission. Benjamin describes how Psaemmenitus stood unmoved as he watched his daughter, dressed as a slave, fetch water from a well, and his son being marched to his execution. Only when a he recognizes a former servant in

the train of prisoners does he finally display his grief. Benjamin explains:

> From this story it may be seen what the nature of true storytelling is…. [A story] preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. Thus Montaigne referred to this Egyptian king and asked himself why he mourned only when he caught sight of his servant. Montaigne answers: "Since he was already overfull of grief, it took only the smallest increase for it to burst through its dams." Thus Montaigne. But one could also say: The king is not moved by the fate of those of royal blood, for it is his own fate. Or: We are moved by much on the stage that does not move us in real life; to the king, this servant is only an actor. Or: We are moved by much on the stage that does not move us in real life; to the king, this servant is only an actor. Or: Great grief is pent up and breaks forth only with relaxation. Seeing his servant was the relaxation. Herodotus offers no explanations. His report is the driest. That is why this story from ancient Egypt is still capable after thousands of years of arousing astonishment and thoughtfulness. It resembles the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day. (90)

For Benjamin, the classic story's value lies precisely in what it does not articulate: in a central experience around which the narrative revolves, but which the listener must ultimately inhabit in order to grasp. While the information one finds in the newspaper must "appear 'understandable in itself'" (89), and so has no impact on the mind of the reader, the story's incompleteness begs for psychic resolution. For Benjamin, the story's purpose is not to present a completely coherent narrative, but rather to impart an experience, which, though unarticulated, structures that narrative; in this way "the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks" (89). No explanation any observer or listener might conjecture is adequate to Psammenitus's subjective experience, and so the story necessarily terminates at the point where language loses its mimetic fidelity to that experience.

In Benjamin's account, the tale's loose ends dwell in the mind of the listener, slowly reconfiguring his consciousness until it occupies the position of the one left opaque in the story: "And the more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story's claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely it is integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later" (91). Precisely the absence of a definitive explanation precipitates the listener's intersubjective leap: "the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks" (89).

Though this absence of explanation defines Benjamin's notion of the story, it remains relatively undertheorized in his account. And while his essay's own lack of

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explanation in this area certainly results from the degree to which it emulates its subject, I want to suggest his reticence on the matter does a disservice to the very account he wants to advance, for he here seems to conflate the *mere lack* of psychological explanation with its *necessary inadequacy*. He leaves open the question of whether there could have been some definitive explanation of Psammenitus's display. And as it happens, Benjamin may have withheld the best candidate, for *The Histories* tell us that following the Egyptian king's initially cryptic display of grief, Cambyses sends a messenger to inquire regarding the reason for his reaction. Psammenitus replies, "my own suffering was too great for tears, but I could not but weep for the trouble of a friend, who has fallen from great wealth and good fortune and been reduced to beggary on the threshold of old age" (159). Is this a definitive explanation? If we consult Montaigne's reading of the story, we would have to say no.

Strangely, Psammenitus's self-described grief appears in the sentence immediately following the line Benjamin quotes from "Of Sadness," which concerns the experience of passions beyond the capacity of expression and takes the tale from Herodotus as its starting point.[6] His translation of the Greek points to the limitation any explanation confronts: "'It is because this last grief alone can be signified [*se peut signifier*] by tears; the first two far surpass any power of expression'" (7). What Benjamin seems to present as a limitation of knowledge is presented here as a limitation of language, or signification rather. The radically private nature of Psammenitus's grief precludes even the most natural manner of expression. As Dimitris Vardoulakis maintains, the key distinction between the storyteller and historian actually lies in the omitted passage's private/public distinction. Psammenitus's private grief, his grief for his immediate family, is something for which there is no need of an outward sign; there is no distinction between self and other that would require the communication of one's internal state on even the most primal level. His family's grief is his own, and he does not need to communicate his own grief to himself. However, witnessing his old companion takes Psammenitus outside of his purely private experience and constitutes him as an observer as well.: "judgment can only take place when the other is a *hetairos*, someone who is distinguished from the self, yet also someone who belongs in a community with the self. Judgment is not merely a private affair….In this instance of judgment the king recognizes in the manner that the historian judges. His tears are the historian's judgment" (133-4).

Vardoulakis's reading seems to imply an inverse proportion between the intensity of one's subjective experience and one's ability to communicate that experience. Indeed, Psammenitus's tale presents a limit point: he can only communicate that the experience is beyond any means of communication, that it can only be grasped through the subjective

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[6] The quotation Benjamin presents as Montaigne's assessment of Psammenitus, that "since he was already overfull of grief, it took only the smallest increase for it to burst through its dams," actually describes Charles de Guise in the essay, who showed little emotion upon hearing of the deaths of his two brothers, but then openly mourned the loss of one of his men some days later (7). Montaigne uses the de Guise example to set off Psammenitus's explanation, which he accurately quotes.

experience itself. In this light we find a possible justification for Benjamin's omission of Psammenitus's reply, which does not offer an explanation so much as point to the inadequacy of explanation. Like the possible versions Benjamin offers, Psammenitus's own account fails to transmit the experience; his explanation has the same status as any outside observer's. This removed status recalls that of Oswald in the opening passage. However, while Psammenitus's words are not any more adequate to the pain than an outside observer's, they are supported by a felt sense of self that Oswald lacks. When Oswald learns he must leave the Soviet Union, he experiences the pain, but cannot locate its origin. Rather, the pain is overwhelmed by the terror of not being able to locate its origin.

This type of phantom interiority haunt's Jack Ruby's character as well. On the level of narrative style, it destabilizes free indirect discourse when used to represent his, and to a significant extent Oswald's, interiority. McHale observes that those historical novels that "regard the inner world of historical figures as inaccessible" still reserve "the presentation of inner life for their wholly fictional characters" (87). Though in *Libra* both fictional and real characters possess inner lives, only those of the former have depth. Consider the formal inconsistencies in the examples of free indirect discourse representing Ruby's consciousness (I have italicized shifts to the first person and present tense):

> He didn't even know what the spare room looked like since George moved in. Maybe he painted it orange. Not that he didn't like having George around. *It's a matter of once you're used to a human presence, growing up like I did with seven brothers and sisters plus two dead in infancy, you feel there's something missing in a household.* (343, emphasis added)

> He went down to the car and drove home for an early dinner. *Because what is it like to be a Jew in a place, in a state like Texas? You feel to yourself don't ever speak out, don't ever stand out.* But he loved this city....He had friends on the force. He liked to give a loan to a young cop with a new baby. Plainclothes officers came to the club. How many cities could he name where a Jew *can walk into police headquarters and he hears*, Hello, how are you, it's Jack. I owe my life to this town. (350, emphasis added)

And Oswald's:

> He looked at the water going cloudy pink. *I taught myself Berlitz. My Russian is still bad but I will work on it harder. I won't answer questions about my family but I will say this for publication. Emigration isn't easy....Foreign peoples exploited for profit*. He closed his eyes after a while, rested his head on the rim of the tub. *Go limp. Let them do what they want.* (153, emphasis added)

The instability of the narrative registers announces itself in these passages. The narration delves only briefly, uncomfortably, into the consciousnesses of Ruby and Oswald before surfacing in the first person and present tense. DeLillo's resistance to according them a deeper level of awareness seems a function of their ultimate inaccessibility. In his interview with DeCurtis, DeLillo reveals that "once I came upon a kind of abrupt, broken rhythm both in dialogue and narration, I felt this was the prose counterpart to not only Oswald's inner life but Jack Ruby's as well. And other characters too" (*Introducing,* 55). In both instances this broken rhythm derives largely from the instability of the narrative register. The representation of the consciousnesses of these characters often becomes half of an imaginary dialogue.

In isolating these levels of narrative I draw on Ann Banfield's distinction between reflective and non-reflective consciousness in free indirect discourse. She defines these two forms of consciousness with respect to Sartre's critique of the Cartesian *cogito*: "The *cogito* is only a manifestation of consciousness. In knowing I am conscious of knowing. If we refuse to consider consciousness as immediately reflective, that is to say, as a knowledge of knowledge, which would require a regress to infinity…, we will see perhaps that it is not a knowledge turned back upon itself, but the dimension of being of the subject" (197). In practical, linguistic terms, consciousness becomes reflective as a response to "a request for linguistic information" (198). It is the difference between communicating (or preparing one's thoughts for communication) and passively registering one's surroundings. The former concerns the objects of consciousness, the latter consciousness itself. And as we see in the above passages, both Ruby and Oswald direct their thoughts to an imagined interlocutor.

This use of the first person for historical figures corresponds to R.G. Collingwood's notion of history as "a re-enactment of past experience." Though he explains that to "the historian, the activities whose history he is studying are not spectacles to be watched, but experiences to be lived through his own mind," and further, that "they are objective, or known to him, only because they are also subjective, or activities of his own," these experiences are, in practice, only imagined via linguistic artifacts (218). For this reason, Cohn disputes the notion that Collingwood "makes historical figures transparent in the manner of fiction; rather, it displays the historian's effort to find ways of overcoming their constitutional opacity" (156). Acts of communication transmit the objects of consciousness, but, unlike the representation of non-reflective consciousness, do not represent subjectivity as such.

Libra subtly bears out this distinction in the results of the three polygraph tests that appear over the course of the novel. When Everett sees his conspiracy spiraling out of control, he fantasizes about CIA agents coming to his home and administering the test: "He half yearned to be found out. It would be a deliverance in a way to be confronted, polygraphed, forced to tell the truth. He believed in the truth" (361). Everett's fantasy of the polygraph is the fantasy of a completely discursive interiority: "His body would do the rest, yield up its unprotected data. The machine intervenes between a man and his secrets. There is something intimate about the polygraph….[H]e'd seen himself how well it worked. Failed one test. Broke down at the start of another" (362). With the right equipment, Everett's consciousness is entirely readable. Like the contents of Branch's

office, his mind is a set of data, communicable; there is no hint of any discrepancy between Everett's felt experience and what the machine detects. Everett, the one fictional character to be polygraphed in the novel, cannot keep a secret. For the machine, as for the narrative of *Libra* itself, Everett's interiority is wholly available.

Oswald and Ruby, however, prove more difficult to decipher. When Oswald is attempting to defect to the Soviet Union, his KGB handler Alek subjects him to a series of tests: "The polygraph was more or less chaotic but then it almost always is. *Inconclusive owing to various factors*. Maybe the boy was scared" (166, original emphasis). And Ruby's results are even more telling:

> He insists on taking a lie-detector test because the sincerity and authenticity of the truth are precious qualities to Americans. 'It seems as you get further into something,' he scribbles on a pad, 'even though you know what you did, it operates against you somehow, brainwashes you, that you are weak in what you want to tell the truth about.' Authorities arrange a polygraph exam in July 1964. Results are inconclusive" (444).

Unlike Everett's, Ruby's fantasy seems to be that while he may not know what the truth is, the machine will. Like Dupard, he relies on external clues to understand his own intention. Ruby's quoted speech is taken from an exchange with Chief Justice Earl Warren, and immediately prior to the portion DeLillo quotes Ruby states, "I would like to be able to get a lie detector test or truth serum of what motivated me to do what I did at that particular time" (Appendix 17, 807). While Ruby wanted to demonstrate his lack of involvement in Kennedy's assassination, his language, particularly in the passage from *Libra*, suggests he was not entirely certain of his motivation. (DeLillo, in fact, uses these lines to set up Ruby's subsequent descent into psychosis.) For both Ruby and Oswald, there is a boundary past which their experience is no longer readable. This discrepancy between the two types of polygraph tests speaks to the generic tension that structures *Libra*—the novel's tendency towards explanation and history's towards inscrutability. *Libra* concludes without any attempt to resolve these opposing forces; if anything, it thematizes the impossibility of reconciling them.

In her *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon puts forward the category of "historiographic metafiction" as the quintessential postmodern genre. It comprises those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages: *The French Lieutenant's Woman, Midnight's Children, Ragtime, Legs, G. Famous Last Words*. In most of the critical work on postmodernism, it is narrative—be it in literature, history, or theory— that has usually been the major focus of attention. Historiographic metafiction incorporates all three of these domains: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historio*graphic meta*fiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past (5).

However, while *Libra*, published the same year as Hutcheon's book, would seem ideally suited to this category, the novel is uneasy about flattening out the distinctions

between different types of discourse. That is, while Hutcheon maintains that "historiographic metafiction always asserts that its world is both resolutely fictive and yet undeniably historical, and that what both realms share is their constitution in and as discourse" *Libra* marks a stylistic boundary between them (142). For Hutcheon, such metafiction "blurs the distinction which Richard Rorty makes between 'texts' and 'lumps'—things made and things found, the domains of interpretation and epistemology. It suggests that there *were* lumps—historical personages and events—but that we know them only as texts today" (145). However, what I have been suggesting is that the referential Oswald is present as a "lump" throughout DeLillo's novel.

There is a slip in Hutcheon's analysis that I think *Libra* is keen to avoid, for Hutcheon suggests an unproblematic correspondence between what "were lumps" and what we know as texts. My claim in this chapter has been that Oswald's inscrutable interiority constitutes such a lump, and that the discursive traces on which DeLillo bases his characterization are unstably propped on top of that interiority. I believe we can read Oswald's lack of agency as a function of the way DeLillo's characterization maintains the separation between the discursive elements of the historical personage and the inscrutable interiority. The latter does not become readable text as in a fictional character (unless we say that, as it gets incorporated into the characterization, it becomes readable as inscrutability); it maintains an almost phantom presence in the text, occupying a non-discursive space from which the fictional Oswald is necessarily excluded.

CHAPTER TWO

The Devil's in the Details: The Mundane Symbols of *The Executioner's Song*

Of course, if water boils in a pot, steam comes out of the pot and also pictured steam comes out of the pictured pot. But what if one insisted on saying that there must also be something boiling in the picture of the pot?

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

You can always ask, pointing to an object in a photograph—a building, say—what lies behind it, totally obscured by it. This only accidentally makes sense when asked of an object in a painting. You can always ask, of an area photographed, what lies adjacent to that area, beyond the frame. This generally makes no sense asked of a painting. You can ask these questions of objects in photographs because they have answers in reality. The world of a painting is not continuous with its frame; at its frame a world finds its limits. We might say: a painting *is* a world; a photograph is *of* the world.

— Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*

You know, a painter may find something on the street that he thinks is incredible. Sometimes he'll glue it right into the painting. It becomes part of the work. In *The Executioner's Song*, newspaper stories became part of the painting and part of the transcript of the trial – a lot of found objects. I felt acted upon, in a funny way, while doing this book, by painting terms. It was as if I'd shifted from being an expressionist…into now being a photographic realist, even a photographic realist with found objects. The reason, I think, is that a painter like a writer sometimes gets to a point where he can no longer interpret what he sees. Then the act of painting what he literally sees becomes the aesthetic act. Because what he's seeing is incredible. It may or may not be possessed of meaning. Reality, itself, closely studied is mysterious, and it's elusive.

— Norman Mailer, *Conversations with Norman Mailer*

I.

When promoting *The Executioner's Song*, Norman Mailer repeatedly stated that his account of events leading up to Gary Gilmore's 1977 death by firing squad accurately rendered the facts. Early editions of the book famously indicate "A True Life Novel" on the cover, and Mailer himself took pains to assure his interviewers of its fidelity to actual events, immediately qualifying his use of "novel" whenever referring to the work: "but it is accurate" (*Conversations*, 245), "but I didn't want ever to sacrifice what literally happened in a scene

for what I would have liked to see happen" (270).   The book's detached, journalistic style—a radical departure from the elaborate, self-involved prose for which Mailer had been known—arose, he says, from a desire to let the material speak for itself, even when doing so ran counter to his instincts as a novelist: "I thought, well, when [two people] meet what I want is to have a very good scene between them—as I would if I had been writing the novel. But in fact they met and not much had happened. It was sort of a disappointing scene. So I felt bound to stay with the disappointment of the scene and have half the scenes in that book a little less than they ought to be" (245). Encounters promising insight and revelation sputter and stall, unredeemed with respect to an overarching logic that, in a work of fiction, might confer meaning on their very uneventfulness (*A Sentimental Education* would be a prime example of the latter). Mailer casts himself as curator, merely polishing up artifacts to highlight their inherent features. The book's "novelistic nature," he says, "is rich without language" (268). The trove of information surrounding Gilmore's execution was "gold," Mailer states, concluding one interview, "if I had enough sense not to gild it" (270).

Criticism on *The Executioner's Song* has tended either to accept Mailer's account of his detached role or to look for manipulations of individuals and incidents behind the pared-down style—the effects of what Mailer describes as some limited, "functional" invention to stitch the details together (244). While the former approach is too willing to discount Mailer's limited presence, the latter (though it doesn't go so far as to claim the work is a fiction) uses that presence to justify what I'll broadly term symbolic readings—readings that imbue the work's factual details with a significance independent of their context. The most ghoulish example comes from a book review that associates the autopsy description of Gilmore's nearly unidentifiable heart (bullet-ridden after the execution) with his "evil" nature. Such readings of the text are not wholly unjustified, as Mailer's presentation of the material gestures toward them to varying degrees. However, as I will explore in this chapter, the referential nature of the details ultimately undermines any attempt to abstract symbolic meanings; the materiality of the referents always exceeds them.

Within the world of literary journalism, perhaps the most famous instance of this tension between literal and symbolic readings surrounds the 1953 publication of Mary McCarthy's "Artists in Uniform," in which she details her encounter with an anti-Semitic army colonel while aboard a train bound for St. Louis. *Harper's* ran the piece as "Artists in Uniform: A Story," which led many readers to interpret it as fiction, finding symbolic implications in every detail, from the presence of nuns in one of the train cars to the color of the narrator's dress and the dishes she and the colonel order for lunch. The confusion prompted McCarthy to write a follow-up article the next year, "Settling the Colonel's Hash," in which she baldly states, "there were no symbols in this story; there was no deeper level. The nuns were in the story because they were on the train; the contrasting greens were the dress I happened to be wearing; the colonel had hash because he had hash" (Sims, 250).

In spite of her insistence on the referential origin of the story's details, McCarthy does not advocate a strictly literal reading of the work; she specifically resists what she labels a "literary" symbol, which "is centrifugal and flees from the object, the event, into the incorporeal distance" (259). With such symbols, there is no motivated relationship between the literal object and its symbolic meaning. "In this dream-forest," she says, "symbols

become arbitrary" (260). Read symbolically, the colonel's hash evoked a negative meaning simply because readers disliked him for other reasons. Distinct from what McCarthy describes as quotidian symbols whose meanings never stray far from their objects, these literary symbols float free of any context. Far removed from the individual whom they should reveal, from the details indicating one's orientation to, and constitution by, the world, they pull free of the network of objects bearing a unique relation to the individual at their center. The everyday symbols deserving interpretation, however, fail to attract the reader's attention as such. So tightly are the latter woven into the fabric of daily life, McCarthy observes, that her readers overlook them:

> They were searching for a more recondite significance than that afforded by the trite symbolism of ordinary life, in which a dress is a social badge. They supposed that I was engaging in literary or artificial symbolism, which would lead the reader out of the confines of reality into the vast fairy tale of myth, in which the color green would have an emblematic meaning (or did the two greens signify for them what the teacher calls "shades" of prejudice), and the colonel's hash, I imagine, would be some sort of Eucharistic mincemeat. (252)

This "trite symbolism of ordinary life" is predicated on a causal connection between the literal object, its symbolic meaning, and the person associated with it. What McCarthy describes in the original piece as her "irrevocably Bohemian" manner of dress indicates to the colonel that she is an artist with a particular belief system. The meaning derives from an individual's perceptions of an object; objects are symbolic in an anthropological sense, i.e., in the "sense all human actions are symbolic because they represent the person who does them"—often against that person's will, as in McCarthy's case (252).

  While she distinguishes between two types of symbols, her description implies a continuum stretching, as she indicates, from the object or event "into the incorporeal distance." This continuum, to be specific, would range from the purely material to the purely metaphysical—from a thing existing only for itself to a pure idea that renders everything within its scope an instantiation.[7] Like McCarthy indicates, the details in referential genres would stand closer to the material end of the range.

  As in McCarthy's story, there are instances throughout *The Executioner's Song* that, either on account of small stylistic liberty on Mailer's part, or the repetition of details, seem to gesture toward a symbolic payoff the book never delivers. Since the book's initial publication, critics have been unable to adequately explain the existence of these semi-symbolic meanings, either downplaying the role of Mailer's ordering hand, or claiming that

[7] We see the extreme ends of this range dramatized in a famous passage from *To the Lighthouse*: "…and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke. Often she found herself sitting and looking…until she became the thing she looked at—that light for example. And it would lift up on it some little phrase or other which had been lying in her mind like that…which she would repeat and begin adding to it, It will end, it will end, she said. It will come, it will come, when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord" (63). Mrs. Ramsey gets effaced at both ends of the continuum, from brute materiality to absolute abstraction.

the traces of his influence warrants the identification of symbolic structures more appropriate to works of fiction. These hinted symbols are treated, to put it simply, as either more (fictional) or less (documentary) than they are.

The book's opening offers perhaps the most potential for symbolic reading, depicting a childhood scene in which Gilmore is complicit in his cousin's disobedience of a command not to climb the trees in their grandmother's orchard:

> Brenda was six when she fell out of the apple tree. She climbed to the top and the limb with the good apples broke off. Gary caught her as the branch came scraping down. They were scared. The apple trees were their grandmother's best crop and it was forbidden to climb in the orchard. She helped him drag away the tree limb and they hoped no one would notice. That was Brenda's earliest recollection of Gary. (5)

The biblical overtones are difficult to overlook. Even if one misses the structural correspondences with the story of Adam and Eve, Mailer's diction reminds us to make the connection. Instead of a plainer construction more consistent with Brenda's language throughout the book (the very next line reads "she was six and he was seven and she thought he was swell") Mailer describes the climbing restriction with the freighted "it was forbidden." The choice to open the book with this event strongly suggests the symbolic reading of the passage that Mark Edmundson offers: "So from the beginning we're led to associate Gary with a fall, with transgression, and with—the parallels are too numerous to be discounted—the Fall" (*Bloom's*, 134). There might indeed be too many parallels to ignore, but what does the connection amount to on an interpretive level?

Even in this passage, in which we feel Mailer's influence on the shape of the material far more than anywhere else in the book, no sooner do we recognize the symbolic connection than the referential material begins to refract the meaning it would focus in a work of fiction. Some of the images in this scene conjure images from the story of the Fall, but there is no causal relationship. Had Mailer invented the scene to establish such a connection, the narrative logic underlying its creation would justify the association. But Mailer's narrative logic only governs the scene's *selection*. Even if he chose the scene for its biblical resonances, its referential details (or, to be scrupulous, what Mailer treats as referential details) exceed the meaning his presentation elicits. They resist any interpretation positing an association beyond the limits of a causal relation.

The vagaries that result from pushing beyond this limit are apparent in Edmundson's reading. He begins to describe the scene in terms that cast it, to recall McCarthy's distinction, as a symbol of ordinary life. It associates Gilmore with "transgression," establishing his oppositional relation to authority from an early age. A causal relationship obtains: in retrospect, we draw a line from this scene of childhood disobedience to the reckless defiance that will lead Gilmore to spend over half of his life in prison. But when Edmundson, in a form of interpretive transgression, moves beyond treating the scene as an early indication of a pattern of behavior and takes up the biblical comparison, his reading becomes infected by the vagueness of the imposed symbol: "The mythical echoes and the soft but perceptible drop of the last line convey a certain inevitability. Gilmore is fated, despite finer impulses, to fail" (134). As soon as he adopts the literary symbol Edmundson's language registers the dilution in meaning. He points to "echoes" and a minimally

perceptible "drop" (apparently referring to the shift in the frame of reference communicated by "That was Brenda's earliest recollection of Gary"), both of which intimate a "certain" inevitability in Gary's fate. The lines direct our attention to the foggy distance where we can just make out a link, a "certain" link, between scene and incorporeal symbol.

The alternative to this surplus of meaning has been to overlook the gestures toward it. Criticism on *The Executioner's Song* that plays up the image of Mailer as documentarian focuses on the extent to which he, particularly with respect to most of his earlier work, restrains himself from imposing order on the events he recounts. According to James Stull, "The self-conscious persona and highly conscious literary voice(s) of *The Armies of the Night* are replaced by a narrator who seems to abdicate authorial responsibility by presenting events and information of the Gilmore case as raw, unedited experience" (*Literary Selves,* 125). Robert Merrill similarly emphasizes the book's ability to convey a sense of unmediated access to the material: "Mailer is usually seen as less selective, less insistent on his own views, and more inclined to *amass* his case than to shape it toward a single conclusion….The 'social drama' Mailer renders here [in *The Executioner's Song*] is neither symbolic nor metaphoric but the thing itself" (*Norman Mailer Revisited*, 211). These evaluations of the text accord with the rhetoric governing its style and structure, and with Mailer's stated approach to its composition. With minor exceptions, many of which he acknowledges in the afterward, he primarily confines his presence to the selection and arrangement of his material. The book's form also contributes to the impression that Mailer is "amassing a case." He relates that it "didn't have just my mind working out a form," but that "it came out of all the people who in one way or another contributed to the book—I'd think it was a little closer to life than anything else I've worked on before" (*Conversations*, 245). The components seem to organize themselves into progressively larger units within an organizational hierarchy reminiscent of a living organism's. The 1050 pages are divided into two books, each containing seven parts; these parts, in turn, are further divided into chapters, and the chapters into smaller numbered sections, ranging from one to two pages in length; these sections, finally, comprise smaller discursive units—usually one paragraph in length, but sometimes more—that are separated from the preceding and following text by a single blank space. These visually and conceptually disparate units have been understood to signal the absence of an externally imposed continuity, Mailer's refusal or inability to insert explanation for the sake of coherence.

The content of *The Executioner's Song* is expansive. Though it focuses on the nine-month period between Gilmore's release from a federal maximum security prison on April 9, 1976 to his execution on January 17, 1977, it ranges as far back as the nineteenth century, when Gilmore's great-grandfather came west. The book also includes detailed family histories of many of the persons who figure in Gilmore's story, with details ranging from Nicole's grandfather being forced out of his position as superintendant of the Provo City Water Department to the possibility that Gilmore's father was the illegitimate son of Harry Houdini. The first book, "Western Voices," gives these histories and the lives of the individuals connected by the Gilmore murders in context. These voices cover events through the trial, the initial sentencing, and Gilmore's challenge to the court to carry out the death sentence it handed down. It ends at a point of transition, where the Gilmore case has exceeded the bounds of both local interest and local jurisdiction. The final line notes that by

mid-November, four months after the murders, "Gary Gilmore was a household name to half of America" (503).

Book Two, "Eastern Voices," stays with Gilmore from the time he becomes a media spectacle through the immediate aftermath of his execution. The eponymous voices mediate the events surrounding Gilmore and package them for the rest of the world. Personal artifacts, persons themselves in the form of life rights, are bid on and sold. Gilmore himself handles the scrutiny, such as it is from his cell, better than his extended family; people are impressed and dismayed by his ability to manipulate the media. He explains in a letter to Nicole that he understands fame from "*a previous life. I seem to understand it. But I don't want to get to the point where we're enjoying fame and not being ourselves anymore. We are just GARY AND NICOLE and we've got to remember that*" (561, original emphasis). Mailer remains outside the narrative throughout, only joining the project after the point where the book concludes.

Though Mailer doesn't figure as a character, and though he remains extremely reticent regarding his subjects, the subtle but pervasive signs of his influence on the material trouble accounts that overlook his editing and shaping, and the minor liberties he allows himself as author. While *The Executioner's Song* is a massive work, the materials from which Mailer constructed it are many times larger. Interview transcripts alone come close to 15,000 pages, and Mailer has explained the work's relative absence of description by the need to compress "3000 pages of material into half the space" (*Conversations*, 267). Nearly all the raw materials required some form of alteration; according to him, only one interview was taken verbatim from the transcript (269).

In addition to the exhaustive process of selecting and arranging the material, Mailer also confesses to an inability to completely suppress his creative impulse. Regarding his commitment not to embellish the interviews, he remarks that "there's very little invention in the book" (244). Beyond what he describes as practical fabrications—"sometimes you just have to end a scene" (244)—Mailer acknowledges two specific inventions in the afterword: "Alas," he begins, "one would confess one's creations" (1052). We learn he penned the "old prison rhyme" that appears at the beginning and end of the book, and psychiatrist John Wood's dream, which was actually adapted from Mailer and Schiller's interview of him. Taken in conjunction with his other manipulations of the material, this admission has led John Hellmann to label the work a fiction. He takes a particularly strong stance:
Mailer presents the reader with an emphatically journalistic reality for 1,050 pages of reportorial narrative, only to then turn about with a whimsical 'alas' and admit to the fictive element that necessarily 'frames' a report, an element that can be disguised but never eliminated. Calling the reader's attention to the inevitably transforming role of his fiction-making consciousness, he reminds the reader that his work, despite its factual content, is in the ultimate epistemological and ontological sense an artifice, an aesthetic shape that necessarily achieves mimesis of the external world through the constructing act of a shaping consciousness (*Fables of Fact*, 57).

Hellmann's critique is worth examining in some detail because it clearly presents the bind critics find themselves in when trying at once to respect the book's generic uniqueness and provide some definitive statement about its fictional or non-fictional status. As we see, Hellman adopts two extreme positions in his assessment, and both essentialize the work on

the basis of characteristics it shares with the two genres. While the manifest work of the passage is to force the text into one established genre or another, its derivative suffixes betray an underlying concern about mischaracterizing the book in the process. An "emphatically journalistic reality" is not journalism, and "reportorial narrative" is not reporting. The critique gropes for an adequate category to justify what, particularly in its attention to Mailer's "whimsical" disregard for the referential reading he has engendered, comes off as a sense of betrayal. It seems Mailer's flippant tone can't diminish the offence, can't rebuild the trust in a referential narrative once the "fictive element" has been confessed.

It's somewhat surprising, then, that when Hellmann approaches the text from the fictional side, he does not take issue with its "factual content." Though the "fictive element" cannot be eliminated, it is not enough to warrant labeling the work a fiction. In the passage's second half the descriptors, the converse of "journalistic" and "reportorial," attempt to categorize *The Executioner's Song* as fiction without referring to it as such. The reader, he claims, becomes aware of the "inevitably transforming role of [Mailer's] fiction-making consciousness," of the work as "an artifice, an aesthetic shape that necessarily achieves mimesis of the external world through the constructing act of a shaping consciousness." (If we take a moment to consider the meaning of these words, the preceding could be said, of course, of even the driest reporting.) Only a few lines before the above passage begins, Hellmann notes that best-seller lists and the Library of Congress categorize the work as fiction, so why does he argue in support of the label but stop short of applying it himself?[8] The passage would seem to indicate that Hellmann has a sense of the unique generic territory the book occupies, and that he remains tethered to that sense even as he tries to impose the nonfiction and fiction categories. The passage's linguistic contortions result from the tension between the book's particular form and these generic categories; it ultimately reads as Hellmann's attempt to reason his way out of a natural inclination to read the text referentially.

Though Mailer insisted the work was a novel, his clarifications regarding the term as it applies to *The Executioner's Song* run counter to conventional definitions. He explains, in syllogistic fashion, that in fiction "we want to create life" and that the book's use of "real people…means only that this is a novel which is not an imaginative novel, which did not come out of my imagination. But I wrote it as if it had" (*Conversations*, 244). Though the reader of a novel "should understand somewhat more than we do in life, but not everything" (244), he explains that the factual material prevented him from offering answers to the

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[8] The appeal to the Library of Congress or the best-seller lists as authorities on the book's fictionality seems unfounded, as it appears Mailer ultimately determined the book's categorization. A *New York Times* article revealing that it was the second choice (behind Philip Roth's *Ghost Writer*) of the 1980 Pulitzer Board's fiction advisory panel touched on the issue of genre: "What was surprising was that the Pulitzer Board named 'The Executioner's Song' the fiction winner despite the controversy in literary circles about whether it fit in that category. It is a long narrative about the life and death of the Utah murderer Gary Gilmore that some considered nonfiction but that the author labeled a novel" ("Mailer Book was the 2nd Choice of Fiction Advisory Panel," Herbert Mitgang, April 15th, 1980). While literary circles have not since settled the matter, Mailer apparently established its official status as fiction by fiat.

questions it posed: "This material made me look at ten or 20 serious questions in an altogether new fashion, and it made me humble in that I just didn't know the answers…I thought it might be very nice for once just to write a book which doesn't have answers, but poses delicate questions with a great deal of evidence and a great deal of material and let people argue over it" (243). By Mailer's own definition, there is tension between a form which offers more understanding than one gets in life, and his admitted inability to offer any answers raised by the book's source material.

Mailer's assertion that *The Executioner's Song* provides readers with "evidence" implies that the book's countless details are all potentially charged with meaning. He has sifted through tens of thousands of pages of raw data; what facts remain in the book have the status of evidence, though within what framework remains unclear. They suggest an organizing principle without ever revealing it. Of course, certain clusters of details will gesture toward different potential principles. As Roland Barthes argues in his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," "the creativity of narrative (at least under its mythic appearance of "life") is thus situated *between two codes*, the linguistic and the translinguistic. That is why it can be said paradoxically that *art* (in the Romantic sense of the term) is a matter of statements of detail, whereas *imagination* is mastery of the code" (89). What keeps us reading a novel, for Barthes, is the revelation of the text's translinguistic code, its governing logic: the "passion which may excite us in reading a novel" is "that of meaning, that of a higher order of relation" (89). However, even if we allow that more than one logic might govern a novel, the seemingly related details in *The Executioner's Song* fail to intersect at some originary point over the text. Many never cross paths; still others have promising trajectories but fail to get very far off the ground. Although the selection and arrangement of details lays the groundwork for a more abstract significance, it never quite exceeds the literal.

One of the more banal examples of this appears soon after Gilmore gets released from prison and begins adjusting to life on the outside by purchasing a white Mustang, a car nearly identical to that of his love interest, Nicole Barrett. There are vague acknowledgements of this unremarkable coincidence. Gary and Nicole seem to view it as a sign of a love connection, but their thoughts are half-formed. Do the twin Mustangs mean something? Does it mean something that Gary and Nicole think they mean something? That they're ready to see the hand of fate in such a common commodity?[9] The connection fades out of the narrative before it amounts to anything:

When they left, Spencer said to Marie, "That's just about what Gary needs. A girl friend with a baby to feed. It doesn't look like she'll be too much of an asset to him."

He squinted after their car. 'My God, did he paint his Mustang blue? I thought it was white."

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[9] According to Edmunds.com, the model year of their Mustangs, 1966, is still the best-selling year for the Mustang in its near fifty-year production history.

> "Maybe it's her car."
>
> "Same year and model?"
>
> "Wouldn't surprise me a bit," said Marie. (64)

> Coming outside, [Brenda] was surprised by the sight of the pale blue Mustang. That was enough to restore him. Didn't have to be fantastic, he told her. He and Nicole had both bought exactly the identical model and year. It was a sign. (67)

> It was odd, but he had a Mustang just like hers, same model, same year. Just the color was different. So she felt comfortable in it. (75)

Here and throughout the text, Mailer's arrangement of scenes elicits a symbolic reading, but the materiality of the given details neutralizes the impulse towards abstraction. The first of the above quotations closes the ninth section of chapter three, giving its final line, to borrow Edmundson's term, a certain inevitability. Even more than in the orchard scene, which is aided by shifting the frame of reference, the portentousness of Marie's statement is purely a formal effect. Spencer and Marie sense that Nicole is no good for Gary; in spite of the strong mutual affinity Marie reads in the twin Mustangs, the relationship seems doomed.

The most plausible symbolic reading stems from the Mustang's role when Gilmore's relationship with Nicole is ending. The car, which runs poorly from the start, is a continual source of frustration; but once Nicole leaves him, Gilmore views it as the locus of his relationship troubles. Convincing himself that a white truck from the same used car lot will set everything right, Gimore arranges a trade-in on hard terms: $400 in two days and another $600 in two weeks (217). Without any other source of money, he robs Max Jensen and Ben Bushnell to cover the first payment; why he also murders them is never clearly established. In this context, however, Nicole's identical car plays no role.[10]

One of fictionalization's ethical pitfalls is brought into sharp relief in Mailer's own flirtation with metaphorizing such material objects, particularly the bodies of several of the book's characters. When Gilmore's cousin Brenda visits him in prison, anxious about having

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[10] The second film in Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* draws on *The Executioner's Song* for its portrayal of the life and death of Gary Gilmore. The film, which counts Mailer among its cast members as Gilmore's possible grandfather, Harry Houdini, is structured, around "the phase of fetal development during which sexual division begins" (*Cremaster.net*). Barney's "abstraction of this process" makes use of Gilmore's story, which moves backwards in time, from Gilmore's execution in 1977 to Houdini's 1893 performance at the *World's Columbian Exposition*. The reversal represents the system as it "resists partition and tries to remain in the state of equilibrium imagined in *Cremaster 1*." Unlike the symbolic readings discussed here, Barney largely refrains from locating his interpretation in the text itself. He nevertheless features a sculpture titled *The Cabinet of Gary Gilmore and Nicole Baker*: "Inferring that Gilmore killed out of a longing for union with his girlfriend, Nicole Baker, [Barney] represents their relationship through two conjoined cars: the blue and the white 1966 Mustangs that they coincidentally both owned."

turned him in and coping with the stress of his execution, she is also suffering from endometriosis:

> Brenda also had a bad physical condition. It was getting to the point where she just couldn't bear the pain. … Then the doctors explained. It seemed the inner lining of a woman's uterus was shed every month, but in her case, that lining built up on the outside of the uterine wall. At present, it was attaching to her intestines, where it would rupture and bleed. … They gave her pain pills, but she still felt as if she were tearing inside. A couple of times when she went out to the prison, the sitting and waiting made the pain unendurable. Finally, when they showed no signs of letting her in, she stopped going. Then, walking got painful. Sometimes it would pull on her merely to stand up. There Vern was, just getting over his operation, and here she was, feeling stuck together and twisted inside. (751-2)

There is something cruel in the impulse to instrumentalize the crude, physical reality, obscure the coarse features of Brenda's suffering in the service of plot. Even if the narrative didn't disclose her medical condition prior to her cooperation with law enforcement, the excessive detail in Mailer's description suggests stress is not the cause. Though Mailer's focus on these details sets up an unmistakable parallel between Brenda's physical and emotional states, it also exacts a greater ethical toll on the reader who would follow his lead, taking a contingent medical condition as a sign that she was "torn up inside" over her role in Gilmore's apprehension. Not only does the symbolic reading capitalize on Brenda's suffering, but the penitential interpretation also validates Gilmore's sense of betrayal. If one takes *The Executioner's Song* as a closed system, we can imagine a small number of such readings striking the whole symbolic economy into order.

Hugh Kenner's 1980 review of Mailer's work offers just this sort of reading of Gilmore's physical body. He draws a link between the blank space surrounding the paragraph-sized units of text and Mailer's refusal to extrapolate a reason for Gilmore's actions. Yet in spite of himself, he cannot refrain from extrapolating reasons of his own, going so far as to support them with the graphic description of Gilmore's autopsy:

> The secret [of why Gilmore murdered Max Jensen and Bennie Bushnell] is very likely that there was no secret. All that's to be said is that now and then, under stress, Gary Gilmore simply killed. That we can explain such matters, which means, express them in terms of something we already know, is a delusion, one of our cheaper delusions. Amid all the hype, which to his great credit he keeps chiefly at bay, I suspect that Norman Mailer knows this: the truth that is written in all his thousands of margin-to-margin white spaces, that we are not entitled to give names to what we do not know, and that the heart of man is very often desperately wicked.
>
> *He skinned Gilmore right up over his shoulders, like taking a shirt half off, and with a saw cut right up the breastbone to the throat, and removed the*

*breastplate and set it in a big, open sink with running water. Then, he took
out what was left of Gilmore's heart. Jerry Scott couldn't believe what he
saw. The thing was pulverized. Not even half left. Jerry didn't recognize it
as the heart. Had to ask the doctor, "Excuse me," he said, "is that it?" The
doctor said, "Yup."* (231, original emphasis)

Even as he valorizes Mailer's refusal to impose explanation, he cannot help but offer his
own: "that the heart of man is very often desperately wicked." So pronounced is the physical
heart's inability to support Kenner's statement that it nearly seems an intentional illustration
of the text's stubborn reticence, of the referential object's refusal to submit to symbolic
interpretation. There are several moments in the text where Gilmore's chilling lack of
remorse might call "wickedness" to mind, but the autopsy? Certainly as with Brenda's
condition there is a crude coincidence here. One would imagine that, at some point during
his life, half of which he spent in prison, Gilmore was described as heartless, or was told he
had no heart at all. In these expressions the heart functions as a symbol, which, in literary
contexts, refers "to a manner of representation in which what is shown (normally referring to
something material) means, by virtue of association, something *more* or something *else*
(normally referring to something immaterial)" (*Princeton Handbook*, 273). If one reads the
text referentially, however, the attendant belief in the heart's physicality restricts any
association with the immaterial quality; in spite of Mailer's firm nudge in the form of Jerry
Scott's exchange with the doctor, a referential reading will not accommodate the connection.

One could imagine using the same phrase to capture the literal and figurative
meanings: Gilmore didn't have a heart, and he didn't have a heart. In a purely fictional work,
where the literal object's symbolic meaning is primary, such a statement would be redundant.
(The literal sense would not come across in a similar description of the Grinch, for instance,
where the graphic representation of his heart, two sizes too small, is clearly derived from the
symbolic meaning.) Kenner's reading, which imposes a symbolic value that far exceeds the
literal object, has this fictional quality. The explanatory framework obscures the baser
features of not just the quoted description but of the narrative surrounding Gilmore's life and
death. We might say that neither Jerry Scott nor Hugh Kenner were able to recognize
Gilmore's heart.

II.

"I have nothing to add beyond the results of my statistical analysis," [Sciss] declared. "A
close relationship can easily be demonstrated between eggs, bacon, and the stomach, to
name only one example, or a distant relationship, with somewhat more difficulty,
between, for example, a country's political system and its average marital age. But
regardless of the degree of difficulty, there is always a definite correlation, a valid basis
for a discussion of causes and effects."

—Stanislaw Lem, *The Investigation*

The machine as symbolizing its action: the action of a machine—I might say at first—seems to be there in it from the start. What does that mean?—If we know the machine, everything else, that is its movement, seems to be already completely determined.

We talk as if these parts could only move in this way, as if they could not do anything else. How is this—do we forget the possibility of their bending, breaking off, melting, and so on? Yes; in many cases we don't think of that at all. We use a machine, or the drawing of a machine, to symbolize a particular action of the machine. For instance, we give someone such a drawing and assume that he will derive the movement of the parts from it….

But when we reflect that the machine could also have moved differently it may look as if the way it moves must be contained in the machine-as-symbol far more determinately than in the actual machine. … And it is quite true: the movement of the machine-as-symbol is predetermined in a different sense from that in which the movement of any given actual machine is predetermined.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

While the imposition of abstract symbolic readings on referential material is perhaps more easily discounted, I want to suggest that within *The Executioner's Song*, even McCarthy's "ordinary symbols of daily life" are of limited use. In Tom Wolfe's similar, though more extensive account of these material symbols—what he terms symbols "of people's status life"—he ranks them as the single most important storytelling device the New Journalism borrowed from the 19th century novel. The other three are 1) emplotment, or "telling the story by moving from scene to scene and resorting as little as possible to sheer historical narrative," 2) the inclusion of long stretches of dialogue, and 3) a "'third-person point of view'… [which gives] the reader the feeling of being inside the character's mind"—what sounds like free indirect style (46).[11] Though he never mentions her in the extensive introduction to his anthology, *The New Journalism*, published two decades after "Artists in Uniform," McCarthy's use of literary techniques in non-fiction anticipates the more self-conscious combination of genres in the New Journalism. Wolfe's description of these symbols bears a striking resemblance to McCarthy's "symbolism of ordinary life":

> The fourth device has always been the least understood. This is the recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of traveling, eating, keeping house, modes of behaving toward children, servants, superiors, inferiors, peers, plus the various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene. Symbolic of what? Symbolic, generally, of people's *status life*, using that term in the broad sense of the entire pattern of behavior and

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[11] When Wolfe raises the question of how a journalist can legitimately access the minds of his subjects, he states, "The answer proved to be marvelously simple: interview him about his thoughts and emotions, along with everything else" (47). My first chapter is broadly concerned with the assumptions underlying Wolfe's solution, particularly the subject's ability to know his own mind. See the discussion of Benjamin and Collingwood in particular.

possessions through which people express their position in the world or what they think it is or what they hope it to be. The recording of such details is not mere embroidery in prose. It lies as close to the center of the power of realism as any other device in literature. It is the very essence of the 'absorbing' power of Balzac, for example. Balzac barely used point of view at all in the refined sense that Henry James used it later on. And yet the reader comes away feeling that he has been even more completely 'inside' Balzac's characters than James's. Why? Here is the sort of thing Balzac does over and over. Before introducing you to Monsieur and Madame Marneffe personally (in *Cousine Bette*) he brings you into their drawing room and conducts a social autopsy: 'The furniture covered in faded cotton velvet, the plaster statuettes masquerading as Florentine bronzes, the clumsily carved painted chandelier with its candle rings of molded glass, the carpet, a bargain whose low price was explained too late by the quantity of cotton in it, which was now visible to the naked eye – everything in the room, to the very curtains (which would have taught you that the handsome appearance of wool damask lasts for only three years)' - everything in the room begins to absorb one into the lives of a pair of down-at-the-heel social climbers, Monsieur and Madame Marneffe. (*The New Journalism*, 47)

According to Wolfe, this forensic attention to detail provides access not just to the lives but the minds at the centers of these clusters of symbols. Whether the mind belongs to a referential person or a literary character does not matter for Wolfe; he uses "person" and "character" to refer to the same subject. In this account, the network of details surrounding a subject provides us with an "inside" view, though Wolfe must downplay and then dismiss the conventional distinction between internal and external to achieve this epistemological leap. While, when he first mentions it, third person point of view is valuable insofar as it "gives the reader the feeling of being inside the character's mind" (46), we read immediately after that Balzac provided a more "complete" inner view than James, though he "barely used" the technique. However, just as "styles of furniture" appears on the same plane as "habits, manners, [and] customs," so status lives become simply "the lives" of Monsieur and Madame Marneffe by the end of the passage. Focusing on inveterate social climbers opens up this subtle equation of life and status life – of the thing itself and the lens through which it is viewed. Wolfe concludes his reading of the Marneffes with the observation that "there is scarcely a detail in the later Balzac that does not illuminate some points of status," as though details are most naturally indices of status (47). Again, there is a conflation between the logic governing the selection of details, and the details themselves.

In his similar account of Balzac's use of description, Erich Auerbach theorizes the catalogue of material objects, though his qualified understanding of their significance helps articulate the limitations of Wolfe's reading.[12] He draws his conclusions from the description

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[12] The similarity in Wolfe's and Auerbach's readings of Balzac may not be coincidental. The entirety of Wolfe's doctoral studies at Yale overlap with Auerbach's tenure there as professor of

of Madame Vauquer and her pension – particularly of the "harmony" created by the correspondences between her equally foul appearance and surroundings:

> There seems to be no deliberate order for the various repetitions of the harmony-motif, nor does Balzac appear to have followed a systematic plan in describing Madame Vauquer's appearance; the series of things mentioned—headdress, false hair, slippers, face, hands, body, the face again, eyes, corpulence, petticoat—reveal no trace of composition; nor is there any separation of body and clothing, of physical characteristics and moral significance….[T]he thesis of the 'stylistic unity' of the milieu, which includes the people in it, is not established rationally but is presented as a striking and immediately apprehended state of things, purely suggestively, without any proof….The motif of the unity of a milieu has taken hold of him so powerfully that the things and the persons composing a milieu often acquire for him a sort of second significance which, though different from that which reason can comprehend, is far more essential—a significance which can best be defined by the adjective demonic. In the dining-room, with its furniture which, worn and shabby though it be, is perfectly harmless to a reason uninfluenced by imagination, 'misfortune oozes, speculation cowers.' In this trivial everyday scene allegorical witches lie hidden, and instead of the plump sloppily dressed widow one momentarily sees a rat appear. What confronts us, then, is the unity of a particular milieu, felt as a total concept of a demonic-organic nature and presented entirely by suggestive and sensory means. (471-2)

Key for Auerbach is the lack of a rational order in the description of person and surroundings. The items have the status of representative samples; they capture the impression so completely that one could "deduce" those rooms and boarders that aren't mentioned. What I have been describing so far as the causal limits of symbols in nonfiction assumes a direct relationship between an object and a person. One can conceive that Mary McCarthy's environment as a writer and intellectual engendered certain tastes in clothing that others could potentially recognize. When, in the passage from which Auerbach quotes, we read of a proprietress that "as she walks, her wrinkled slippers drag," Balzac makes an explicit connection between Madame Vauquer's sluggish temperament and the physical imprints of that temperament on the surroundings. The relationships ramify (who would consent to live in these surroundings?), creating a unity among the features of character and setting so uncanny as to earn the description "demonic." But the manifest harmony of these

Romance Philology, though Wolfe received his Ph.D. in American Studies. Both accounts also bear some resemblance to Henry James 1875 assessment in which, commenting on Balzac's extended descriptions, he notes, "The place in which an event occurred was in his view of equal moment with the event itself" (*Literary Criticism*, 49). James also counts the description of Madame Vauquer's pension, the same around which Auerbach structures his reading, as among Balzac's "three or four" most memorable descriptions (51).

details equally suggests a more natural origin, necessitating the compound "demonic-organic." By the following page the emphasis has been reversed, and Balzac's settings have become "organic and indeed demonic unities" (473). The emphasis continues in this direction; the demonic element is increasingly marginalized in order to reveal the surrounding "atmosphere," producing an "atmospheric realism" which, we learn, is closely related to "atmospheric historicism" (473). Even after Auerbach arrives at a comprehensive formulation regarding Balzac's oeuvre, that "the spirit of Historism…is the spirit of his entire work" (477), we learn that this spirit merely complements the "source of his invention," which is "not free imagination, but *real life*" (480, my emphasis). As Balzac describes his own conception of his work, "it will be what happens everywhere" (480). And yet, after this patient critical exorcism, which ultimately reveals the essence of these writings as life itself, unmediated, Auerbach, not losing sight of the disjunction between the initial impression of his subject and this ideal characterization, returns to the element of Balzac's writing that motivated his initial impression: "It was in conformity with [Balzac's] emotional, fiery, and uncritical temperament, as well as with the romantic way of life, to sense hidden demonic forces everywhere and to exaggerate expression to the point of melodrama" (482). What does this circuit accomplish?

As Auerbach makes clear, his purpose is to "explain [Balzac's] realist art" through "a careful separation of the currents which mingle in it" (474). The marginalization of the "demonic" element is preparatory to this analysis. Auerbach carefully isolates the biological and historical influences on Balzac's method. Thus, when the demonic element resurfaces it is as the most extreme manifestation of the "romantic current" that underlies more scientific approaches: the assumption of a fundamental unity within a particular atmosphere (473, 478). But this unity is always at the edge of perception. As we read in the above passage, what governs Balzac's selection and ordering of details is prior to any rational logic, any "deliberate order" or "systematic plan." The milieu's "stylistic unity" is "not established rationally," only "suggestively"; it is not something "reason can comprehend." There is a firm sense in which Auerbach's own analysis bears out the truth of this characterization. Though fastidious about drawing the key terms of his account from Balzac's own writings, "demonic" is Auerbach's own. When biology and history cancel out their corresponding elements in Balzac's writings, they leave a "demonic" remainder, that of the "uncritical temperament" linking the disparate pieces of a given milieu. Outside the bounds of reason, which recognizes its own imprint on the world, this demonic element creates the illusion of unity, seeping into the background of perception to naturalize, or make "organic," the connections between discrete details.

Barthes explains the conflation of history and reality with respect to the naturalization of such details, drawing on the concept of "facts as such": "Once language intervenes (and when does it not intervene?), a fact can be defined only tautologically: the *noted* issues from the *notable*, but the *notable* is…only what is worthy of memory, i.e. worthy to be *noted*" (138). As he goes on to show, historical discourse is governed by a "paradox," which is that facts only have a "linguistic existence," yet they pass themselves off as accurate copies of a reality outside of language. What is notable identifies itself as what simply is.

In McCarthy's "Artists in Uniform" and Mailer's autobiographical works, particularly *Armies of the Night* and *Of a Fire on the Moon*, this conflation of the noted and the real is

unproblematic insofar as the reader is aware that the significance of each detail originates in the author's consciousness. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon reads Mailer's refusal to change a factual error regarding the Eagle's moon-landing lights in the text of *Of a Fire on the Moon* (in spite of his willingness to add a footnote in later editions) as an indication of "the dual status of his representation of the Apollo mission: the events actually happened, but the facts that we read are those constituted by his narrativized account of them" (79). McCarthy also reflects on the inevitability of selecting the notable from among a vast field of noted details:

> In any account of reality, even a televised one, which comes closest to being a literal transcript or replay, some details are left out as irrelevant (though nothing is really irrelevant). The details that are not eliminated have to stand as symbols of the whole, like stenographic signs, and of course there is an art of selection, even in a newspaper account: the writer, if he has any ability, is looking for the revealing detail that will sum up the picture for the reader in a flash of recognition. (252)

McCarthy's sense of the representative detail has much in common with Balzac's. The revealing detail is what conjures for the reader, as Auerbach notes regarding the passage from *Pere Goriot*, "his memory-pictures of similar persons and similar milieux which he may have seen" (471). There is, however, an economy to McCarthy's form of description that is lacking in Balzac. She relies on fewer details, each of which bears a heavier representational burden. And as she makes clear when referring to the "*art* of selection," these details, unlike the impression Balzac seeks to convey, are not chosen at random. If the selection of detail in an autobiographical account like McCarthy's conveys a greater sense of intention, the effect is to create an image of the author's subjectivity; the scene described is the scene as it appears filtered through the author's consciousness. Her shift to the passive in the first sentence obscures the distinction between these two registers: what details are left out as "irrelevant" are irrelevant to a particular author, though in a more essential sense, "nothing is really irrelevant."[13]

Indeed, the content of *The Executioner's Song* seems derived from the conviction that nothing is irrelevant. Unlike the carefully selected details McCarthy theorizes, however, Mailer, following in the footsteps of Balzac, will often provide what has the appearance of a random sample. For instance, when Gary and Nicole arrive at her grandparents' house for her grandmother's birthday, we read an extended description of the yard and interior of the house:

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[13] In his response to McCarthy, "Unsettling the Colonel's Hash," Darrel Mansell takes the position that any distortion is a fictionalization: "…the words [do not] somehow reproduce the entirety of the event. If McCarthy were to reproduce the top of the colonel's luncheon plate, there is still the hidden bottom, and also the hidden genealogy of the hash and the colonel. The autobiographer's words, like the novelist's and everybody else's, must artificially delimit, and therefore distort, the event" (269).

It was a big yard which wrapped around the front and side of the house, and Stein had gotten the place kind of cleaned up with the lawn swing and lawn chairs in place and all the food set out in the carport on big tables, the barbecued beef, potato salad and baked beans, the potato chips and various jello salads, the soda pop for the kids and the beer, but you still couldn't help but see into the backyard that was to the rear of the side yard, and that was never going to get cleaned up. It had a huge stack of piled-up grass and other cuttings, and a bid old rusting billboard laid on top to keep the cuttings from being scattered by the wind, and Stein's old camper that you lifted onto a pickup truck was next to it, and coils of old hose that had gotten half uncoiled, plus the water-soaked swing hanging from the old tackle pulleys in the tree, the overturned wooden dory that needed painting, and a stove-in old red barrel by the rusted sign. There were gardening tools in a leaning shed and a bunch of old damn black rotty tires strewn around an old car body. The farther back you got in Stein's yard, the more you saw a lifetime of living." (169)

The image of Stein's yard is a perfect illustration of Wolfe's symbols of status life. The details all point to a working class family that has cobbled together a reasonably comfortable existence, but has not been able to afford itself any luxuries. The assortment of food laid out in the carport for the huge extended family is a celebratory feast made possible by extreme frugality, a frugality that would rather display a yard of rotting and rusted junk than discard any item of potential use (the repurposed billboard and tackle pulleys, for instance). (The home's interior reinforces this image, with what seem to be scavenged furnishings containing "every color God gave the world…couches with different cushions, framed pictures of animals"—the list goes on (169-70).) Mailer indicates what the objects add up to in the concluding line: Stein's biography is visible in the objects strewn about his yard, and it is up to the reader to decipher just what sort of "lifetime of living" is contained within them.

These objects, moreover, do not merely provide an external impression; they provide the general outline of Stein's "inner life" so that, when we do get a brief internal view two paragraphs later, the content of his thoughts is an instantiation of it. After twenty-seven years during which he had worked his way from day laborer to superintendant of the Provo City Water Department "…he still had to quit because the mayor decided to put in an engineering graduate over him. Even had the gall to ask Stein to teach the new boy all about the water business. That was a memory to curdle your good feelings when you give a party to look back over it all" (170). The yard may not be appealing to passers-by but it's practical, and Stein may not have a college degree but he knows everything about his job. In these lines we glimpse a man who values what's necessary grating against a world that values appearance.

The description of the objects surrounding Stein and their function as the outward signs of a corresponding interiority perfectly illustrates the utility Wolfe claimed for them in a nonfictional context. Details are indicators of status, and awareness of that status determines one's orientation to the world. Wolfe elaborates on what he sees as the mutually constitutive nature of inner and outer:

...experiments in the physiology of the brain...seem to be heading toward the theory that the human mind or psyche does not have a discrete, internal existence. It is not a possession locked inside one's skull. During every moment of consciousness it is linked directly to external clues as to one's status in a social and not merely a physical sense and cannot develop or survive without them. If this turns out to be so, it could explain how novelists such as Balzac, Gogol, Dickens and Dostoevsky were able to be so 'involving' without using point of view with the sophistication of Flaubert or James or Joyce." (48)

Wolfe's underlying assumption, illustrated so well in Stein's case, is that in fiction and nonfiction alike the "external clues" signify the features of the consciousness of the character or person at their center. As with Madam Vauquer and the Marneffes, so with Stein: in each case the details have a clear function accorded by the character or person they add up to. Particularly when indicative of interiority, they serve an explanatory function as well. If Stein had been wealthy, if his yard contained antique statuary within a well maintained English garden and a garage with several luxury cars, all financed by a job for which he was not qualified, which he held for twenty-seven years by relying on the hard work of others, then his bitterness (assuming the absence of a pathologically distorted sense of self) would appear inexplicable. Wolfe's symbols of status life provide the formula, are the objective correlative, to borrow T.S. Eliot's term, for a particular internal state.[14] Their functions within that formula, Wolfe indicates, are unique. The Marneffe's shabby possessions have value as indicators of "down at the heel social climbers"; the objects in Stein's yard and home indicate a man who has scavenged together some marginal comfort by favoring utility over appearance.

Descriptions surrounding Gilmore, however, often lack the cohesion in the above description of Stein's yard. As discussed, the selection and arrangement of details often suggests a significance that their materiality will not support (the opening fall as the Fall, Gilmore's bullet-ridden heart as symbolizing his heartlessness). However, when the book approaches Gilmore's motivation for the two murders, Mailer has trouble establishing any symbols of daily life. Finer details start to accumulate as if breaking the scene into smaller and smaller pieces will reveal causal links a broader account would overlook. The most

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[14] According to Eliot, "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (58). Wolfe's formulation is more restrictive than Eliot's. His emphasis on "status" and the indicators of status lends itself to static representations of interiority—an individual's habitual outlook. Eliot's interest in motivation is more dynamic, which is why it perhaps lends itself more readily to Mailer's account of Gilmore.

pronounced example of this minute, seemingly irrelevant level of detail occurs in the chapter immediately following the first murder.

After shooting Max Jensen, Gilmore drives around Orem with April Baker looking for her sister and Gilmore's recent ex-girlfriend, Nicole. He gives up and convinces April to get a room with him. This is Chapter 14, "The Motel Room." While the first three chapter titles each describe durations of time—"The First Day," "The First Week," The First Month"—and subsequent titles are places, objects, or people with a significant bearing on Gilmore's life, "The Motel Room" breaks that link. Over the course of these fourteen chapters the emphasis shifts from time, to the people and objects that have some influence on Gilmore's actions, to the motel room where he happens to spend the night. The chapter begins with an extended two-page description of the room's mundane details. Here is a representative sample:

> Between the beds was an end table with a lamp and an octagonal glass ashtray that carried the green logo of Holiday Inn. A red light for messages kept flashing on the phone. Since it was on by error, it did not go off. Neither did the air conditioner. After a while, its hum vibrated in the bowels.
>
> 2
>
> On the door frame of the bathroom was a switch that in the dark glowed like a squared off fluorescent nipple. Turned on, the overhead light showed white walls and a cement-colored tile floor. A plate-glass mirror was attached above the sink by five plastic glass-clamps screwed into the wall. The sixth had fallen out. Its exposed screw hole looked like a motionless dark bug. (232-3)

The objects in the room are catalogued independent of their relation to Gilmore, as though, not having established a satisfactory explanation for his actions, the narrative broadens its search, though without a clear direction. If the section enacts McCarthy's assertion that no detail is really irrelevant, it does so on faith; the attenuation of significance at this point is absolute. The only mention of a human presence, the bowels, places the inhabitants on the same level as the objects in the room, resonant with the air conditioner's mechanical hum. The second section concludes in a similar manner: "The toilet paper from the toilet-paper holder in the wall to the left of the toilet seat was soft and very absorbent, and would stick to the anus" (233). The repetition exaggerates, we might say aggressively exaggerates, the materiality of the description.

These pages are not without literary language. There are two similes in the second paragraph of the passage quoted above, but it would be a stretch to call them attempts to redeem the catalogue of details, or conscious attempts at least. Though the references to the bowels bring the human down to the level of the inanimate, the switch "like a…fluorescent nipple," and the "screw hole…like a motionless dark bug" do not raise the inanimate to the level of the animate, or reveal the animate reflected in the inanimate. They are more flickers

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of an unconscious impulse to do so—to make details cohere, make, as in Stein's yard, the inorganic expressive of the life one's lived, of one's worldview. The barely animate presence in the motel room is, in terms of Balzac, a low-grade, perhaps the lowest grade of demon. This minimal energy pervading the text's details like a kind of cosmic background radiation may have been enough to make a lawn swing, old hose, and a rusted sign yard speak, or to noticeably if inconclusively gesture towards the Fall, a symbol of love, a symbol of callousness. However, the details in the motel room reveal no order behind the murders, nothing in the way of motivation. The human presence gets knocked down and it stays down, twitching slightly perhaps, but indicating no conscious movement.

When the scene finally shifts to Gary and April, its attention remains on this basic level, on the materiality of the detail: " 'April,' Gary said, 'are you going to tear that strip off the toilet, or do I have to?'" (233). At the very moment the reader is most inclined to search for motive or larger significance, the text cannot conjure even the scant attempts made in the previous sections. It cannot redeem the gruesome details by rendering them as something other than what they are, or instrumentalize them by putting them into the service of an explanatory framework.

CHAPTER THREE

The Abstracted Ladder: *Mason & Dixon*'s Model of History

All abstract ideas are really nothing but particular ones, consider'd in a certain light; but being annexed to general terms, they are able to represent a vast variety, and to comprehend objects, which, as they are alike in some particulars, are in others vastly wide of each other.

> — David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*

War, and no peace be 'till our undoubted right,' to roadway on the oceans of this Planet, become permanently manifest to the Spanish Majesty.

     Such the effect of a small Ear, kept about one in cotton, from ursine piety or other feelings. Has not Jenkins's Ear re-emerged, with a vengeance? It has kindled a War: dangerous for kindling other Wars, and setting the whole world on fire,—as will be too evident in the sequel! The *Ear of Jenkins* is a singular thing. Might have mounted to be a constellation, like *Berenice's Hair*, and other small facts become mythical…

> — Thomas Carlyle, *History of Frederick the Great*

I don't want us to forget that there's a woman in there, not a symbol—not a symbol—a real woman who lived and breathed and got angry and got hurt and had dreams and disappointments. And I don't want us to forget that.

> — Bill Clinton, Eulogy for Coretta Scott King

     Near the beginning of *Mason & Dixon*, the Royal Society dispatches the title characters to Cape Town, then under the control of the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, or V.O.C.), to observe the transit of Venus. The two men, part of an international effort to determine the earth's distance from the sun using parallax, grow increasingly ill at ease given the tight controls within the company town. When Dixon suggests Mason has let himself get attached to the outpost, Mason protests vehemently against the mere possibility, according the V.O.C. a near-supernatural degree of control through commodification; Cape Town's organizing principle leaves no room for sentimental attachment:

> 'AAhrr! My Sentiments! Sentiments, in this Place! A Rix-Dollar a Dozen today, tomorrow wherever the Company shall peg them,— the Dutch Company which is ev'rywhere, and Ev'rything.'
> 'Somewhat like the Deists' God, do tha mean?'
> 'Late Blow, late Blow,— '

'Mason, of Mathematickal Necessity there do remain, beyond the Reach of the V.O.C., routes of Escape, pockets of Safety,— Markets that never answer to the Company, gatherings that remain forever unknown, even down in Butter-Bag Castle. I'd be much obliged if we might roam 'round together, some Evening, and happen we'll see. Mind, I'm seldom all the way outside their Perimeter,— yet do I make an effort to keep to the Margins close as I may." (69)

The economic model Dixon here suggests to Mason is also a model of history in Pynchon's novel, which, by incorporating non-discursive zones invisible to history, resists replicating the discursive power structures that govern conventional historical narrative. As discussed with respect to *Libra*, historical fiction generally makes use of blanks in the historical record, filling in personages and occurrences to engage with the surrounding field of accepted fact. For Scott, what the author adds must be "natural to each situation"; for DeLillo, fictional creation must appear "fresh fact." Each author feels the claim the extant store of facts makes on any creation that would mingle with them. If such creations are grown from cuttings of the known historical record, however, Pynchon's text strives to imagine the flora in territories independent of the facts that have come to be known, and which stand for larger, more diverse territories.

Pynchon's take on the genre, like the "Markets that never answer to the Company," actively ignores the claim of accepted fact, exaggerating the independence of unrecorded history with fantastic elements ranging from talking dogs to a giant American Golem. *Mason & Dixon* resists the historical equivalent of Colonel Bouquet's scheme "to tessellate across the Plains a system of identical units, each containing five Squares in the shape of a Greek Cross, with each central square controlling the four radiating from it" (617). Just as the V.O.C would render Mason's sentiments identical to any other salable item in terms of their monetary values, so Colonel Bouquet would disregard the features of the terrain bounded by these crosses. The image spatializes a form of history that privileges abstraction over the particulars, known or unknown, that it would account for. Pynchon's novel, approaching history from the other extreme, highlights the inexhaustibility of its particulars. Like the lives of Cape Town's colonials, which Mason and Dixon glimpse through windows and doors, these particulars are "finite but overwhelming."

Dixon's description of the off-grid markets of Cape Town points to the metaphysical and material extremes that structure *Mason & Dixon*'s brand of historiography. As Dixon jokingly observes, following out the implications of Mason's description of the V.O.C., only God is capable of perfectly uniting these two extremes – of creation where material realization and abstract form are one and the same. The contrast between the divine unity of form and matter and their earthly separation runs throughout the novel, appearing at those moments where abstract systems reveal their limited ability to account for the physical universe or the course of human affairs. Far too many details fall outside of, or are obscured by, the abstract framework. As one of the story's two narrators, the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, muses, assuming each star is a

"mathematickal Point…then all the Stars, taken together, tho' innumerable, must like any other set of points, in turn represent some single gigantick Equation, to the mind of God as straightforward as, say the Equation of a Sphere" (134). The "Mathematickal Necessity" of which Dixon speaks, then, implies a distinction between divine and worldly math. God's equation does not provide a general map of the cosmos that more or less corresponds to its actual, physical composition. The correspondence is perfect; no material falls outside the abstraction. Worldly math, however, must distinguish between ideal and real planes – between lines without width, and the lines separating colonial provinces.

If one takes the V.O.C.'s colonial presence as the realization of an abstract system of control, it must out of necessity be imperfect, Dixon suggests. Life at the southern tip of Africa will always exceed – as manifest in secret escape routes, safe havens, markets, gatherings – the vision of Dutch society created by the V.O.C. That vision is ultimately governed by the accumulation of capital, and the Company seems unwilling to let any potential source of revenue go unexploited, even maintaining its own brothel, "seeking as ever total control, over the sex industry in Cape Town" (81). Total control of the sex industry is essential, not for whatever revenue it generates, but because the Company can ensure its workforce is exclusively composed of the slave population. When the narrator observes that the detached calculations behind the Vroom daughters' coquetry is of the same sort one might hear among the women in the Company brothel, he immediately follows, "two distinct Worlds, the Company maintaining their separation, setting Prices" (81). V.O.C. control is predicated on the commodification of the slave population alone. For any Dutch colonials to render the same services would establish a monetary equivalence with Cape Town's slaves that could disrupt the imposed racial hierarchy.

While a Dutch sex trade threatens control of the colony by uniting its populations in terms of an abstract monetary equivalence, these populations are already united on a physical level in their offspring who, as Pynchon would have it, refuse to honor the Company's monopoly: "a few independents, brave girls and boys who are young enough to enjoy the danger of going up against the Compagnie. Sylphs of mixed race, mixed gender, who know how to vanish into the foothills, and the Droster Net-work, even finding safety beyond, in the land of the Hottentots" (81). The narrator's description derives from the inadequacy of simple racial and gender binaries as applied to these independents who, in possessing qualities of both dominant populations, identify and are identified with neither of them. Their composite identities, invisible to a system in which they must figure as either colonial or slave, girl or boy, teaches them to vanish well before they "vanish into the foothills" and the network of runaway slaves. For them, fleeing Cape Town is both escape and exile, the latter insofar as they forfeit participation in global commerce when they move beyond its reach. Unlike the slaves in the Company brothel, that is, these "independents" receive recognition for their services within the system of exchange. Participating in, even competing with the Dutch system, their escape is not without cost, in both senses: "Yet 'tis difficult to leave the life in town, to give up that sudden elation, when the ships appear 'round the Headlands, Spanish Dollars everywhere in golden Infestation….The taverns are jumping, sailors bring their pipes and fiddles ashore…the nights bloom like Jasmine" (81-2). Like the town itself, founded to

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serve the business interests of the V.O.C., the merriment these independents must forego is propped upon a system of global trade. The nights may "bloom like Jasmie," but they only sprout from the preparatory infestation of Spanish dollars.

The tension between the upper level of abstraction inhabited by the designs of the Dutch East India Company and the infinite particularity of the geographical, physical, and cultural terrain that those designs obliterate once they are imposed seems to attend the rise of capitalism. As theorized by Fernand Braudel in his *Civilization and Capitalism* these invisible regions on either side of the market economy have only a "shadowy" presence in the historical record, as they leave no discursive traces. While for Braudel the economy in its entirety comprises three domains – those of material life, the market economy, and capitalism – only the middle level is in plain view. The observations from which economic theory emerged were of this, the only visible layer, so that its basic premises conflate the visible portion of the economy with the economy as a whole:

> It was on these 'transparent' visible realities [of the market economy], and on the easily observed processes that took place within them that the language of economic science was originally founded. And as a result it was from the start confined within this privileged arena, to the exclusion of any others.
>
> But there is another shadowy zone, often hard to see for lack of adequate historical documents, lying underneath the market economy; this is that elementary basic activity which went on everywhere and the volume of which is truly extraordinary. This rich zone, like a layer covering the earth, I have called *material life* or *material civilization*. These are obviously ambiguous expressions. But I imagine that if my view of what happened in the past is accepted, as it seems to be nowadays by certain economists for what is happening in the present, a proper term will one day be found to describe this infra-economy, the informal other half of economic activity, the world of self-sufficiency and barter of goods and services within a very small radius.
>
> On the other hand, looking up instead of down from the vast plane of the market economy, one finds that active social hierarchies were constructed on top of it: they could manipulate exchange to their advantage and disturb the established order. In their desire to do so— which was not always consciously expressed—they created anomalies, 'zones of turbulence' and conducted their affairs in a very individual way. At this exalted level, a few wealthy merchants in eighteenth-century Amsterdam or sixteenth-century Genoa could throw whole sectors of the European or even world economy into confusion, from a distance. Certain groups of privileged actors were engaged in circuits and calculations that ordinary people knew nothing of. Foreign exchange, for example, which was tied to distant trade movements and to the complicated arrangements for credit, was a sophisticated art, open only to a few initiates at most. To

me, this second shadowy zone, hovering above the sunlit world of the market economy and constituting its upper limit so to speak, represents the favored domain of capitalism, as we shall see. Without this zone, capitalism is unthinkable: this is where it takes up residence and prospers….

[I]n the end I accepted that the market economy had, between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, been a restrictive order, and that like all restrictive orders, whether social, political, or cultural, it had created an opposition, counter-forces, both above and below it. (*Civilization and Capitalism*, Vol. I, 23-4)

While *Mason & Dixon* is concerned with incorporating a wide variety of "shadowy" realms beyond those that contribute to the composition of the economy, the characters' roles within an emerging global trade repeatedly comes to the foreground, most often as speculation regarding the unseen forces governing the course of their lives. When they are in Cape Town, under the indirect control of Braudel's "few wealthy merchants in eighteenth-century Amsterdam," Mason and Dixon's initial sense of physical confinement in the oppressive outpost takes on a temporal dimension as they interrogate the forces that brought them to their current positions. Given their relatively modest backgrounds – Mason is a baker's son, Dixon a collier's – they each doubt the other acquired his coveted position through merit. Mason suggests a Jesuit conspiracy behind Dixon's presence, to which he responds, "as certainly would it be the East India Company who keep *thee* ever in Motion" (73). When Mason asks for clarification, Dixon realizes corporate conspiracy applies equally well to both of them: "'Happen 'twas my looks…? thy charm…? Or are we being us'd, by Forces invisible even to thy Invisible College?'"(73).[15]

From the heights of trade and power, the domain of "the Invisible Gamesters who wager daily upon the doings of Commerce and Government," their lives are reduced to mere functions (40). Mason confesses, "I'm but a Pepper-corn in the Stuffata, stirr'd and push'd about by any fool who walks by with a spoon" (74). By the time they are in America, surveying the line for which they would become famous, they have long since stopped regarding each other with suspicion, but speculation regarding the larger forces at whose mercy they find themselves remains largely unchanged in content; in form it has become a means of entertainment. When Mason proposes an elaborate conspiracy, once again revolving around Jesuits, Dixon responds much as he did in Cape Town: " 'Tho' I don't mind a likely Conspiracy, I prefer it be form'd in the interests of Trade conspiracy" (479). As they move westward along the line, into regions more remote from the centers of power, the sense of determinism engendered by their imagined use begins to fade.

Distance from these centers and from their conventional modes of viewing reveals the detail of the terrain, personal as much as geographical, they had obscured. *Mason &*

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[15] Dixon refers to the name for the informal network of scientists that preceded the formation of the Royal Society.

Dixon stages this re-engagement with the uneven terrain from which abstractions are drawn in several modes throughout the novel. The Cape Town section calls attention to material and metaphysical extremes by way of an oblique reference to the "abstraction ladder" from linguist-turned-senator S.I. Hayakawa's *Language in Thought and Action*. The famous 1939 text also appears in the middle of Pynchon's 2009 novel *Inherent Vice*, which quotes the book's most well known line: "Back in junior college, professors had pointed out to Doc the useful notion that the word is not the thing, the map is not the territory" (194). The direct quotation from Hayakawa presents language as an abstraction – a simplified shorthand for the things to which it refers. Later in the book Hayakawa explains that there are varying levels of abstraction within language. He deploys "Bessie the cow" to illustrate his point, placing her at eight different levels of abstraction on his "abstraction ladder" (85). These levels range from the "real Bessie" which, in the infinite complexity of her physical composition (from the subatomic level on up through every bodily process and level of anatomical organization), stands outside of discourse, to Bessie's commodification as "wealth" (85).[16] Each step up the ladder removes more features from the preceding step until Bessie is nearly immaterial.

Pynchon plays on Hayakawa's system near the beginning of *Mason & Dixon* in a slapstick scene involving an actual ladder getting abstracted in the literal sense of being drawn away.[17] At this point in the novel, while Mason awaits the transit of Venus at the Vroom boarding house, he is at the mercy of the proprietors' three adolescent daughters, Greet, Jet, and Els, who, while their boarder is out in a heavy downpour, bolt the door in advance of his return for their amusement. While the girls giggle at his predicament, Mason finds a ladder, climbs to a balcony window, and has just realized it won't open when he suddenly "feels activity beneath his Soles, and looks down in time to see the Ladder being deftly abstracted and taken 'round the corner in malicious fun by Jet'" (89). He momentarily clings to the balcony before it gives way and he plummets to the ground, lying "in Surrender to the Forces of Nature, allowing Heaven's Rains to visit as they will" (89). But just as Mason's physical body falls to earth, so does his mode of viewing his surroundings when, sensing what he thought water now crawling across his face, he realizes "Heaven's Rains" include countless glow worms, which the storm had sucked up. The sight initially stuns him, but he soon realizes there is no higher meaning: "It is not a message from any Beyond Mason knows of. It is an introduction to the Rainy Season" (89). Though the correspondence between Mason's "Ladder being deftly abstracted" and Hayakawa's "abstraction ladder" might read as imperfect, perhaps even coincidental, the dissonance between the novel's use of the verb and Hayakawa's use of

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[16] The first two levels are outside of discourse in Hayakawa's model: 1) the real cow, for which no name is adequate, and 2) the object we perceive, which is necessarily a reduction of all that makes up the real cow. The subsequent levels are 3) "Bessie," the "name we give to the object of perception" 4) "cow," which "stands for the characteristics we have abstracted as common to" all cows, 5) "livestock, "6) "farm assets," 7) "assets," and finally 8) "wealth" (85).

[17] The *OED* provides this etymology: Latin *abstract-us* drawn away, < *abs* off, away + *tractus*, past participle of *trahĕre* to draw.

the abstract noun provides a key to the novel's approach to historiography: in returning to literal objects and meanings Pynchon's novel attempts to resurrect some version of the territory that historical maps overlook.

Metaphysical and material extremes, which appear in many forms throughout the novel, are central to *Mason & Dixon*'s brand of historiography, which works against historical reconstruction that relies on discursive traces alone. These traces are referred to as "readable" or "visible" within the novel; the task Mason and Dixon sets itself is to somehow render the nondiscursive, "invisible" territories at either end of the abstraction ladder. The lower end comprises material that either does not endure, or does not disclose any determinate meaning. During the storm in Cape Town the narrator relates that

> All structural Surfaces here, even Vertical ones…take up Water like great rigid Sponges, and after enough of it, dissolving, crumble away….Fruit Peels lie squashe'd and slippery in the Gutters that run down to the Canals, where the Slaves are out in the Storm, doing their Owners' Laundry, observing and reading each occurrence of Blood, Semen, Excrement, Saliva, Urine, Sweat, Road-Mud, dead Skin, and other such *Data* of Biography, whose pure form they practice Daily, before all is lixiviated 'neath Heaven. (88-9)

The laundry presents a minor version of the kinds of material history that leaves no trace. The soiled clothing is not resistant to interpretation; it is a natural form of expression, the "pure form" of biography. As with the concrete use of "abstract," Pynchon here suggests the most literal meaning of "biography": life writes in the material the slaves are charged with removing. The slaves see the significance of each item, "reading each occurrence," privy to these and other sordid details of their master's lives precisely because they are cut off from any larger discursive structures.

What knowledge the slaves of Cape Town possess, not just of those they serve, but of their own lives, does not extend beyond their community. Their history is "Indifferent to Visibility," a "Collective Ghost" (68). The brutal treatment they endure goes "unrecorded, charm'd invisible to history, invisible yet possessing Mass, and Velocity, able not only to rattle chains but to break them as well" (68). The description highlights the disjunction between the totality of occurrences and the small portion that get recorded and transmitted – that carry into the future as representatives of their age. Their exclusion from discourse does not eliminate the wrongs committed; the Dutch presence cannot eradicate this chasm in the terrain by not including it on the map.

In its repeated moves down the ladder – like Mason, as far down as possible – *Mason & Dixon* repeatedly draws attention to the objects from which discourse, their abstract representation, springs. However, the novel does not suggest it has privileged access to these objects; it calls attention to their remoteness by framing the narrative of Mason and Dixon's experiences within a narrative told in 1786, two decades later, by the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke. A Scheherazade figure, he lives with his sister, brother-in-law, niece and nephews "for as long as he can keep the children amus'd" (6). This is the

manifest reason for the amounts of romance and adventure, not to mention the several fantastic elements, in the many episodes he recounts. Beyond this frame there is still another, unidentified narrator who narrates Cherrycoke's narration, though this text contains the same markers of dialect and historical typography as Cherrycoke's. The multiple frames are often disorienting. Mitchum Huehls notes a particularly layered passage in which Dixon narrates the story of the perpetual motion watch given to him by his mentor, William Emerson. As Huehls describes it, "an unnamed narrator narrates the narrator Cherrycoke's exemplary narration of Dixon's narrative about the message of a watch that never stops running" (34). For Huehls these multiple frames demonstrate "the infinite subdivisibility of the instant," as each narrator arrests the narrative's forward movement (34). These frames are also layers of mediation separating the stories recounted from their multiple audiences, with each frame increasing the possibility of embellishment, inaccuracy, or pure fabrication. Rather than filtering out progressively more features, these narrators in fact multiply them. The act of fictionalizing, by detaching received, restrictive narratives from the territory they obscure, counterituitively points to a referential plenitude.

Throughout the text, referents are inexhaustible sources of narrative, capable of accommodating a seemingly infinite number of unique representations, and in so doing upsetting any unitary notion of history. A quarter through *Mason & Dixon*, Reverend Cherrycoke, recounts Charles Mason's time on the remote South Atlantic island of St. Helena, including what reads as a myth explaining the arbitrary relationship between artifacts and the discourse that attaches to them. Fearing for his sanity while separated from Dixon and in the company of depressive astronomer Nevil Maskelyn and the ghost of his dead wife, Mason flees, wandering towards the island's capital in a daze before finding himself at the "Jenkin's Ear Museum" (175). After gaining entrance by squeezing his way through a man-sized ear canal, Mason asks the curator, Nick Mournival, to "'just have a look [at the ear]…and be off,'" at which point Mason learns he must first watch the attendant show – an assemblage of performance, history, a "Disquisition upon Jenkin's Ear-*Ring*," and a musical salute to Jenkins himself (178).

As the show concludes a horrified Mason realizes that the ear, preserved in a jar of brine, has perked up and is listening. Mournival explains that "'she's one voracious Vessel,— can't get enough of human speech, she'll take anything, in any language'" (178). Mason now learns that he cannot leave until he speaks to the ear – until he whispers his "fondest Wish," as "Sailors and Whores and Company Writers without number who've found their way down here, who've cried their own desires into the Great Insatiable" (179). The ear, however, "only *listens* to Wishes,— she doesn't grant 'em" leading Mason, after whispering his wish for Dixon's safe voyage back from Cape Town, to reflect: "Till now he has never properly understood the phrase *Calling into a Void*,— having imagin'd it said by Wives of Husbands, or Teachers of Students. Here, however, in the form of the priapick Ear, is the Void, and the very anti-Oracle— revealing nothing, as it absorbs ev'rything. One kneels and begs, one is humiliated, one crawls on" (179). Beyond its existence as Jenkin's referential ear, the focal point for the set of discourses surrounding it (as dramatized by Mournival), the ear has a broader status as "the Void" – an insatiable hole at the center of existence. It only elicits the articulation of desire; it is a

focal point that, like some remote scientific monitoring station, takes the measure of those with whom it comes in contact, retaining the articulated desires it elicits as representative samples of these sailors, whores, writers – of Mason himself.

Once Mason has entered this referential territory, he can't be sure he made it out as himself or whether he remained in some kind of purgatory while the trace continued in the world as his stand-in. Though Mason can just see over the walls of the museum before he enters, he notices they are significantly higher once inside them. Completely removed from his surroundings he listens, like Jenkin's ear, as "ev'ry audible Nuance now comes clear to him, near and far, all of equal Loudness, from ev'ry part of the Town,— but invisible" (180). His inability to interact with the sources of these sounds suggests a form of death, and Mason considers, "In its suggestion of Transition between two Worlds, the space offers an invitation to look into his Soul for a moment, before passing back to the Port Town he has stepp'd from" (180). His return to the town is far from clear, however. The text jumps from his realization that there are no doors in the wall to the return trip to London: "no door-ways of any kind…then Rain, salt from the Leagues of Vacant Ocean…." (180). He confesses to Dixon: "I was in a State. I must have found the way out. Unless the real Mason is yet there captive in the exitless Patch, and I but his Representative" (180). He suggests a model of historical representation according to which the referential Mason is walled off from the discourse that surrounds him, unable to influence representations that, like the one in Pynchon's novel, may create him as they like. If the ear does function as the repository of an individual's discursive legacy, then the bond with Dixon that Mason's wish articulates would certainly account for how he has been remembered, as Pynchon's novel suggests.

Mason & Dixon's take on the distinction between the referential object and the surrounding discourse marks a departure from its treatment in Pynchon's early novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*. When, near the end of the novel, Oedipa Maas tracks down Professor Emory Bortz for information on the life of Renaissance playwright Richard Wharfinger, he and his graduate students explain the irrelevance of her distinction between "the historical Wharfinger" and "the verbal one" (124):

> 'The historical Shakespeare,' growled one of the grad students through a full beard, uncapping another bottle. 'The historical Marx. The historical Jesus.'
> 'He's right,' shrugged Bortz, 'they're dead. What's left?'
> 'Words.'
> 'Pick some words,' said Bortz. 'Them, we can talk about.' (124)

They suggest the distinction Oedipa should make is not between his biography and his writing; both are equivalent as discourse. She should distinguish, rather, between discursive and non-discursive fields, the latter lost to history and beyond the scope of academic study. Bortz, however, qualifies his restriction when Randy Driblette's recent production of Wharfinger's play, *The Courier's Tragedy*, is mentioned. Bortz explains Driblett's uncanny ability to conjure the writer's sprit independent of his texts:

"[Driblette] felt hardly any responsibility toward the word, really; but to the invisible field surrounding the play, its spirit, he was always intensely faithful. If anyone could have called up for you that historical Wharfinger you want, it'd've been Randy" (125). According to Bortz, nobody was closer to the author than Driblette, where he defines "author" as "the microcosm of that play as it must have surrounded Wharfinger's living mind" (125). When Oedipa first meets Driblette she's struck by "the incredible network of lines" around his eyes, which "seemed to know what she wanted, even if she didn't" (60). Attuned to subtler indices that provide the unique coordinates of a particular consciousness at a particular point in time, Driblette easily disregards words, "rote noises" that only crudely indicate a reality he sees from the inside: "I am the projector at the planetarium" (62).[18]

The authenticity of Driblett's epistemological leap, apparent in the play's staging, goes unquestioned in the novel. There is an (albeit implicitly acknowledged) authoritative notion of Wharfinger's "living mind" to which Driblett comes closer than anyone else. But if it's a special gift to imagine oneself into the mind of a historical figure in *The Crying of Lot 49*, in *Mason & Dixon* it is, though not sanctioned by any authoritative Bortz-like figure, made part of a natural tendency to endow others with subjectivity. No sooner do characters lay hold of the barest outline of apparent personhood than they begin to fabricate a consciousness. When the reality of history comes up in chapter thirty-five, once again concerning a Renaissance playwright (Shakespeare this time), the question surrounds the plays rather than the author. While Bortz and his graduate student are reluctant to acknowledge Wharfinger's existence beyond his textual traces, Ethelmer begins revealing details of the man on whom Shakespeare modeled Hamlet:

> 'What of Shakespeare?' Tenebrae still learning to be disingenuous, 'Those *Henry* plays, or the others, the *Richard* ones? Are they only make-believe History? Theatrickal rubbish?' as if finding much enjoyment in speaking men's names that are not 'Ethelmer.'
> 'Aye, and *Hamlet?*' Suggests the Rev[d], staring carefully at the youngsters in turn.

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[18] The mention of Shakespeare in a discussion on Renaissance revenge tragedies certainly brings *Hamlet* to mind, and the repetition of "words" points to one of its most famous exchanges:

>POLONIUS   What do you read, my lord?
>HAMLET   Words, words, words.
>POLONIUS   What is the matter, my lord?
>HAMLET   Between who?
>POLONIUS   I mean, the matter that you read, my lord. (2.2.191-5)

While the response of Bortz and his student would indicate they have similarly divorced words from matter Bortz, perhaps feeling the adoption of such a theoretical position is also a feigned madness, quickly accepts her "historical Wharfinger."

Her eyes a lash's width too wide, perhaps, 'Oh, but Hamlet wasn't real, was he?' not wishing to seem to await an answer from her Cousin, yet allowing him now an opening to show off.

Which Ethelmer obligingly saunters into. Of course he has the *Data.*

'All in all, a figure with an interesting Life of his own,— alas, this hopping, quizzing, murderously irresolute Figment of Shakespeare's, has quite eclipse'd for us the man who had to live through the contradictions of his earthly Life, without having it all re-figur'd for him.' (351)

Rather than restrict Hamlet to his finite number of lines, Ethelmer (albeit for show) will invent a whole past for him, full of the "contradictions" that a fictionalization would simplify. This creation of a territory for a fictional map – Ethelmer's invention of "data" from the life of Hamlet's historical model – reverses the graduate student's dismissal of any existence for Wharfinger beyond the texts he leaves behind. In another indication of *Mason*'s emphasis on the rich territory from which abstractions are drawn, Ethelmer shows off by referencing his broad factual knowledge; Bortz's graduate student, on the other hand, makes a show of his theoretical facility. Both rehearse a pompousness associated with two stereotypical scholars: the archival researcher and the theoretician. Even the affect in their reactions emphasizes a material/metaphysical distinction: Ethelmer's officious insight rehearses an enthusiasm for the data, while the graduate student's exasperation rehearses boredom with repeating the same theoretical maneuver.

Reducing Wharfinger's life to the totality of his remaining words renders speculation about any life beyond them, as with a fictional character's, irrelevant. Ethelmer's fatuous discourse on the life of the historical Hamlet, on the other hand, displays a natural inclination to preserve great unrecorded expanses in the lives of putatively referential subjects. Particularly in its representation of historical figures, *Mason & Dixon* poses challenges to the superiority of historical reconstructions that restrict themselves to fact.

Against unitary notions of history championed by Uncle Ives, who insists "No one has time, for more than one Version of the Truth" (350) and cautions against the seductive power of "these irresponsible narratives, that will not distinguish between fact and fancy," Cherrycoke's narration of past events strongly implies that even a spurious territory subtending the known facts, material and psychological, is a truer representation than what emerges from merely connecting those facts (350). Cherrycoke lays bare his creative method of accessing the past when he comes to Mason and Dixon's time with fellow Royal Society astronomer Nevil Maskelyne on St. Helena. The location's obscurity leads Uncle Ives to ask, "'Then how are we ever to know what happen'd among the three of 'm upon that little-known Island?'" (105). Cherrycoke's response is simply to rehearse a brief list of facts about Maskelyne and the Island over the next ten lines: he was there nearly a year and unable to make observations due to defective equipment; at twenty-nine it was his first time away from home; St. Helena was an "infamous Port of Call…dedicated to naught but the pleasures of Sailors" (106). Considering these unfavorable circumstances in light of his knowledge of Maskelyne's future as Astronomer Royal, Cherrycoke openly speculates that something had

to have prevented him from losing his mind; when his brother-in-law Mr. LeSpark quickly volunteers "An attack of Reason," Cherrycoke wastes no time beginning his extended account of the men's lives (though Dixon must return to Cape Town for most of this period) on the island (106).

Cherrycoke animates the bare facts which, on their own, reduce Maskelyne to his contributions to astronomy, by minimizing them; the narrative returns them to the proportional size they would have had within the vast field of lived experience. Maskelyne himself does much of this work of recontextualizing his life's encyclopedic bullet points; as he laments to Mason, "The World cannot understand me when I express myself" (144). At this early point in his career, the doubt and frustration surrounding his inability to communicate his scientific contributions occupy his thoughts to a far greater extent than the contributions history remembers. Of the historical figures in *Mason*, Maskelyne comes closest to DeLillo's Oswald insofar as his is the character in whom the limitations of representation are most apparent: "What use are Trines and Sextiles, if Human Discourse be denied me?" (144). While Oswald displays painful indications of his limited facility with human discourse, he still lacks Maskelyne's ability to communicate that limitation. We might say that Oswald *is* the mimetic limitation while Maskelyne, in expressing his frustration with that limitation, shows himself immeasurably rounder than his ignored letters and rejected monographs alone would indicate (144).[19]

Though Cherrycoke achieves this recontextualization of known facts by building from Ives' initial formula for the Maskelyne of St. Helena, "the attack of reason" fades from view as the island chapters progress. While the formula nestles those facts within the more detailed history and psychology Cherrycoke creates, his initially vivid portrait later shades into the astronomer's unknown depths. The young astronomer takes Mason's fears about the V.O.C.'s control to a paranoid extreme with the British East India Company, which he also believes to possess a god-like influence over his every action, thought, and dream (128). He believes the island a conscious creature, created by the Company to monitor its inhabitants. Only this "awareness of living upon a *Slumbering Creature*, compared to whose Size, we figure not quite as Lice…keeps us uniquely attentive, to Life so precarious, and what Civility is truly necessary, to carry it on" (128). An apparent poster child for panoptical reformation, Maskelyne is readable inside and out in terms of the Company norms he has internalized. But as his character accumulates detail, he begins to exceed the abstraction that had originally justified Cherrycoke's internal view, becoming increasingly mysterious. He eventually confesses to Mason his desire to help buy out the contract of a young German soldier, seduced into service by the promise of romantic adventure and now growing suicidal on the desolate island (Mason will later feel certain this soldier, Dieter, is a ghost (173)).

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[19] Within the novel only Captain Grant explicitly wishes for such a reduction to external traces while the *Seahorse*, the ship that carried Mason and Dixon on their initial voyage (aborted following a skirmish with the *l'Grand*) undergoes extensive repairs. Grant suffers through the long process, "camp'd like a Gypsy upon a waiting-list,…ever laboring to empty his mind, seeking to become but the sleek Purity of Ink upon Paper" (50).

Mason cannot understand, however; the story only draws his attention to his unstable companion's impenetrability: "The incident of the German Soldier, in Maskelyne's life, seems like St. Helena itself, the visible and torn Remnant of a Sub-History unwitness'd" (162). From the bare details Cherrycoke first recites he fills out a broader field of particulars only to indicate what they fail to reveal in any positive form. All they reveal, as Venus in its transit across the Sun's surface, is the outline of an unknown.

The St. Helena section performs the opposite function for Mason. If we return to his encounter with Jenkin's ear and the abrupt close that section brings to his time on the island, we find, as in the construction of Oswald's character in *Libra*, the past getting overwritten by what the subsequent course of events reveals as the essential feature of his identity. But while Oswald ultimately desires the coherent image of himself the media presents, Mason only inadvertently chooses a historical identity built on his association with Dixon when he whispers his false wish to the ear. The scene highlights the arbitrariness of future configurations of identity and events—how, in Jenkins' case, the ear displaces the man as it retroactively shapes his past in light of his disfigurement at the hands of the Spanish guarda-costa and the war it subsequently incited.

As is appropriate to myth, the story of the museum ascribes an intention to some chance feature of the world, here history's misrecognition and misrepresentation of Mason's life. It essentializes this one feature among countless others, investing it with governance over the whole of lived experience; like the V.O.C. in Cape Town, which rules "radially from a single Point," the feature radiates backward and forward in time, obscuring any details that do not support its privileged place. In Mason's case, the "fondest wish" he confesses to Jenkins' ear is a smoke screen that conceals a desire too personal to disclose in these or any other circumstances, yet this second-order wish becomes his representative: "His fondest Wish? That Rebekah live, and that,— but he will not betray her, not for this. What he whispers, rather, into the pervading scent of Brine and…something else, is, 'A speedy and safe passage for Mr. Dixon, back to this place. For his personal sake, of course, but for my Sanity as well'" (179). As mentioned above, Mason then exits only to find himself trapped in the museum's garden, at which point he loses consciousness, only coming to in a conversation where he relates his experiences to Dixon, and wonders if he might only be the real Mason's representative. But if the narrative then jumps to a moment after Dixon's safe return while Mason enjoys the company so vital to his mental health, the wish would seem granted. Why, if Mournival has stated that the ear does not grant wishes, would the narrative jump to this scene portraying the fulfillment of Mason's wish?

The ear does not change the course of events as they occur, only how they are framed. The offered wish functions as a narrative logic, organizing the representation of its confessor's life. It functions as death does for Benjamin and Brooks, orienting one's life in relation to a fixed point. Mason makes the connection explicit when he tells Dixon that his "wish too intently these days" is to "re-paint" the scene of his first meeting Rebekah so that "she might bear somehow her fate in her Face" (171).[20] While Mason claims to be distraught

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[20] The link to Freud's death drive is apparent in the painting as Mason's "wish" for Rebekah's foreknowledge of death. I discuss Pynchon's use of anachronism in *Mason & Dixon* below.

over his wife's innocence, as the scene's original painter he would be the origin of such an outlook. It is Mason who cannot retrospectively master the shock of losing Rebekah, and his helplessness in subsequent dealings with her ghost confirm his misattribution of innocence. As in the conversation with Dixon, so with the confession to the ear: Mason fails to give voice to his true sentiments. In dramatizing this withholding, the novel points to the obvious weakness in Collingwood and Wolfe's uncritical equation of thought and its verbal expression: the latter will almost always, as here, temper and falsify in countless ways and degrees according to the audience, even (and especially) when that audience consists of oneself.

The resulting version of Mason known to history, the "Representative" of the "real Mason," therefore doesn't reflect features of his life only visible, or even comprehensible, in light of his grief for his deceased wife (180). As in the novel, the actual Rebekah Mason died in 1759; Charles Mason left his two young sons to observe the transit in 1760, spending the better part of the next decade abroad. The novel suggests it is more faithful to the referential Mason to assume the motivation—his melancholy desire for escape—that led to his life's most noted achievement than to see the limits of the man in his resume. The latter representation removes his grief at the source, erasing his remaining time on the island and any possible subsequent visits by Rebekah, even Mason's possible reflections on her prior visits. The narrative, temporarily governed by the stripped-down Mason of future Mason-Dixon fame, finds nothing worth recounting before Dixon's return; it performs the act of erasure that follows from the stated wish.

Pynchon's novel repeatedly advances the view that reducing a life, a culture, a course of events to known facts is more an act of fictionalization than inventing content to fill in the many long expanses of unrecorded time. Cherrycoke lays out the general view of history from which imaginative reconstructions of the past, like the St. Helena section, are derived in a passage from his *Christ and History*. The text advocates the co-existence of multiple versions of the same past, along with the multiple liberties with fact such a plurality implies:

> Facts are but the Play-things of lawyers,—Tops and Hoops, forever a-spin…. Alas, the Historian may indulge no such idle Rotating. History is not Chronology, for that is left to lawyers,— nor is it Remembrance, for Remembrance belongs to the People. History can as little pretend to the Veracity of the one, as claim the Power of the other,— her Practitioners, to survive, must soon learn the arts of the quidnunc, spy, and Taproom Wit,— that there may ever continue more than one life-line back into the Past we risk, each day, losing our forbears in forever,— not a Chain of single links, for one broken Link could lose us All,—rather, a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong, vanishing into the Mnemonick Deep, with only their Destination in common. (349)

Courts cannot abide equally valid versions of a single fact or chronology, and a nation, race, or other collective identity will not cohere without sharing the same version of the past. Held up against the legal admissibility of the one and (given that the treatise would have been

written close to 1789, the time of Cherrycoke's narration) the revolutionary potency of the other—qualities that stem from the unitary nature of these accounts of the past—history's fictionalizing nature comes into relief. The quidnunc (a gossip), spy, and taproom wit all work with fragmentary information around which they construct a larger narrative to suit their ends, the first building up to scandal, the second to intrigue or conspiracy, and the third to absurdity. The aspects under which they view their information ensure that each will find the larger story they desire. The instability of past—the common destination of all these lines of inquiry—is also a function of time as well. The lines vanish into the "Mnemonick Deep," hinting at some assumed primeval contact with the past that gets recorded and travels forward in time. However, as they vanish, they are only tethered to their point of origin. History, then, does not represent the past so much as it represents the thought structures contemporary with the moment of its creation.

Mason & Dixon is, likewise, both a representation (through several layers of mediation) of the lives of its title characters and an index of contemporary structures of thought. Several critics have noted how the novel highlights this feature of its construction in a number of anachronisms scattered throughout the text. As Christy L. Burns observes in her account of the novel's postmodern historiography, "While other writers, like James Joyce, have invoked parallax as a perspectival method in order to challenge univocal narrative form, Pynchon works the concept more radically into his fictional treatment of historiography" (1). "In Mason & Dixon," she offers, "Pynchon's temporal or historical coordinates are the mappable difference, measurable via his synchronization of the 1760s charted alongside the 1990s. His readers thus will interpret history as a dialogue between the differences and the uncanny similarities of that time's 'angle' and their own" (3). Burns makes keen observations regarding this temporal parallax and the novel's historiography, but she along with subsequent critics have not incorporated the full range of anachronism, which would worry the easy equivalence between the time periods.

The most recognizable anachronisms stem from television and pop culture, as when Captain Smith advises a young Cherrycoke to avoid "Coffee, Tobacco and Indian Hemp," cautioning, "If you must use the latter, do not inhale" (10). The reference to Bill Clinton is recalled later when Mason and Dixon encounter George as a stoner (278). We later encounter the stamp of Star Trek in the private salute of the "Elect Cohens of Paris": "the Fingers spread two and two, and the Thumb held away from them likewise, said to represent the Hebrew letter Shin and to signify, "Live long and prosper" (485). The very next page contains a discussion of an American Golem only able to speak "Eyeh asher Eyeh," glossed by an apparent forebear of Popeye's: "'That is, "I am that which I am," ' helpfully translates a somehow nautical-looking Indiv. with gigantic Fore-Arms, and one Eye ever a-Squint from the Smoke of his Pipe" (486). Elizabeth Hinds locates "1990s-style coffee gourmandizing in every location, however remote, that Mason and Dixon visit" (198). According to her, "this constant intrusion of later history into eighteenth-century temporal space creates a 'fold' in linear time;…these anachronisms redraw past and future, and…reconfigure both what does and did happen into what might have happened in both the recorded eighteenth century and the fictive one" (198-9).

Burns places the mid-eighteenth century and the late-twentieth on equivalent terms, while Hinds sees the latter intruding on the former. However, I believe the larger purpose of

these anachronisms is to highlight the inadequacy of historical representation by, as discussed earlier, returning (or performing a return) to literal or material sources from which contemporary modes of thought are derived. We might also see this return to a broader base in the novel's relation to its literary antecedent, *Ulysses*. Burns rightly observes that parallax is more "radically" integrated into Pynchon's text, but, perhaps because it's such an obvious point, she doesn't dwell on its referential justification. Pynchon, starts at the literal procedure and derives multiple figurative meanings from it. In *Ulysses*, on the other hand, parallax lacks literal significance; it only has symbolic significance.

In isolation, this distinction may be of little value beyond an account of Pynchon's anxiety of influence. However, if we examine the well-known examples more closely, or the use of anachronism more broadly, we see it as part of a larger tendency to move down the abstraction ladder. Or rather, anachronism here often superimposes twentieth-century abstractions on the territory from which they sprung. George Washington did grow hemp on his plantation, and the novel's stoner Washington takes American's contemporary relation to marijuana back to its source. The description of the Vulcan greeting works the same way. Though it doesn't originate in the eighteenth century, the description of the gesture's meaning is accurate, as Leonard Nemoy, who developed the greeting for *Star Trek*, describes it in his autobiography (103-4). (I would have to leave it to Brian McHale to explain the relation between Eliza's frame narrative and *The Flying Nun* (*Edinburgh*, 255).)

Other instances of anachronism merely stage a return to material origins, as when Mason encounters difficulty squeezing down the entrance canal to the Jenkin's Ear Museum owing "to a certain *Corporate Surplus* accumulated at Cape Town" (176, original emphasis). The term was not used to refer to a corporation's earnings over operating expenses and dividends until the twentieth century; here it may encourage us to read contemporary legal definitions of corporate personhood back into the V.O.C. We might even say the notion, discussed above, that bodily traces are readable as a pure form of "Biography" gestures toward a literal meaning the word never possessed: the bodily traces left on one's laundry.

When Cherrycoke refers to these bodily traces, he describes them as "the *Data* of Biography" (89). "Data" or "Datum" appears thirteen times in *Mason & Dixon*, and nearly all of the uses are anachronistic. Fr. Boscovich's Book contains "a great Variety of *Data* within" (474); near the end of his life, Mason primarily works with "a set of Logarithmick Tables,— reducing and perfecting Mayer's solar and lunar *Data*" (768). Particularly in examples that impose the term on human experience, breaking it down into its component parts, does the contemporary usage make itself felt. In addition to the data of biography, Mason and Dixon share the "*Data* of their Dreams" (71, original emphasis), and, as mentioned above, Ethelmer pretends to knowledge of the data of the historical Hamlet's life (351).

This is not the only scientific or technical term that frames the content of the narrative, however. The novel also uses "Net-Work" in its abstract sense, not until well into the nineteen century used to describe various interconnected systems (*OED*). In one frequently quoted passage which casts America as Britannia's dream, the new territory serves as a repository of pure possibility "wherever 'tis not yet mapped" (345). These fantasy realms are "ever behind the sunset, safe till the next Territory to the West be seen and recorded, measur'd and tied in, back into the Net-Work of Points already known, that slowly

triangulates its Way into the Continent, changing all from subjunctive to declarative…" (345). The territory bounded by these points becomes what is rather than what might be; recorded and measured, the formerly unknown becomes communicable as data. Like the conclusion of the novel, which speaks of "more points being tied in…as above, new Stars are recorded and named and plac'd in Almanacks," this triangulation ultimately renders the physical universe in a table of figures (772). In a version of the V.O.C.'s pervasive commodification, here the new territories are given an abstract equivalence as an accumulation of data. To be tied in is to become part of the larger discursive structure—part of the accumulation of data.

The overtly anachronistic descriptions of these forms of data, of the triangulated networks that call to the reader's mind contemporary telecommunications or electrical grids, is the novel's overt way of acknowledging that the past is necessarily filtered through contemporary modes of thought. The novel enacts Alan Liu's program for postmodern historicism *avant la lettre*. The introduction to his *Local Transcendence: Essays on Postmodern Historicism and the Database* closes with the observation that "postmodern historicism introduces the thought of *mediation* in the relation of the past to future" (24-5). He further recommends that it should signal this mediation "through actual media innovation or allusions to such innovation in its own form, thereby methodically bring to view a sense of simultaneous sameness and otherness in our relation to history," though such innovation, he explains, is "really any mediation that produces a sense of anachronism" (25). Anachronism felt as such produces a version of Cherrycoke's model of history—a history visibly filtered through a present thought structure. For Liu, correspondences are highlighted and the past's otherness is acknowledged rather than assimilated into the mediating structure. This sense of history's sameness and otherness is not available, however, when the mediating structures of thought are naturalized, when the discursive territory they map is conflated with the totality of the past.

Carolyn Porter raises this concern in her critique of the New Historicism—in what Catherine Gallagher, summing up Porter's criticism, describes as "the formalist equivalent of colonialism" (37). Indeed, the methodological problem Porter diagnoses in the critical practice stems from the extent to which the texts on which it focuses stand as representatives of the larger culture. Thus, she argues that in Stephen Greenblatt's "Invisible Bullets" "analysis of a particular textual phenomenon is presented in terms that extend well beyond these textual limits" (755). Her problem, however, is with the "gap between two discursive spaces," between a "historically specifiable culture" and "an orthodox literary text" rather than between a discursive space broadly conceived and a non-discursive space (755). The dubious equation between these spaces appears a function of an unchecked interpretive desire that would rather stretch out available texts to represent a far broader territory in the past than acknowledge either the artificiality of this procedure or the past's unavailability.

Within *Mason & Dixon*, historical representation continually performs this double operation of creating a past unrecorded by history and gesturing towards the unavailability of such a past. The significance of territories of the unknown is not in their potential availability. Better methodology or the discovery of new documents does not bring the past closer. Like Sir William Johnson and his band, chasing after the surveying party but, "as if enacting a discarded draft of Zeno's Paradox, never quite successful in attacking even the

rearmost of the Party's stragglers, who remain just out of range," history here is only approached asymptotically (706). As such, like the overwhelming spew of data in Nicholas Branch's office, or the possibility of an infinite proliferation of detail in Gary and April's motel room, the visible, historical traces are necessarily something other than what was originally sought. When Mason and Dixon become one with their historical traces, are fixed as their discursive remnants, they (as described in the course of their counterfactual Western movement), "like certain Stars in Chinese Astrology,…lose their invisibility, and revert to the indignity of being observ'd for earthly purposes" (707). History and historical figures are akin to what Dixon imagines "a part of thy Soul that doesn't depend on Memories, that lies further than Memories" (253), or what Mason believes he's found when, seeing in Eliza an exact physical replica of Rebekah, he imagines his former wife "'The Slate cleanly wash'd….[having, a]s in Plato's Tale of Er,…drunk from Lethe, and begun anew'" (537). The past either becomes available as a product of interpretive desire, or remains, like certain Cape Town markets and gatherings, forever unknown.

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