

Recuperating Deliberation in Early-Postmodern US Fiction

by

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Introduction

This project begins from a simple problem. We don't have precise explanations for how anti-realist fiction can make constructive arguments that validly influence readers' beliefs about the real world. The standard account of fiction's mind-changing work relies on the trope of immersion: when we read, our minds go "into" another world, we observe its objects and events, vicariously experience it, interact with its characters as if they were other humans, and eventually our minds come back out, allowing us to adjudicate the relationship between that world and our own. What, though, of fictions that refuse to let us get immersed, that remind us constantly of their fictionality, textuality, conventionality? The standard argument in this case, closely associated with the term "postmodernism" for reasons I'll examine later, tends to be that such fiction, by interrupting the assumptions that guarantee the immersive experience in conventional fiction, achieves a negative argument, invalidating those assumptions, and hence challenging the ideology associated with them. If the conventional immersive novel has, since Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, been associated with the development of bourgeois individualism, the presumption that we can take an objective stance on the structures and movements of cultures, societies, and ideologies, the presumption that human mental experience is linear and discursive, and so on, then anti-mimetic fiction can argue that none of this is true, and can point to at least some of the sources of the false consciousness. Yet this leaves anti-mimetic fiction's philosophical capacities and commitments entirely supervenient on those of the realism it rejects. All non-realist experiments then bear a single rhetoric. Both its advocates and its detractors have seemed content to agree on this, even as throughout a half-century's concerted investigation of the genre they have disagreed on so much else.

The current project demonstrates the limits of this consensus, and takes steps toward an understanding of prose fiction that allows for individual antimimetic

forms (those that render the fiction explicit about being only words on a page and won't let the reader get immersed in 'another world') to entail equally individuated constructive arguments in response to identifiable historical contexts. I make my case for anti-mimetic fiction's constructive communicative capacities by examining first-generation US postmodernism, and in particular how authors of this generation used distinct stylistic forms to make different arguments about the viability of practical, deliberative individual agency.

Since such agency was the great philosophical enemy of poststructuralism, my demonstration that US postmodern fiction was widely committed to arguing for viable deliberative agency will, I hope, undermine the equation between that fiction and postmodern philosophy: an equation that institutionally underpinned the development and promulgation of the idea that formal antimimesis entails deconstructive rhetoric. The historical accident of the equation between "postmodern" experimental fiction and "postmodern" philosophy has led to the rhetorical reductionism that can't make sense of the distinctiveness of novels like Joseph McElroy's *PLUS* (1977), and it's that kind of distinctiveness that the method I develop in this project aims to do justice to.

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PLUS embodies the kind of postmodern antimimetic fiction that is almost impossible to reconcile with that conflation. Its self-conscious disassembling and reconstitution of traditional prose modes for representing conscious thought allow it to first conjure a situation of seeming agentic paralysis, but then to develop and represent a viable alternative to it, all through modulations of style.

PLUS concerns a disembodied brain orbiting the earth. Imp Plus, the brain in question, was salvaged from a terminally ill scientist and sent into orbit on a satellite processing solar energy: Imp Plus' job is to transmit numerical data about that processing back to earth. Through prose structures that evolve with each chapter, the novel traces how the brain, through its mastery of communication devices and its own linguistic capacity for reflexive self-consideration, develops a version of agency that lets

its consciousness exceed its physical limitations, and finally break its own orbit. McElroy, who's still publishing, published his first novel in 1963, making him a peer of better known "postmodern" authors like William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, or Don DeLillo. *PLUS'* precise sentence-level refigurations of the conventions of prose psychology and its concern with the process of attaining practical agency in the face of material and philosophical obstacles make it, I'll argue, something like a culmination of the first generation of postmodern writing, and an epitome of self-conscious fiction's ability to make constructive philosophical arguments through style. But precisely for this reason, it's almost impossible to make sense of within existing critical vocabularies for either US postmodernism or anti-mimetic fiction per se. Literary theory about either almost unilaterally concludes or presumes that such fiction's commitments must be deconstructive and anti-agential. Novels like *PLUS* ought to force a reconsideration.

PLUS, like the other novels I'll examine, *makes arguments through style*. The argumentation I'll discuss in more depth later, but it's important to clarify that I use "style" in the sense presumed by the field of literary stylistics: as the identifiable and consistent grammatical features of sentences that characterise a larger text. I don't, by contrast, mean some more general signature imprint that identifies multiple works with their author. Similarly I prefer "style" to "form," which in the study of postmodern fiction as elsewhere is too often used as an overall characterization of a fiction's design or even , rather than identifying specifically linguistic phenomena. *PLUS*, we'll see, is stylistically notable precisely because at each stage of the brain's evolving capacities, McElroy writes within newly evolving grammatical and syntactical constraints: it's a novel of multiple related styles. Some of the other fictions I'll examine stick with one such style throughout their span, others organize passages written in a number of styles. What matters in each case is, first, that at least one style within each novel is distinctive to that novel—among the things that make these texts antimimetic is that their reformulation of prose conventions generates sentence-rulebooks that are often (like many of those through which *PLUS* evolves) unique in literature, and hence have to be encountered *qua* styles rather than granting us transparent access to the novels' posited

worlds—and second, that it is thematically salient: syntactical structures in such fiction are content as much as vehicle. In particular, given these fictions' shared interest in the possibility of deliberative agency, sentence-structures for representing mental phenomena often embody differing attitudes about consciousness, and in these novels, which so often set differing styles against each other within the framework of a single text, the styles interact as competing worldviews, literal arguments.

Authors of this generation were quite explicit about how this textualist orientation meant their fiction should be read. John Barth's much-misunderstood anti-mimetic manifesto of 1966, "The Literature of Exhaustion," resolves two plausibly conflicting insights. First, it's possible for a literary genre to stagnate and lose touch with advancing understandings of human minds and cultures: "A good many current novelists write turn-of-the-century-type novels, only in more or less mid-twentieth-century language and about contemporary people and topics; this makes them less interesting (to me) than excellent writers who are also technically contemporary" (66). But technical contemporaneity is difficult because there's a finite supply of genuinely new forms, which, as Barth for one believed were all but exhausted. Nevertheless, says Barth, novelistic forms *can* remain practically and philosophically relevant to the advancing world, by being self-reflexive about repurposing old forms in new contexts. They must give up the project of inventing new mimetic forms: the successive invention of forms like free indirect discourse or the stream of consciousness toward the impression of ever less mediated readerly immersion in the minds of fictional people. Leaving that project behind, we could cultivate a model of literary reading based less on illusory immersion than a genre-literate awareness of the fiction's fictionality, prose-form's conventionality: "it might be conceivable to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature... if one goes about it the right way, aware of what one's predecessors have been up to"(68). Such an approach would be "valid" in the sense of no longer relying on the temporary commitment to the existence and reality of fictive entities that immersive reading requires: a commitment invalid due to its resting on

unreal grounds, which had hence haunted literary theoreticians since Aristotle with the spectre of deception and false consciousness.

PLUS' chapter-by-chapter evolutions in sentence-level form, then, don't give us access to an inhabitable human mind, but reorganize the grammatical components of the traditional literary presentation of minds in order to make an argument—"technically contemporary" in both the Barth-ian formal and the science-of-consciousness senses—about the role discursive mental phenomena can play in the development of practical agency even as growing focus on mental processes' dependence on embodied feeling had challenged the precedence and practical relevance of discursive thought.

Imp Plus' prose-form evolution begins with a language composed almost entirely of simple single-clause sentences.

The impulses drew Imp Plus with their messages. And Imp Plus drew them. Through the brightness the messages inclined along a gradient. Imp Plus inclined to receive them. He inclined through the brightness. The brightness was good. It folded. It folded the messages. He could send messages. He could talk on the Concentration Loop. The brightness packed around him. A part of the brightness became him.

The brightness was the Sun (5).

Imp Plus' agency here is restricted to inclining, drawing, and sending - all things done at the behest of ground control. The moment that prompts an evolution is a syntactical discovery: in a sequence of primarily transitive verbs, Imp Plus' ability to talk on the Communication Loop that keeps him in touch with earth—"could send"—is intransitive. From the possibility of talking without a specified interlocutor, of using language reflexively, we arrive at the first major change in his state, as "he" and the bright monitor that tracks his transmissions of data about sunlight "become" the same consciousness. The blending of the brightness of the monitor and the brightness of the sunlight, meanwhile, suggests that his consciousness and agency span two realms: the physical and the communicative.

Almost immediately, his self-awareness of this state leads him to feel and understand what he has lost in the process of disembodiment, and hence to become aware of his agentive limits. Yet this awareness is the condition for another new step towards redeveloping agency:

From the message pulses through this change he knew his loss was real. His loss of all but a fraction. [...] Everywhere he went there was a part just missing. A particle of difference.. And in its place an inclination. A sharp drop. [...] He thought of not answering, and this was a new thought, and he felt a trace of thought all over, and like a ray he fell everywhere after the trace which was the absence close to his heart but alight with inclination that was more than gradient though it was gradient (7/10).

Bodilessness leads to a sensory world that, defined by communicative range, is “everywhere.” His new agency is itself communicative: the possibility of not answering when he is asked for data. This becomes both the condition for advances in reflexive consciousness (the awareness that a thought is new to him) and the basis for his awareness that mental distribution might transcend physical location. New thoughts are *felt* “everywhere” all at once, even as they’re determined by “the trace which was the absence close to his heart but alight with inclination that was more than gradient though it was gradient.” This multiply reflexive sentence—by far the most complexly constructed by this point of the novel—makes a spatial understanding of the brain’s communication network the condition for the evolution of complex language constructions, hence of the ability to think beyond the response to data questions, and hence to communicate with itself. The ability to perceive one’s thoughts from outside themselves becomes the reflexive precondition of deliberate agency. And McElroy conveys this growing repertoire of preconditions through the novel’s growing repertoire of sentence-structures.

As the novel goes on, Imp Plus recovers earthly memories, becomes able to judge the project he’s part of, able to store and regulate the solar energy that fuels his communication system, able to shut it on and off at will, able to control the organic growth of the plant matter that the satellite uses to test the energy system, able to project himself into that matter so as to regain sensory physicality, and, most crucially,

able to distribute his consciousness throughout the communication loop by reconciling two of his newly controllable functions—the processing of energy, the communication of information—into a single form of consciousness he calls the “lattice”: essentially an ability to direct energy around a visualized grid outside himself just as he does information. In combination with his reflexive capacities he is then able to internalize the lattice’s energy-channels so as to direct the growth of new physical brain-parts. Each of these steps is registered in stylistic terms, which then become preconditions for further steps. While the novel’s syntax of consciousness briefly coincides with what Barth called “turn-of-the-century” novelistic conventions at its halfway point, the second half of the novel moves decisively beyond them to establish newer forms. The development is expressed with generic self-consciousness when Imp Plus finds his expanding repertoire of consciousness incompatible with his earthbound interlocutors:

“He had them again, he thought; and he went on. The lattice, he felt, also wished to know; or Imp Plus was one part of the lattice’s wish. But answering Cap Com that the sight he had had had been solid yet possibly not *had* but something else, Imp Plus saw into the flesh of his past motion: only deep enough to think what would make them believe. Yet then deep enough to let him feel further, as if a sliver had been implanted in him out of sight by him himself, why did he want them to believe him?” (208).

Imp Plus’s lattice-distributed consciousness still relies on the communication loop that keeps him in touch with the human ground control. The problem is that those controllers, stuck in their existing assumptions about singularly embodied consciousness, can’t interact with the full scope of the lattice he is mastering even as they constitute nodes in it. Imp Plus’ awareness of his own uncertainty about whether “wish” comes from him or from the lattice or from both finds expression in the unusual recursiveness of “had”: we’re at the syntactic stage where the simultaneous difference and overlap of agentive consciousnesses within the same field pushes the limits of processable earthbound language. In questioning to what degree insights and ideas and experiences have to be “had” by a locatable determinate individual, Imp Plus also realizes the difficulty of communicating experiences and wishes that depend on having transcended “the flesh of his past motion” to people still trapped in a form of

consciousness tied to that flesh. The kind of embodied consciousness to which he initially aspired to return is now a drag and a threat on his growing sense of self and capacity. So, McElroy seems to suggest, the future of the novel might come from imagining beyond the attempt to perfect immersive mimicry of nineteenth-century ideas of the active mind and self. What started out as a Barth-style breakdown and reassembly of “exhausted” conventions provides the ground for the kind of novelty Barth had thought impossible to generate again.

If the novel ended with this speculative articulation of a lattice-spanning consciousness, then *PLUS* could still perhaps be read as another piece of anti- or –post-humanist postmodernism, uninterested in individual, deliberative, practical agency. Stressing that speculative lattice-mind’s incompatibility with the earthbound, it could leave us with the intractable paralysis or deferred resolution typically attributed to postmodern fiction by critics who associate it with poststructural deconstruction. But the novel’s final narrative crux, resolving the single-brain syntax with which it began, finds a space within the new formation for a version of individual action. Imp Plus’ final act is to sabotage his own orbit and crash to earth, precisely in order to preserve the lattice he once grounded against the earthbound communicators’ efforts to constrain him and thus undermine it.

He foresaw a fiery carom, he saw his own IMP containing the lattice like a planar field step into space so deep[...] and he was drawn by this chance until he saw that it really was his if he wanted[...] he thought[...] that what he and they had together drawn into a circuit of conception could best hold elliptically distinct if he became an absence (215).

This final acts dawn in terms of “foreseeing” a “chance” that he is “drawn” by “until he saw that it really was his.” In this way, McElroy leads us back to the vocabulary of “drawing,” “inclining,” “absence,” and “chance” that, at the novel’s outset, signalled Imp Plus bare-minimum capacities. Having been preconditional origins of the evolution the novel traces, these remain—so long as they can still be subordinated to “his”—the terms through which a capacity for embodied individual agency persists—maintaining a “real” “him”—within the distributed consciousness.

The novel ends, after Imp Plus' destruction, with a single paragraph whose focalizing consciousness is the lattice-persistent "thought" itself:

thought wondering then what chances now turned upon this fresh absence that would be as lasting as the glint of its arrival must have been brief for any who saw it in the sky: thought wondering, too, if at last the great lattice had let this happen or had been surprised (215).

"Thought" now wonders about the intentions of "the great lattice" even as in the absence of Imp Plus' embodied "him" it depends on the lattice for existence. This reflexive awareness of absence was what first allowed Imp Plus to consider refusals, which let him conceive of positive actions: the lattice itself, in other words, has entered the prose structures of thought that allowed Imp Plus' transcendence of disembodiment, and the question McElroy leaves us on is what higher level the lattice itself might come to function among. The novel thus elaborates a single cycle: the development of a consciousness from a condition that seemed to limit it to one in which it could provide the ground for a further, second-stage, overcoming of limit. Like Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker* (1937), in which an earthbound man's consciousness travels through the universe taking part in ever-widening frames of consciousness and agency, from telepathy to planetary and galactic levels of consciousness, McElroy gives us a stage by stage account of what supra-human agency might look like. But unlike Stapledon, McElroy locates the basic capacities of these further models in the human capacity for linguistic self-reflexivity, and, more crucially, where Stapledon's narrator tells the story in unchanging, essentially journalistic terms, McElroy conveys his argument entirely by organized modulations of style. His deconstruction of prose-psychological conventions is all in the service of a speculative reconstruction that both makes space for capable individual agency and suggests its compatibility with something even greater, even more constructive. And to achieve this, like Barth, he has to make his prose components opaque, has to make them signify in relation to the history of consciousness-representation, and then rearrange those significations into something that signifies beyond what we already know.

PLUS' self-consciousness about its manipulation of existing stylistic conventions is absolutely central to its argument about what minds are, how they relate to embodiment, and what capacities they might have beyond our present state of evolution. The very qualities that make it formally "postmodern," then, are those through which it makes an argument entirely at odds with standard equations between postmodern fiction's rhetoric and the commitments of poststructuralism. His optimism about the possibility of recovering a stable self, of putting language in the service of action, of imperfect cognition as a spur to decision rather than a paralyzing obstacle, and the novel's culmination in an act of achieved agentive responsibility, all set him opposition to the tenets of the philosophy most often associated with his generation of writers. As antimimetic fiction gets read under the aegis of postmodern fiction, so the philosophical commitments of antimimetic fiction get read under the aegis of the canonically "postmodern" philosophy of poststructural deconstruction. Anti-cosmic fiction is too often understood as a mere expression of deconstruction's philosophical underpinnings. As Michael LeMahieu notes in order to motivate his own rereading of the importance of logical positivism to the era's fiction:

Because the canonization of postmodern fiction occurred concurrently with the rise of theory, the textual attributes that continue to qualify as postmodern tend [in current criticism] to illustrate theory's claims... That coherence comes at the price of circumscribing the scope of postwar literature by ironically limiting the postmodern literary canon to those texts that imitate a poststructuralist theoretical paradigm that is based on decidedly anti-mimetic claims" (17/8).

Even in his painstakingly detailed rereading of the philosophical impetus behind mid-century fiction, founded on his awareness of the non-inevitability of the identification of postmodern theory and literature, LeMahieu ends up preserving the association between antimimesis and poststructuralism.

The canonization process he notes was far from inevitable, fulfilling contingent institutional exigencies, but the equation has persisted into an unhelpfully procrustean axiom that regulates almost all discussion of antimimetic fiction. In Appendix A, I survey the critical history by which equations between postmodern fiction and deconstructive philosophizing were canonized despite their comparatively fringe origins

in the manifestos of a small group of late-1960s authors. McElroy is not the only experimental author of the era whose stylistic innovations serve rhetorical purposes entirely at odds with the anti-mimetic=deconstructive axiom that now underpins almost all academic research on non-immersive fiction. My test-case for the error of conflating the era's fiction and literary theory is to examine postmodern *fiction's* concerted interest in developing optimistic accounts of how deliberative agency might remain viable even under the challenges the previous century threw at it. In the rest of this project I examine novels by Barth, William Gaddis, EL Doctorow, and Thomas Pynchon. They and many of their peers share McElroy's interest in questions of deliberative agency, his stylistic innovativeness, and his essentially optimistic way of putting the latter in service of the former.

The Postmodern Project Novel: A Varied Genre

Abandoning the modernist formal pursuit of mimesis—the quest for forms more immersive than the Joycean stream of consciousness—is part of what makes these novelists' work more than a mere expression of their own era's widespread, post-existential antifoundational scepticism.¹ Daniel Punday, examining the connections between poststructuralist deconstruction and the literature of its era, rightly notes that

especially in America, when these writers describe their own goals, they rarely emphasize deconstruction as desirable in and of itself. Indeed, these writers often speak in seemingly traditional terms about discovering the natural aesthetic bases for new fiction... New fiction requires new criteria, but such criteria will be rooted in the essentials of the medium" (*Narr/DeC* 48-49).

Punday's vocabulary of roots and bases lets us read the anti-mimesis advocated by writer-critics like Barth and William Gass in terms of literal construction: they want literature to proceed on a stabler—more "valid," in Barth's term—conception of the "essentials of [its] medium," which for both means acknowledging that literature's

¹ Larry McCaffery distinguishes postmodern experiments from modern experiments, for example, on the basis that for the earlier era, "most of the really significant experimentation tended to be largely extensions of realistic methods, especially the attempts of writers to develop methods of delving deeply

medium is language rather than the objects of posited worlds.² Its methods for conjuring those worlds are a matter of linguistic conventions we have naturalized into transparency but whose valid capacities rely on an acknowledgment of their contingency and a reclamation of their opacity.

PLUS investigates distributed consciousness, but doesn't revel in directionless decentering of the kind privileged by Derrida or late-Bakhtinians like Linda Hutcheon; its formal play with spatial setting and the conflict of worlds physical, mental, and linguistic serves an argument about consciousness' capacities, rather than merely undermining modernist assumptions as Brian McHale, in his hugely influential account of postmodern fiction's proliferating worlds, would have it; if Frederic Jameson, even more influentially, suggests that postmodern fiction is flat both affectively and in terms of form, then *PLUS*' connections of melancholy memories from before the disembodiment and a kind of rapturous anticipation of future stages of consciousness set it on a different affective plane, while its step by step evolution of form, closely tied to a model of cognitive progress, is the very opposite of undifferentiated flat parody. It's not a novel about the art-life relationship, not an exercise in immanent objecthood, not an expression of the incoherence of reason, and, though *Imp Plus* begins the novel in a tough situation for a prospective agent, it treats an awareness of the structures of language as a path toward that agency, rather than a matrix of endless paralyzing deferral. And yet Hutcheon, Jameson, and McHale, having written their unifying accounts of postmodern form in the 1980s out of a concerted engagement with postmodern philosophy, remain the three most influential accounts of the formal qualities of McElroy's generation of novels. Why?

These novels take post-existential challenges to practical, deliberative agency as their starting points. *Imp Plus*' passive state at the novel's opening reflects early postmodern literature's general preoccupation with states of agentive paralysis. The

² Though Punday makes the case for reading this fiction deconstructively, his vocabulary of roots and bases sets Barth and Gass in explicit opposition to Derrida, whose most influential writing for the era's literary critics was the essay "Structure, Sign, and Play" with its emphasis on the contingency intrinsic to the vocabulary of structural foundation on which the human sciences erected themselves.

preface to Joan Didion's era-embodying collection of essays *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* (1968) stipulates that its title essay emerged from a state "paralyzed by the conviction that writing was an irrelevant act, that the world as I had understood it no longer existed. If I was to work again at all, it would be necessary for me to come to terms with disorder." Her next novel, *Play It As It Lays* (1971), begins with its heroine *seeking* modes of paralysis in order to reconcile herself to her institutionalisation, her lack of access to her hospitalised daughter, and her involvement in the death of her nihilistic associate BZ. Choosing to live by the disconnective motto "nothing applies," she aims to believe in a world without belief or cause for action, and fantasizes about states of numbness or total levellings of value or individuality—"The notion of general devastation had for Maria a certain sedative effect"—as a response to "peril," which she fears less as a physical threat than for its relation to causation and hence to deservingness. Yet over its course, the novel traces her "coming to terms with disorder" in terms of her turning this attraction to nothingness into a faith in its asymptotic distance that necessarily refuses BZ's conclusion that the desirability of nothingness entails suicide. Maria thus establishes a minimalist ground for the minimal action of going on, continuing to "play." Thomas Pynchon's first novel *V.* (1963) in part follows Benny Profane, a "Schlemmihl" wilfully resigned to putting his destiny in the hands of inanimate objects, while *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) features the song "Sold on Suicide" in which a young man can't kill himself until he has explicitly renounced every conceivable aspect of life, a project that keeps him from acting and hence keeps him alive. Most fundamentally, meanwhile, Barth's early novel *The End of the Road* (1958) investigates what he called "cosmopsis"; the paralyzing contemplation of the vastness of existential relevance, of the infinity of considerations present to every act. In its iconic scene, narrator Jacob Horner goes to a train station planning on a random day trip, but a cosmoptic paralysis descends:

it was there that I simply ran out of motives... there was no reason, either, to go back to the apartment hotel, or for that matter to go anywhere. There was no reason to do anything. My eyes... were sightless, gazing on eternity, fixed on ultimacy, and when that is the case there is no reason to do anything—even to change the focus of one's eyes (323).

The novel begins with cosmopsis, and traces Horner's wilful attempts to avoid action, commitment, selfhood. Paralysis—as a starting point and as something often wilfully pursued by characters who believe they have something to fear from agency—is as central a preoccupation of postmodern fiction as the paralyzing awareness of our lack of sovereignty is of postmodern theory.

But precisely because this is where all these novels begin, this paralyzing challenge to deliberative agency is not the limit of what they have to offer by way of rhetoric and insight. Amy Elias, in a study of postmodern fiction's engagement with history, diagnoses cosmopsis as a false universal with a dubiously passive and myopic politics: it's

the state induced by an epiphanic glimpse of the historical sublime by a First World consciousness. The 'universality' of the paralysis as Barth defines it is not universal. It is a pathology of the West, and it is centered in philosophy internal to Western metaphysics. It is a state of existential paralysis that is linked to privilege—the privilege inherent in having time to view the horizon through the gaze of the master (230).

Logically, of course, there's no incompatibility between something being universally true and only a small subset of privileged people having the time to get angsty about it. The argument's more relevant problem is that it only works as a criticism of Barth's fiction—which, as she goes on to argue that Pynchon uses similar materials to more politically defensible ends, Elias intends it to be—if we take the diagnosis of cosmopsis as the novel's rhetorical impetus. This would be a mistake. Horner repeatedly refers to forerunner problems of cosmopsis as ancient as Buridan's parable of the ass paralyzed by the decision between identically hunger- and thirst-sating options of a bale of hay and a bucket of water: neither Barth nor his characters are claiming that the problem of cosmopsis is anything new. As *PLUS*' stylistic evolution makes especially literal, such novels develop beyond the initial challenge. As I'll examine at chapter length, Barth's novel both diagnoses Horner's cosmoposis as a motivated avoidance of available agency, and points a way beyond it. Elias' reading, though, is symptomatic of the way that *The End of the Road* and novels like it have had their givens taken for their insights.

Moreover, especially in the early years of their reception, though with notably little revision since, this misreading often saw the novels read as second-hand expressions of the paralyzing insights associated with poststructuralism. Among these, we might non-exhaustively include: the infinity of considerations present to any choice (cosmopsis); the recursiveness of all attempts to locate grounds for reason outside of its own vocabulary; the radical, infinite singularity of others, violated when they are reduced to commensurable considerations in a decision; the fact that so much of our decision-making seems to happen in accordance with factors outside the intellect, from the influence of the body to the nature of desire; an awareness of the historically contingent way that liberal models of freely deciding and calculating self serve particular class interests. Yet while postmodern-era fiction often accepts the reality of these to the point of beginning its narratives by taking them as plot-level givens,³ it for precisely that reason can't stop its rhetoric at the point of articulating them.

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This is particularly clear insofar as many of these challenges to agency predate poststructural philosophy, and indeed are registered as problems—in distinctively stylistic terms—in earlier US fiction. The period from the civil war to the *fin de siècle* is characterized by some of its most high-profile fiction articulating these challenges as new, unfamiliar, dawning over the course of the relevant narratives, and genuinely paralyzing. Take, for example, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), in which a character, having pondered whether or not to steal money from his employers for a number of pages, wavering between the two courses of action in linear presentation of considerations, suddenly finds that his action has preceded his thought:

While the money was in his hand the lock clicked. It had sprung! Did he do it?... the moment he realised the safe was locked for a surety, the sweat burst out upon his brow and he trembled violently. He looked about him and decided instantly... at once he became the man of action (243).

³ In the Jamesian sense of *données* rather than the philosophical sense Sellars etc challenge in terms of “the myth of the given,” though that's relevant in its own ways to the contrast between pragmatist and poststructural antifoundationalism that I discuss later.

This is explicitly framed by contrast to his self-conception as a methodical deliberator—“Hurstwood could not bring himself to act definitely. He wanted to think about it—to ponder over it, to decide whether it were best” (243)—a reflexivity about the terms in which our judgments of our deliberative freedoms come up short that also animates Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1905). Wharton’s heroine, Lily Bart, is a chronic self-saboteur: knowing that her material goal is a wealthy marriage, she nevertheless becomes averse to making any decision in which she could conceive herself as “calculating”—a term she associates with the Jewish arriviste Rosewood—rather than “risking”—one she associates with her friend the unmarried poor but romantically appealing dilettante Selden. In other words, her decisions are influenced by the terminology in which she conceptualizes them. Finally, she dies of an overdose of sleeping medicine, a process in which the language of both risk and calculation figure: “she knew she took a slight risk in doing so; she remembered the chemist’s warning... But that was one chance in a hundred: the action of the drug was incalculable...” (342). Wharton’s modulations of free indirect discourse make it unclear whether this language should be taken as Lily’s or the narrator’s, making it unclear how much responsibility Lily herself bears for the concepts that brought her to this point, and mimicking the lack of clarity about how deliberate her overdose actually was. Wharton and Dreiser thus make stylistically innovative arguments about the biological and linguistic determinations of action that undermine even the most deliberate and self-conscious of agents. Neither offers us any solution to the problem they raise: in the early 1900s, the identifying and stylistically expressing the problem was rhetoric enough.

We might trace this earlier generation of fiction’s interest in articulating these paralyzing challenges without seeking solutions to Ambrose Bierce’s Civil War short story “Chickamauga,” in which a boy realizes as he returns from a walk that the house on fire is his own. The story to this point has been of gently comical misrecognitions—his fear of a rabbit, his suspicion that a soldier may be a bear—but successfully recognizing the house leaves him “stupefied by the power of the revelation,” a state of paralysis expressed in the story’s full final paragraph: “Then he stood motionless, with quivering

lips, looking down upon the wreck” (26). Chickamauga articulates a dawning national insight leading to paralysis, and if Dreiser and Wharton pick up this dynamic to articulate equally unresolved challenges to sovereign agency through stylistic experiments as tightly tradition-tweaking as Barth could desire, then this has three implications for our understanding of paralyzing insight’s place in postmodern fiction. First, US postmodernism’s engagement with agency-questions is continuous with earlier co-national fiction’s dealings with similar issues. Second, the paralyzing challenges were old hat by the time the postmodernists wrote. Third, as a novel like *PLUS* makes clear, those paralyzing stipulations shift structural place in the later genre, to become starting problems, rather than final, challenging insights. Postmodern fiction’s relation to that list of *paralyzing postmodern givens*, then, finds its real interest not just in articulating them, but in working out how to legitimately value, decide and act without denying them.

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This distinction grounds the grouping—call it a genre, a canon, or an archive—of fictions I examine in this book in order to make my case for the constructive philosophical capacities of style-driven anti-cosmic antimimesis. It’s a subcategory of postmodern fiction that uses antimimetic forms to isomorphically address two seeming impossibilities: how can we warrant deliberative agency in an post-foundationalist world, when every fresh revelation about the way the mind interacts with the world tells us how little control we have over our actions and how impossible it is to justify those decisions we *are* responsible for? and how can fictions which don’t even *try* to convince us that they give us access to some kind of world on the other side of their language affect our beliefs and actions in the world in which we and that language exist? The fictions that shared this dual undertaking I call *postmodern project novels*, since they both pursue the overall project of making anti-cosmic fiction viably argumentative, and recount characters’ attempts to achieve long-duration agentive projects from within situations that seem to endorse only paralysis and scepticism. These projects range from the creation of an artwork (William Gaddis’ *J R*), to the discovery of a warrant for going

on living or acting (*Play it as it Lays* or *The End of the Road*), to the development of a consciousness (*PLUS*), to the establishment of a biography (Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, McElroy's debut *Smuggler's Bible*, EL Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*), to the salvation of a romantic relationship (Carlene Hatcher Polite's *The Flagellants*). These project-arc'd plots mirror at the level of fictional event each author's own attempts to establish valid formal grounds for conspicuous fiction to influence real-world beliefs or actions. These novels vary greatly, but they all put new styles in the service of optimistic arguments about moving beyond paralyzing challenges to agency.

These novels (and occasional short fiction, though the timeframe of the *project* suits itself to longer narratives) are united by five major qualities: 1) they start from a concern with agentive paralysis, with plots tending to revolve around characters struggling to carry out a long-term project; 2) their formal qualities highlight their own fictionality and conventionality, providing a barrier to worldly immersion and demanding self-consciousness about the *meaning* of forms; 3) They take poststructuralist-type critiques of agency for granted rather than as novelties of interest, and so they seek ways to live and work viably without denying them: they hence start with formal and plot-level articulations of these problems, but develop beyond them, in form and plot, over the course of their narratives; 4) They aren't critical of "Reason" per se, along post-structural lines, but distinguish practical rationality from forms of personal, theoretical, or political rationalization: the conflict between -ity and -ization organizes their narratives; 5) Contra standard accounts, they are not formally or rhetorically "flat": their sentence-level forms vary over the course of the narratives in ways that add up to arguments about development and progress. Their starting-point formal innovations reflect the paralyzing problems they address, but modulations of form within those overall conditions bear the weight of argumentative development.⁴

⁴ We can see this dynamic within the authors' own self-descriptions. Just to take the two I've spent most time on already, McElroy describes *PLUS* as about "the same old subject my books are always about—getting myself into an awful trap in order to feel more real, then figuring a way out" (239). We start with a "real" problem, and move "out"ward towards a solution that doesn't merely deny it. Barth bypasses McElroy's personal framing to clarify makes the relationship between this dynamic and specific historical

The novels all respond to the same intellectual climate. But since each responds to a different anti-agentive constellation of givens, narrates a project with a different goal, and, most crucially, responds to those specificities with a distinct self-foregrounding prose style, each offers distinct stylistic arguments about how to reclaim some practical agency under the conditions that seem to paralyze it. In this specificity, they provide a counter to canonical accounts of postmodern anti-realism in which all anti-mimetic stylistic innovation has the same simple anti-hegemonic logic and hesitation-generating effects. In this project, just as I examine postmodern fiction in order to revise the most central accounts of how antimimetic fiction works, so within the generation of postmodernism I focus on four of the most canonical writers of this generation: Barth, Gaddis, Doctorow, and Pynchon. Each uses a different stylistic innovation to address a different question and realm of deliberative agency. Barth investigates how to deliberate in an era where the stable self is in question, Gaddis examines the more fundamental question of where in an anti-deliberative language-culture we can retain space and growth-potential for the unvocalized thought. Doctorow exploits the different semantic constraints that fictionality puts on sentence-reference in order to make an argument about how best to look for avenues of historical agency under state hegemony, while Pynchon uses sentence-structures whose referents cross ontological boundaries within his many-worlds novelistic universes to ask an even more fundamental question about the metaphysics of historical action and possibility. Varying in the scale of their concerns and the ways in which they investigate the first-person texture of decision alongside the world-historical ontologies of possibility, these authors show just how many different arguments it was possible for anti-mimetic styles to make about the basic concept of deliberation at one point in history.

situations: “The Literature of Exhaustion” suggests that “an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work—*paradoxically*, because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation” (71). Turning what seemed like the “refutation”al problem into the “material” of practical “work,” Barth, like McElroy and the protagonists of the postmodern project novels, puts energy into overcoming postmodern challenges to agency, rather than just denying, recognizing, or expressing them. The echo of the “ultimacy” on which his earlier protagonist had gazed in cosmopsis makes clear the relationship between the projects of authorial rhetoric and fictional event.

A selection of four less famous authors and fictions that also fit the five basic criteria of postmodern project fiction—say *The Flagellants*' investigation of the agency-constraining limitations of quotidian language, *Play It As It Lays*' search for a minimalist warrant for the action of refusing suicide, William S Wilson's *Why I Don't Write Like Franz Kafka* with its speculations about how deliberative agency would fare among the many human qualities set to change irreversibly in an age of cyborgery and biological enhancement, and Walter Abish's *Future Imperfect* sketching how we act towards others in terms of singularity and commensurability—would demonstrate just as much range in style and philosophical imagination, but since these works were never used to canonize the anti-mimesis=deconstruction equation a study elaborating their precise stylistic innovations and constructive commitments would have less revisionary force. The four authors I focus on here, for all their demographic similarity, provide a varied archive that can ground a complete revision of our understanding of anti-illusionist fiction's workings and rhetorical capacity.⁵

Antimimetic Mechanics

Whether or not the argument that *PLUS*' stylistic modulations make about the importance of linguistic reflexivity to deliberative agency is *right* matters less than the fact that those precise modulations are capable of carrying an equally precise argument. Since understanding the significance of these modulations requires a Barth-ian awareness of their place in the generic development of prose representations of psychology. *PLUS* doesn't immerse us in another mind so much as identify and organize linguistically pre-coded aspects of consciousness to tell us about minds per se. Its style-driven argument thus relies more on our awareness of its genre-bound textuality than on the imputed world on the other side of the language.

⁵ The technicalities of which—in terms of fictive ontology, cognitive processing, rhetorical export—I hope to develop in technical terms in future work by a more direct engagement with narratology, cognitive studies, and the philosophy of literature.

It's clear that some texts set themselves the task of communicating without the apparatus of empathy and immersion, but terms like those I use above, about textuality and referentiality and "worlds on the other side of language," are more controversial, and come from an existing set of debates about the ontology of fiction: one in which the authors I address often participated directly.

First, I should clarify what I mean when I frame this project as a defence of *antimimetic prose's* capacities. The term's meaning is determined, of course, by the meanings of mimesis it presumes, and there are many incompatible of these. Some identify fiction's intent to mirror the specific world we live in—which would make conventional science fiction anti-mimetic—while others concern the formal apparatus by which fictions try to guarantee perceptual access to imagined worlds: on this model, most science fiction is mimetic, on the former model, it is not. Since my concerns are stylistic, I use the term in fairly narrow terms aligned with the distinction Christopher Nash makes between *neo-cosmic* and *anti-cosmic* versions of non-realistic fiction. The difference comes in the degree to which they want us to maintain the standard fictive reading practice of believing in the existence of the objects the narrative describes. *Neo-cosmic* fiction presents *worlds* that operate according to laws incompatible with our own, but does so through formal devices familiar from conventional realism so as to lay standard claim to giving us unmediated mental access to those worlds. *Anti-cosmic* fiction, by contrast, foregrounds its own textual appropriation or manipulation or rejection of those conventions, refusing to allow us to forget that it is made of words on a page, and that any world we imagine on the basis of those words is limited to our imaginings, with no independent existence.⁶

The term *anti-cosmic* usefully picks out the givens of Barth's or Gass' philosophies of prose fiction, which require readers to maintain awareness of the fact

⁶ "As a still illusionistic [*neocosmic*] mode [non-realist fiction] may feel free to pretend, or even think right to set out to demonstrate that there's more than everyday life-in-the-world to feel and think about. Or, as an anti-illusionist [*anticosmic*] mode, it may unfold and explore—whether for the sake of beauty or some further kind of truth or pleasure—the one thing fictional illusions can't cope with: the fictionality of the fiction itself, and all that it's composed of" (46).

that no world exists on the other side of the words they read, even as those words rely on an imagined world to organize their relationships. I use *anti-mimetic* rather than *anti-cosmic*, though, because Nash's account of *anti-cosmic* fiction's rhetorical capacities makes the text's *specific* language irrelevant to the overall attack on the possibility of representable worlds, and I need a term that leaves room for specific words and organizations to bear specific arguments. The other flaw in *anti-cosmic*—and any designator for this fiction which doesn't mention mimesis—is that it leaves open another of the blanket anti-cognitive rhetorics I want to undermine: the claim that the disorientation produced by any departure from mimetic habits is a kind of second-order mimesis, corresponding better with our reality than the traditional novel's delusory implications of worldly comprehensibility, world-navigating sovereign agency, and so on. My *anti-mimesis* clarifies that the novels I examine seem uninvested in this model.

In this respect, a term like *counter-illusory* might get at what I'm interested in, except that there are persuasive accounts of the degree to which traditional mimetic fiction aims to immerse us in its worlds without denying the artificiality of the process. Robert Alter, for example, defines his history of non-realistic fiction against a realism that

operates with a tacit agreement between author and audience that these artifices are the necessary and efficacious vehicle for conveying the truth about the characters, and that they are to be assumed as a transparent medium even in their conspicuousness; for our chief interest is in the personages and events they convey to us, not in the nature and status of the artifices (19).

This crucially distinguishes between fictions that ask to be read as organizations of fictive event, and those that ask to be read as organizations of verbal artifice. Unfortunately, this leads him to argue that non-realism always preoccupies itself with the "nature... of the artifice" at the expense of worldly concerns, which is of course precisely what I'm disputing. Leonard Orr argues similarly about the category of the *non-aristotelian* novel, which like *counter-illusory* has the virtue of not naturalizing realist aspects by making them the dominant term that constrains anything "anti." Yet where *anti-cosmic* doesn't leave enough room for a focus on the different rhetorics of

different styles, *non-aristotelian* runs the risk of undermining the constructive rhetorical intent I think that form's capable of sustaining. I use *antimimetic*, then, for its ability to both reject world-illusory formal mechanics and stay capable of a range of rhetorical outputs.

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This limitation of available rhetorics is the most consistent weakness across the almost half-century of work on antimimetic fiction's distinctive history and workings, from Alter's survey to the present. Nash, for all his useful distinction, gives a fairly underwhelming account of their respective communicative potentials: both are constrained to rejections of realism's rhetoric: with "[anticosmism] laying siege to Realism's *having* declarative intentions, and [neocosmism] assaulting the *specific* declarative intentions" (278). Unfortunately, the lack of uptake for Nash's work means that scholarly examinations or histories of anti-realist fiction tend to blur his two modes together, with even more reductive consequences for the accounts of the rhetoric.

While anti-cosmic fiction seems to raise harder and more interesting questions, critics who don't make Nash's distinction have almost exclusively examined the overall category of antimimesis in terms of neo-cosmic examples. The kind of convention-foregrounding stylistic anti-cosmism advocated by Barth and epitomised by McElroy struggles to find a place in such accounts, even before we get to rhetorical considerations. We don't lack explanations of *Neocosmic* rhetoric: the standard "immersion" account of fiction's mind-changing mechanic works perfectly well for it. When people *do* distinguish among antimimeses, the presumption is usually that *anti-cosmic* fiction is the most simply deconstructive of available modes: in Nash's account, "anticosmic fiction is brilliantly proficient in—and in fact highly specialized for exactly the activity of—shattering our sluggish habits of thought, but is inclined... to stop there" (292). As I'll argue, the way that authors like Barth and McElroy, in line with the methodological manifestos of Barth or Gass, highlight their textuality is essentially anti-cosmic, but their rhetoric is not negative, doesn't get to "shattering" and then "stop there." Presumptions about the limited array of rhetorical work such fiction is capable of

are belied by any reasonably faithful examination of the texts themselves. What we need, then, are accounts of the constructive capacities of the anti-cosmic strain of antimimesis, but recent developments have if anything subsumed this even further below existing emphases.

Take, for example, the recent boom in work on non-realist fiction in the field of narrative theory. This has mostly happened under the heading of “Unnatural Narrative,” examining the challenges that non-realist fiction poses to a field whose models for narrative structure are mainly drawn from the study of classic victorian or “turn-of-the-century” realism.⁷ The movement has drawn useful attention to antimimetic texts, but it both privileges *neo-cosmic* forms of antimimesis and insists on the old unilateral destructive-verb rhetoric.

An early manifesto essay, for example, suggests that *Unnatural* covers “temporalities, storyworlds, mind representations, or acts of narration that would have to be construed as physically, logically, mnemonically, or psychologically impossible or highly implausible in real-world storytelling situations” (“What is Unnatural” 373), while the introduction to a collection on the poetics of unnatural narrative as a whole defines its remit by conflating the texts that best allow us to “comprehend theoretically the strategies of narrative construction that are unique to fiction” with those “texts that present extremely implausible, impossible, or logically contradictory scenarios or events” (*Poetics* 3). The emphasis in both cases is on departures in the usual construction of fictional “storyworlds,” “events,” “scenarios” rather than on any quality of the language. Brian Richardson’s recent summative monograph on the movement makes explicit that for him, “discourse does not constitute the unnatural, except in rare cases where the discourse actually affects the storyworld” (12). Richardson, meanwhile, lists and taxonomizes vast arrays of forms that violate the “Natural” canon. Yet he embodies the discipline-wide problem that interest in the array of forms has not been

⁷ “Unnatural Narrative” also more directly contests the more technical sense of “Natural Narrative,” a model that insists that our default mode of processing the implication-conditions of *all* narrative is drawn from those that govern face-to-face conversations about real-world events. See Fludernik

matched by interest in the range of rhetorical capacity. He avows an investment in plurality: "Every unnatural work has to be quite different." But when it comes to the rhetoric of such works, he's happy to talk in general terms that remind us of Nash on "shattering," let alone the more globally pervasive vocabulary of "deconstruction" or "subversion." Sometimes he writes as if the "violation" or "transgression" of expectation is an end in itself, at other times as if the forms necessarily "challenge" and "disrupt" philosophical positions associated with traditional rise-of-the-novel realism, and at others as if the readerly experience of "disturbance" or "disruption" are the goals. Though Richardson like most theorists of Unnatural Narrative is committed to investigating the whole of "The Other Great Tradition," the limitations of his rhetorical accounts are drawn from a vocabulary associated strongly with the self-conception of "radical" "postmodern" theory in its US-poststructuralist guise. As this was the theory through which the study of McElroy's generation of authors was institutionalized, it's no surprise that Richardson's initial account of the texts he'll consider refers to their "postmodern and other" versions of innovation (3).

Postmodern fiction continues to play a shoring role in the antimimetic=deconstructive presumption that underpins the study of antimimetic fiction. As long as antimimetic fiction's interests are presumed to be limited to the negation of realism's, we will lack a vocabulary to talk about some of the most distinctive fiction of recent decades. Monika Fludernik, the articulator of Natural Narratology, was right to suggest at the beginning of the current interest in the Unnatural that "mimetic reductionism" might give rise to a corresponding "anti-mimetic... reductionism" (358). Whatever its causes, this antimimetic reductionism has left us without either a clear technical account of how explicitly anti-illusory fictions can do more than "disturb" us, or a store of examples of such fiction on the basis of which we could build such a technical account.

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This is where the criticism and the practice of anti-mimetic fiction diverge. As Richard Walsh, one of the few critics to examine antimimetic fiction's range of

argumentative implication, suggests of the postmodern generation, “What they reject, to different degrees, is the centrality of mimesis as a mode of engagement. This is not a negative or restrictive strategy: the chief merit innovative fictions share is their capacity to extend the possibilities of fictional engagement *beyond* mimesis” (NA 2).⁸ In other words, anti-mimesis is a tool that can serve a constructive “beyond” of what we know, not just negations supervenient on what we already know. This, certainly, is the way that the authors I discuss in this project tend to talk about their own work.

Walsh’s language of “beyond” tangentially conjures the other distinctive presumption that undergirds the theoretical assertions of critic-authors like Barth and Gass. As I’ve said above, such authors insist that one of the distinctive qualities of their kind of convention-foregrounding antimimesis is its open insistence that there is no existent world on the other side of its language, no matter what that language may prompt us to imagine. For Gass, for example, it is a mistake to think of a character whose nose hasn’t been described as having a nose in the same way that they have the eyes their author has told us are blue. The character is not a whole person partially described, but only the constellation of words that constitute the description.

On the mimetic model, developments in formal methods of conveying fictional characters’ mental experience thus develop as “better” alternatives for presenting the way minds really work, better immersing us in another person’s head. For him or Barth, the succession of prose-forms that promise to do a more transparent job of presenting the way minds really work, better immersing us in another person’s head has to reach an end-point at which we instead choose to read prose fiction more explicitly as what it is: rhetorically arranged language. Gass goes perhaps further than Barth in insisting that this is all literature ever has been or can be: he offers a thoroughly anticomic verbalism

⁸ See also Daniel Green on postmodernism’s central quality being not an ideology or a contextual origin, but its being an intensely, enthusiastically *written* fiction, an attempt to above all keep writing itself alive as the material or medium of art-in other words, to preserve the idea of literature as a distinctive, perhaps necessarily even as a self-consciously distinctive, order of writing” (741) or RM Berry on metafiction as an investigation of working conditions: “It was as though recent history, both political and cultural, had exposed fiction’s received versions as fraudulent... whether they considered these versions obsolete, naïve, arbitrary, or just boring, the metafictionists were determined to establish the real conditions for their practice” (132).

that treats all the conventional aspects of fiction in linguistic terms. See for example his refiguration of the concept of character:

“A character for me is any linguistic location of a book toward which a great part of the rest of the text stands as a modifier. Just as the subject of a sentence say, is modified by the predicate, so frequently some character, Emma Bovary for instance, is regarded as a central character in the book because a lot of the language basically and ultimately goes back to modify, be about, Emma Bovary. ... The work is filled with only one thing—words and how they work and how they connect” (interview w/ Gardner 8).

The difference might be best explained by recourse to the work of Roman Ingarden, the Austrian metaphysician whose *The Literary Work of Art* aimed to give an account of what a literary artwork was that didn't boil down to either the physical object of the book, the psychological experience of author or reader, or the objects of imaginary worlds. For Ingarden, literary artworks exist as such when they unite in one space four different levels of inseparable phenomena: the phonetic structure of a word-sequence, units of verbal meaning and their interrelations, “schematized aspects” that direct us from the verbal meanings to imaginings, and the objects and events that populate those imaginings: entities of the kind Ingarden's mentor Franz Brentano called “intentional inexistents.”⁹ Ingarden's interest was in ontology rather than rhetoric, and so he required the co-presence of these four levels of artwork, without any implicit hierarchy. In standard mimetic reading practice, however, of the kind that leads people to praise prose fiction on the basis that “it makes you feel like you're really there” or “I feel like I really know this character,” there's a clear hierarchy of engagement: Ingarden's fourth level is the object of interest, and the first two levels just serve as material for the third to process to give readers access: call this the transparency approach to reading fiction. Gass' model, on the other hand, asks us to find the salient, engagement-worthy aspect of prose fiction in the first two levels: the fourth level serves, through the membrane of the third, to help order and regulate the relationships on the first two, but has no

⁹ That is, entities with no true existence, but which could still be consistently posited objects of mental attention and orientation, including intersubjectively.

independent interest of its own. Texts will solicit us to engage with them in one of these ways or the other.

Insisting that prose fiction has a more promising future as an artwork that directs attention to Ingarden-levels 1+2 than by treating them as mere adjuncts to 4, Gass and Barth both endorse a set of fiction-building formal practices that deny us explanatory resort to entities on “the other side” of the fiction’s language. They each, in their theories and their practice use conspicuous, insistently non-transparent style in such a way that any fiction construed by that style necessarily announces its own fictionality, its own textual ontology within a generic history, and the need to read it by computing with the significance of that opaque form. If this is the model of fiction that animates much “postmodern” antimimesis, then it seems clear that we need clearer accounts both of how *style alone* can establish a text’s wish to be read anti-cosmically, and of what goes on in terms of “how [words] work and how they connect” once that reading imperative is established.

While these models are often read as iconoclastic, understanding them as simply another way to make rhetorical moves within the same basic Ingarden ontology lets us see that the Barth/Gass approach can accommodate a much broader sense of antimimetic fiction’s rhetorical capacities. This is evident in the contrast between the language these authors themselves use about their work, and the vocabulary favoured by those who associate antimimesis with negation. Compare the positive vocabulary of Barth’s and Gass’ anti-cosmic postmodern manifestoes—discovery, validity, rightness, work, connection—with those of putatively antimimetic explicators like Nash and Richardson: violating, shattering, transgressing, disrupting. This tendency persists through an array of approaches: Brian McHale’s examination of postmodernism sees its formal experiment as dedicated to “disrupting the conditioned responses of the modernist reader” (81), Alter’s earlier examination of the antimimetic tradition sees all such work as “forc[ing]” a reader “to examine again and again the validity of his ordinary discriminations” (224), unnatural narratologists stress how “relatively plotless, pointless, arbitrary, unconnected, or contradictory” can “easily and radically deconstruct our real-

world notions of time and space” (Poetics Intro 2), or force us to “accept the fundamental strangeness of unnatural scenarios and the feelings of disorientation that they might evoke” (*UnNat /UnNat* intro 9). Srinivas Aravamudan, recovering anti-mimetic texts of the Enlightenment era and their constructive treatments of other worlds and cultures, finds that “At their best, such comparative representations go beyond the stereotype and put forward a radical epistemological scepticism of everything, including their own status” (110). In all of this, there’s an emphasis on mere undermining, simple shock, sub-cognitive “shattering.” The authors themselves make no such claims. Yet critics’ shared presumption that anti-mimetic fiction sets itself up first and foremost as a violation of default mimetic practices leads us to a rhetoric constrained to the negation of ideas or orientations associated with those defaults. A vast chasm of particularity persists between minutely detailed elaboration of what anti-mimetic formal features look like, and blanket claims about what they’re good for. In the aggregate, these become deadeningly homogenous. Such fictions will freak you out, and make you question what you take for granted.

Christian Thorne examines this problem in relation to the philosophical context of early-enlightenment fiction, where the anachronistic treatment of enlightenment versions of scepticism in 20th-century deconstructive terms has had a misleading effect. The genealogical critique of reason has its own history, Thorne shows, and both anti-realist fictive experiment and philosophical scepticism in the period were more often tools of overt reactionaries than of marginalized critique. If we presume that “radical epistemology” leads to “radical politics,” he suggests, then we get a “radical criticism” that assumes “that *all* power is centralized” and thus that “gestures toward decentralization are thus indiscriminately to be seconded” (308). The putative alignment of “radical” literary experiment with “radical epistemology” thus partly explains the presumptions about such experiment’s intrinsically de-centering political and philosophical commitments. But as a novel like *PLUS* shows, such experiments can be put in service of a thoroughly constructive take on epistemology, agency, and so on. Thorne’s defence of the plurality of possible constellations of political commitment,

philosophical skepticism, and literary form serves his overall wish for a criticism more willing to treat both literary forms and philosophical commitments as specifically historical. Might postmodern fiction's relation to its generally sceptical times and institutional history, then, be more complex than a mere mirroring?

The equations Thorne diagnoses have become a barrier to reading, one that *PLUS* arguably anticipates. In another of its self-conscious moments, ground control express their cognitive limitations when Imp Plus first attempts to communicate his dawning sense of supra-individual insight to them. "IMP PLUS," they call, "WE READ *OTHER THAN*. BUT AFTER THAT WE DO NOT READ. SAY AGAIN." There's more to antimimetic fiction's rhetorical capacities than the assertion of its status as "OTHER THAN" realism. After half a century, there's no need to insist on "OTHER THAN" "AGAIN."

Definitions Regarding Style and Argument

I've already delineated the restricted meanings I reserve for the complex and overdetermined terms *style* and *antimimetic*. The methodological clarifications above require a few further definitions, particularly regarding the approaches to literature I rely on in claiming that style can *argue*. For some less argumentatively central explanations of why I'm using certain generic, philosophical, and contextual terms in my discussion of this set of authors, see [Appendix B](#).

Given the postmodern authors' concern with deliberative agency, the kind of formal structures the novels manipulate away from Alter's "transparency" are often those for the presentation of thought. The development is away from what I'll call *conventional prose psychology*. This category covers most fictional mind-representation up to the "stream of consciousness," identifying any prose form that claims to grant us access to the moment by moment working of a mind through prose characterised by the linear, sequential presentation of experiences, impressions, insights and considerations toward a conclusion or an action. Dorrit Cohn's history and taxonomy of these forms—she identifies six major forms that have been discussed interchangeably as either "stream

of consciousness” or “free indirect”—makes many subtle and useful distinctions, but each sticks to that basic linear sequencing, and so in the aggregate they establish the connection between “turn of the century” forms and the presumption of psychological regularity. Cohn, like Ann Banfield from a linguist’s perspective in *Transparent Minds*, draws on Käthe Hamburger’s arguments that free indirect forms in particular are unique to prose fiction and hence characterized by an unshakable conventionality: they are artifices of the kind Alter suggests readers and authors have to agree to *treat* as more transparent to experience than they actually are. Yet neither Cohn nor followers like Banfield or Maria Mäkelä investigate the ways in which authors covered by her time period exploit this conventionality to propose non-linear or linguistically opaque models of minds, as I’ve suggested Dreiser or Wharton do.

The insight that Wharton or Dreiser provided for the postmodern generation to build on was that foregrounding the ways that small tweaks to existing conventions could turn them opaque and make them serve accounts of mental experience that challenged the transparent-linear model.¹⁰ Barth, writing in the mid-70s after his fiction had moved on from the investigation of deliberative paralysis, could nevertheless suggest that, antimimetic or not, “literature’s *linearity*—the literal lines of print on the page and the normal one-word-at-a-timeness of language” meant that “other media may deal more effectively than writing with the nonlinear and the discontinuous, but it may be that writing is uniquely suited to deal with the linear and the continuous aspects of human experience” (“FoLLoF” 163). Even in an age of “exhaustion,” he suggests that “written literature can deal most appropriately—at least more effectively than any other art—with just those aspects of our experience that are at some remove from direct sensation...” among which remain the standard materials of the classic psychological novel: “the whole silent life of the mind—cognition, reflection, speculation, recollection,

¹⁰ Many of the authors I discuss don’t depart from these conventions in “radical” ways but just do things like modify one or two basic habits of sentence construction. Critics like Brian McHale address the fact that much of the most widely read postmodern fiction is that whose departures from convention are non-total, treating this as a rhetorical principle for making their own bigger departures stand out. We have plenty of discussion of this balance in terms of affective impact, but little if any that discusses the combination of conventional and convention-stretching prose forms in terms of *meaning*.

calculation, and the rest” (164).¹¹ From Wharton and Dreiser to Barth and McElroy, departures from *conventional prose psychology* don’t mean a disinterest in practical “cognition” or deliberative “calculation.” Quite the opposite: the conventions are a root form over which the novels can organize modulations and departures so as to convey how we could viably update the presumptions that undergirded the older prose.

My claim that these stylistic forms *argue*, or *bear arguments*, relies on a fairly idiosyncratic model of how fictionality works that I hope to justify more fully in future work. For the present, a couple of stipulations should make things intelligible, if not clearly justified. There are many ways in which literature or fiction can persuade: Walsh’s *Novel Arguments* makes a useful start on taxonomizing some of the versions that are distinctive to antimimetic fiction. Both these and the usual accounts of realist fiction’s persuasive repertoire tend to focus on pre-discursive and non-propositional factors: empathy, immersion, affect, and so on. My own interest is narrower: while even the novels I examine persuade in various modes, I’m interested only in the most literally argumentative: those that use stylistic methods to organize imply and combine propositions toward conclusions. Since it’s already controversial whether even mimetic fiction can persuade by anything like this approach, I aim by showing that anti-mimetic fiction can do so to establish the full range and “freedom” of its rhetorical capacities.

Walsh, in a later monograph, makes clear how much those capacities depend on non-immersion throughout the reading experience: “as the basis for reading fiction, a willing suspension of disbelief will not do: disbelief is essential to reading a work of fiction as fictional, and it is only by doing so that we apprehend the effects it achieves by means of fiction’s own particular literary resources” (70). My model relies on the basic postulate—discussed above as central to thinkers as varied as Barth, Alter, or Cohn—that competent readers of prose fiction will process language constructions with this Walshian awareness first of their conventionality or relation to existing conventions,

¹¹ Alan Singer has suggested that for Barth-ian reasons, “elucidat[ing]” “subjective agency” is “the chief conceptual warrant of the [novel] genre itself” (4), and while he focuses mainly on mimetic examples, Barth shows why this doesn’t have to be exclusive.

and second of the historical or logical associations between the root conventions and particular ideas, worldviews, or ideologies (for example, the chronological linearity of *conventional prose psychology* insists that we weigh considerations before making choices). Controlling for the degree of readerly competence, these language constructions should have stable enough implications—due to the concrete history of the conventions they rely on—that their organization can be thought of in terms of entailment (relative to the narrative they posit).

Existing accounts of realist ideology, for example, take this for granted in a conservative sense: that the “transparency” with which readers take *conventional prose psychology* to grant them access to fictional worlds and minds presumes that readers have already naturalized a model of real psychological experience as linear and discursive. Such fiction thus *argues*, on this account, by ratifying that naturalization and reinforcing how we’ve been taught to think of ourselves. When it comes to fictional forms that depart from the already-naturalized, though, existing criticism pays less attention to specific connections between form and ideology. It stresses instead the mere affective jarring of unfamiliarity, the undirected undermining of the default naturalizing process. By contrast, a reader who’s *competent* with literary conventions in the linguistic sense (able to understand the implications of existing meaning-units and able to create and understand new combinations of them) should be aware enough of the construction and implication of the conventions the new form departs from that by examining the details of the departure they should be able to say whether or not it proposes a coherent alternative to the original. Think, in this respect, of my discussions above of Dreiser’s reorganization of the standard sentence-construction to place the outcome of the action before the narration of the choice. As soon as we start thinking about the relationship between specific departures from convention and specific refinements to existing worldviews, we find ourselves, I suggest, attributing *argumentative* entailments to constructions and organizations of style.

Call this approach to the implications of literary style *cognitive*,¹² in the sense of involving calculation about the relationship between implied propositions, and in contrast to models that think about style's effects in terms of pre-discursive affects, mere transparency, or ornamentation.¹³ This makes the moment of departure from convention not one of shock alone, but the beginning of a plausibly constructive engagement with argument: Nash, in one of the rare moments that he frees anti-mimetic rhetoric from mere rejection, suggests that "The assembly of such fiction, all told, may finally be against shock, though each work's individual programme takes shock as its initiating strategy" (159). This seems to usefully acknowledge—against Nash's own wider thrust—that insistent fictionality might be a precondition for constructive work rather than a deconstructing end in itself. This idea has been disparately developed by a number of critics who understand the act of literary composition in vocabularies drawn from the philosophy of intentional action, one that often insists on literature's *rationality* from a communicative-theory perspective that makes no distinction in terms of mimetic and anti-mimetic choices. Theo D'Haen draws on Gricean models of conversational implicature to be precise about how this constructive rhetoric can be channelled. Far from forcing readers into disorientation and shock, he argues, authorial violations of generic expectations begin a process of engrossment: "The conviction of the reader that the story *has* a meaning and *is* consistent, is such that the reader sees [the author] deliberately and blatantly failing to fulfil a maxim and thereby as inviting the reader to calculate that meaning himself" (15). Expectations of communicative significance are so powerful that anticosmic moves, for example, direct readerly efforts straight past the usual otherworld-immersion mechanics, and directly to working out how the fiction is meant to bear on their real-

¹² I would also want to distinguish it from the approach of literary study's "cognitive turn," which particularly within narratology has tended to focus on applying psychological research about how people interact with other people to the relationship between readers and characters, while skipping or begging the question of the cognitive processes by which we get from words on a page to the positing of literary characters as counterpart humans. See Zunshine or Herman ("Storytelling") for two versions of this approach.

¹³ Though the latter can be intrusive enough to make us wonder whether something cognition-worthy is being foregrounded.

world beliefs and actions. The result is that “the more and more frantically an author forces us to calculate implicatures... the more ‘problematic’ his novel is, the more... our attention will shift from the fictional world to the problem of reconciling the given novel with our expectations to the functioning of the real world” (15). That stylistic departures from convention turn their initial affective shocks into an invitation to “calculate” about their relation to readers’ lives and beliefs is at the heart of the rhetorical *cognitivism* I presume.

This makes possible the rhetorical mechanism I’ll suggest almost all postmodern project novels rely on: what I’ll call *stylistic allegory*. If a variety of forms are set next to each other in a significant order, we should be able to work out the significance of their relationships in terms of a relationship between the philosophical ideas the forms *stand for*. In traditional allegory, concept-embodying characters interact at the level of event in ways that allow us to extrapolate arguments about the real-world relationship between those concepts. Insofar as antimimetic fiction defines the material of fiction as its arrangement of language-forms rather than its arrangement of personages and events, *stylistic allegory* naturally follows as a redirection of the allegory-bearing entities from fictive personages to linguistic constructions.¹⁴

Talking of style’s argument-bearing capacities, meanwhile, presumes that although authorial communicative intent is a regulative category with which to calculate, the stability of the generic conventions in which new texts intervene allows the texts alone to provide the matter for establishing re-organizations of readerly concept-networks and the beliefs that hinge on them. Hence the communicative network D’Haen elaborates is that from *Text to Reader*, one in which the author is less essential. Wendell V. Harris, writing explicitly against poststructuralist accounts of readerly experience, makes this clear in his own discussion of these communicative networks. For him, the writer is the source of the communicative intentions that prompt readers to “calculate” about text-to-world relationships, but has no extra-textual

¹⁴ Many theories of allegory already note that even its traditional mode is an essentially linguistic phenomenon. See Quilligan.

regulatory power over those calculations: “The writer constantly assumes certain responses in the reader, who in turn is assuming certain intentions in the relations between the text and external contexts. The complexity of that process can hardly be overstated. Writing and reading thus both require *continuous strategic calculation*” (56). The determinate textual qualities of convention-breaking fictions, then, can be said to *bear* their own arguments; a *bearing* guaranteed by the presumption that another communicative actor composed them, but specified only by their particular linguistic forms and the generic and conventional context in which they operate.

On D’Haen’s model, then, anti-mimetic forms may even *argue* more directly than conventional forms, since they more directly function as calls to “calculation” about intended “implication.” If anti-mimesis acts so directly as a cue to that kind of constructive, relevance-driven reading, it may be no coincidence that the conventions the experimental novels of the 1960s and 1970s broke down and rebuilt were conventions for the presentation of consciousness and agency. Reading anticosmically is, on D’Haen’s model, an overtly deliberative, practical, and social act, requiring the ongoing construction and refinement of plausible communicative coherences and relevances. The rereading I propose of canonical first-generation US postmodernism, then, is to treat it as a repository of this kind of precise, distinct stylistic argument, rather than as unilaterally deconstructive.

Rereading and My Chapters’ Specific Adversaries

As I discuss in Appendix A, it is only recently that scholars have been able to approach “postmodern fiction” with enough separation from “contemporary fiction” to talk about rereading it, and such rereadings have been predominantly historicist: offering new contextual explanations for familiar accounts of the fiction’s formal qualities, rather than starting from disagreement with those accounts. In this project, I take the latter approach, presuming the genre’s historical specificity but rereading first of all for form: different understandings of the fiction’s thematic concerns and

contextual significance should naturally follow. Previous critics of the genre have actively divorced formal analysis from historical insight, most influentially Jameson, whose account of postmodern fiction as limited to “flat” “pastiche” follows naturally from his methodological disinterest in “stylistic description... I have rather meant to offer a periodizing hypothesis...” (3). But Walsh notes the risks of theorizing generalities without accurate “stylistic description” of specifics: “the critical violence that the concept of postmodernism has done to innovative fiction... subordinat[ing] that fiction to the logic of a grand cultural hypothesis; and then, finding the hypothesis embroiled in self-contradiction, it has delegated responsibility for its paralysis back to the fiction itself” (NA 26). Since my formal re-reading’s first move is to snap this artificial but persistently presumed bond between postmodern fiction and postmodern academic theory, the second part of my revisionary re-reading will be to identify potentially different genealogies for the work’s thematic concerns and philosophical positions. I’ll suggest that the novels’ optimistic engagement with the putatively paralyzing givens of their era establishes their place in, and their so-far misprized contribution to, a long tradition of antifoundational US thought about the relationships between deliberation and deferral, doubt and faith, practice and paralysis. My operating contextual question will be: how might we read this fiction—and how might we have read it for the past 40 years—if US university literature departments hadn’t become invested in poststructuralism at the same time as this fiction was becoming the object of study for the new field of “contemporary literature?”

The lack of overt rereadings of postmodern fiction’s formal elements means that three 1980s accounts of postmodern form continue to be cited as authoritative wherever the era’s formal qualities are discussed. The dwindling interest in postmodern theory has led to a lack of interest in reconsidering the fiction so widely taken to be covalent with it, while since these authors still fall—for course-coverage, hiring, and journal-focus purposes—under the headings of either “contemporary” or “post-1945,” energy within those course-coverage fields may seem better devoted either to engaging with work that’s more literally contemporary, or to excavating earlier work that the original

postmodern=contemporary zeitgeist never acknowledged. “Stylistic description” of the era gets deferred to the three canonical accounts: books by Jameson, Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale that have each garnered multiple thousands of citations while barely any of the other critical texts I’ve discussed get into triple figures. Since each was a deliberately generalizing early overview of the era’s fiction, each was naturally unsuited to the kind of distinction among the different rhetorics of different styles that I’m interested in warranting. Normal literary-critical dynamics would see early generalizations taken up for nuancing by more precise readings of individual texts, which could then re-ground newer, more tentative generalizations. Yet due to the core study of “contemporary literature” advancing beyond “postmodernism” so soon after these books came out, that nuancing process never really happened.¹⁵ That it’s still these 30-year-old accounts of the form that most re-readings take themselves to be historically explaining reifies the problem I’m hoping to solve, since all three rely heavily on the equation between antimimesis and deconstructive rhetoric.

Jameson’s treatment of fictions that foreground their own fictionality as wilful abandonments of history and reality replicates Graff’s antipathy, albeit through references to Lacan, Marx, and David Harvey. Hutcheon, by contrast, brought back some of the zealous faith in “disruption” that had animated the surfictionists: in her account, postmodern fiction challenges the authority of hegemonic narratives that rely on the naturalization of tendentious histories. Its self-conscious repurposing of existing linguistic conventions, on her account, propounds a Bakhtinian parody in which the standard authority of “history” is provisionalized as a portable discourse, and hence undermined, restoring franchise and legitimacy to the perspectives it had marginalized. McHale too prioritizes undirected formal proliferations: for him, postmodernism fiction’s unstable ontologies supercede the merely epistemological pluralism of modernism. For him, “a characteristically postmodern text” is one “in which multiple

¹⁵ Hutcheon is the one exception, as her consistent treatment of the relationship between literature, politics, and historiography addresses themes that remain central to subsequent focii of “contemporary” literary studies: I address a few examples of books that consciously try to refine Hutcheon’s model in my chapter on EL Doctorow and Hutcheon, but it’s worth noting that none of these aim to undermine the equation between anti-mimetic form and deconstructive rhetoric that underpins her work.

worlds coexist in uneasy tension” (CP 217), and this reflects the change of question between the two eras from “how can I interpret this world of which I am part, and what am I in it” to “which world is this, what is to be done in it, which of my selves is to do it.” Through attentive descriptions of the strangely structured ontologies in specific texts—which dubiously suggest that the various levels are always unhierarchized—he comes to the fairly underwhelming conclusion that they all serve the same basic rhetorical purpose of undermining modernist reading habits.

In all three models, then, the attempt to identify the generic basis of “postmodernist fiction” ends up insisting on rhetorical homogeny: Jameson’s account of the “flatness” of all postmodern forms doesn’t really distinguish between their rhetoric any less than McHale’s attention to their vast array of multi-level world-constructions. Each of the three defines postmodernist form in opposition to realism’s immersive model of world-correspondence, and extrapolates from this its rhetoric must be limited to an unconstrained movement away from realism’s politics. None of these models can make sense of *PLUS*. Since their aggregate canonicity of these accounts perpetuates the monolithic antimimetic=deconstructive axiom that they rest on, I dedicate a chapter to disputing each by showing how they fail to accommodate a novel that should obviously fit under their remit.

I reread postmodern fiction not as an end in itself, then, but to establish an archive with which to challenge standard accounts of anticosmic anti-mimesis’ rhetorical capacities. The particular arguments made by US postmodernism’s array of forms are obviously a response to historically and geographically specific problems, which influence the direction of their responses. But the generation’s interest lies in the sheer variety of forms that grow from that context, not in the explanatory force of the context itself. Aravamudan’s recovery of the vast array of prose-fictional forms with which the eighteenth century engaged with newly reliable knowledge about “oriental” cultures was fundamentally an exercise in, per its subtitle, *Resisting the Rise of the Novel*, undermining a narrative in which the teleology of the realist novel purged “defective” forms less tied to national history along the way. Postmodern project novels are a

similarly broad and generative archive of alternative models for what longform prose fiction can be and do.

Outside of university study, framings of postmodern fiction are finally beginning to match the authors' own self-conceptions. The blurb for the recent compilation of Barth's short fiction treats him not as a leading postmodernist, but by insisting that his "writing was not a response to the realistic fiction that characterized American literature at the time; it beckoned back to the founders of the novel: Cervantes, Rabelais, and Sterne, echoing their playfulness and reflecting the freedom inherent in the writing of fiction." This is how the authors in question always seem to have seen themselves, from Barth's constant adaptations of *Arabian Nights* to Robert Coover's 1984 insistence—discussing the homogeneity of the 300 novels he had read as a judge of the PEN/Faulkner award—that experimental fiction, though "often thought of as disruptive, eccentric, even inaccessible... could easily be [thought of as] true mainstream fiction, emerging from the very core of the evolving form" (38). Coover explicitly links this evolution to shifts in "social forms" outside the fiction. The "freedom" Barth celebrated was less the upshot of a severance between fiction and the social or the practical than a matter of antimimesis' ability to react to external problems with a variety of forms, rhetorics, and arguments unconstrained by the terms of the realism it defies. Such rhetorics might, per Thorne, include radical conservatism, or per Aravamudan, posit transcultural moral universals. For my purposes, it will cover arguments for the possibility of practical agency in a world that grants the insights of a long tradition of antifoundational thought.

Lisi Schoenbach, writing about *Pragmatic Modernism*, makes a crucial argument along these lines. She argues against two confluences at once: between modernism and the pursuit of rhetorical "shock," and between US pragmatism and the mere attack on philosophical universals. Noting instead that the Anglophone modernist literature that engages most directly with the ideas of James or Dewey is also characterized by an effort to bend its innovations toward influencing readers' "habit," she usefully makes the case that neither literary self-consciousness nor antifoundational philosophy have to be

invested “only in dramatic moments of break and rupture,” but can assert the value and establish the conditions of the constructive integrations “that preceded and followed such moments” (5). Gregg Crane, in a review of Schoenbach and similar books on earlier fiction, notes that this post-shock-value critical “orientation runs the risk of neutralizing what makes these texts literary in the first place, their courting of risk and acknowledgement of mystery in an era of increasing rationalism” (234). Insofar as I go on to identify pragmatism as a model for self-consciously literary literature’s ability to offer constructive accounts of daily agency, I’ll stress the shared emphasis on characterizing agency in terms of an openness to the possibility of failure or error that poststructuralist versions of antifoundationalism find paralyzing. But Crane’s framing also comes close to insisting that the more “literary” the text, the more covalently committed to “risk” and “mystery,” the more opposed to cognitivism and conscious rationality.¹⁶ The novels I examine will, I hope, show that the Barthian “freedom” of their literariness allows them to reorganize just this constellation of heuristics.

Abandoning the idea that prose-fictive antimimesis negatively supervenes on “Rise of the Novel” realism’s commitments leaves us space to distinguish not only a range of rhetorics, but also a range of criteria by which the departures from realism might ask to be read as individual forms. We can hence, instead of taking blanket

¹⁶ The rigid separation of imaginative literature dates at least to the classical era, and animates both poststructural literary criticism and many postmodernist authors. It also might explain some of yet another tendency in literary criticism that makes my project urgent. Poststructuralism may have fallen out of fashion, but the most heavily-promoted “turns” that literary inquiry has pushed in its place have all perpetuated its hostility to conscious reasoning about literature, or what—were we not still amid a “cognitive turn” devoted to elaborating the mimetic logic by which readers of novels can be understood to relate to their characters as real people—could be called a “cognitivist” approach, treating fictions in terms of their propositional-content-bearing and reading processes based on unimmersed reasoning about their constructions. From that mimetic “cognitive turn” to movements based on affect or materialism, literary criticism has become increasingly committed to investigating the parts of our engagement with literature that come before discursive reasoning about it. Selectively interdisciplinary, these movements reflect their overt commitment to the pre-discursive by studiously avoiding the work within the disciplines they draw on that insists on the discursive or rational components of the phenomena in question. For a widely footnoted but rarely substantively engaged critique of this tendency in affect theory, see Leys. For an example of the kind of work on ineliminable discursivity that literary critics who draw on psychology pretend doesn’t exist, see Wetherell. For an account of cultural theory since postmodernism’s organizing hostility to the relevance of belief, see Benn Michaels.

positions about the intrinsic effectiveness of *all* departures from convention, judge these forms in terms of greater and lesser success on their own terms, in articulating those terms, in offering viable arguments, in corresponding to experience, in generating new compounds of feeling, and so on. Ronald Sukenick, an author-critic of an overtly deconstructive bent whose manifestos had an outsized influence on the reception of his postmodern peers, always insists on the necessity of a plurality of forms: “there are as many novels as there are authentic novelists, and, ideally, there should be as many novels as there are novels of those novelists, since in an exploratory situation, every form should be idiosyncratic” (“Ten Digressions” 202). Yet this variety is only in service of a singular overall “disruption”: variety in form only lends weight to the one movement. By contrast, Christine Brooke-Rose, the Swiss-British author and narratologist whose anticomic novels grow out of “lipogrammatic” linguistic constraints—*Between* (1967) assembles sentences from the overlaps of more than a dozen languages, without ever using versions of the verb “to be,” *Amalgamemnon* (1984) is written entirely in subjunctive constructions—noted in the 1980s how little discrimination there was within criticism that notionally endorsed her approach. Lamenting critics’ willingness to rely on the terms of authorial manifestoes, she complains that:

no one ever says: the use of this ‘strategy’ is banal, clumsy, too insistent (or whatever). Or rather, those who might do so are said to be aesthetically prejudiced (against ‘postmodernism’), nostalgic for stable structure or stable moral values or art as illusion and so on... Which can produce a pretty gormless and pedagogic criticism: everything teacher mentions is good (212/3).

All that has changed since Brooke-Rose wrote is a dwindling of advocacy. Everything teacher mentions—be it to promote successor-forms, to re-explain in historical terms, or whatever—remains basically homogenous, and hence basically uninteresting.

Charles Altieri wrote not too long after Brooke-Rose that the then-incipient division between postmodern and contemporary would grant us

two fundamental theses—first that we can distinguish a postmodernism that deserves to live on from the ones that are now properly receiving... last rites, and then that we can use contrasts with what is problematic in postmodern poetry in

order to highlight distinctive features of how artists and writers manage to engage the same cultural problems and pressures (*PoMo 2*).

The current book attempts to fulfil Brooke-Rose and Altieri's unanswered calls. By demonstrating the range of forms and rhetorics that sprung from one generational engagement with one particular set of "cultural problems and pressures," I'll account less for a "postmodernism that deserves to live" than for the living capacities of a form of fiction that too often gets buried along with the parts of postmodernism that deserve to die.

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Finally, the contextual rereading I aim to pursue most directly in this project concerns the matter of which philosophical movements the antimimetic fiction of the US postmodern era should be aligned with. As I've suggested, the existing limitations of criticism on antimimetic fiction have a lot to do with the widespread association between postmodern fiction and postmodern theory.

Although I'm writing to vindicate literature's philosophical capacities, this isn't a "literature and philosophy" project along the lines of recent books by Robert Chodat or Michael LeMahieu, who investigate 20th century US literary manifestations of academic-philosophical ideas about truth and value, intentionality and agency. I'm first and foremost aiming to show that *postmodern project novels* use stylistic innovations to construct precise, coherent arguments (about those issues) in response to particular cultural pressures. Those pressures and arguments, though, were closely tied to the way that insights once restricted to recondite circles and propounded by philosophers who conceived of their work as "antifoundational"—from traditional pragmatism to existentialism—had become commonplace in mainstream US culture. And insofar as I see these novels engaging directly with the question of what to do in a culture where antifoundational critiques of deliberative agency are taken for granted, I align them with very different philosophical forces in their culture than critics who have previously aligned them with the philosophers who spent the 1960s and 1970s propounding those critiques.

Precisely because of the spread of those ideas it may make more sense to label the authors I'm addressing "postfoundational": anti-foundational would suggest that attacks on foundations were as urgent as working out what to do without them. We could also distinguish among anti-foundational and post-foundational postmodernist writing. But I'll discuss the more constructively-orientated of my authors in terms of anti-foundationalism throughout, in order, first, to highlight the fact that their intellectual lineage is so thoroughly bound up in these traditions, and second, to again try and explode from within the existing trend that uses "anti-foundational" to link them to French poststructuralism alone. As I'll show, their immediate response was to intellectual conditions caused by the swift boom and collapse of interest in existentialism in the US, while their recuperative response to the postfoundational conditions of agency aligns them with traditional US pragmatism. In [Appendix C](#) I give a brief overview of archival and contextual reasons to think of both of these as more substantive and better documented influences on the generation of authors in question than the poststructuralists were: the continental postmodern philosophers' major influence on US fiction in fact comes with the *subsequent* generation of innovative fiction writers.

Nevertheless, Pragmatism in its popular slogan form, focused on promoting James' definition of truth as "what works" and his figuration of ideas' truth-relation as their "cash value," has found itself among the putative enemies of postmodern fiction. As a warrant for retrospective rationalization and deference to the status quo, which indeed raises the status quo to the level of a philosophical foundation, that rhetoric is indeed an enemy of postfoundational fiction, which is why that fiction often criticizes it. Characters in Barth, McElroy, William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, all appeal to such readings of pragmatism in ways that the novels go on to show were mistaken.¹⁷ Gaddis' notes from when he taught James "The Will to Believe" as part of a 1971 university course on "The Literature of Failure" show how sceptical we should be in taking such allusions

¹⁷ Barth's narrator Jacob Horner refers to his Doctor, who is interested in action without intention, as a "superpragmatist," Gaddis' young hero in *J R* commissions a false biography of himself that claims he is motivated by James' idea that truth is what works, and so on...

as ventriloquizing the authors' own understandings of American philosophy though: "I am mainly concerned with the misinterpretation of James' pragmatism" (Archive).¹⁸ It's true that in the same novels we get very little *accurate* citation of pragmatic thought: perhaps LeMahieu's demonstration that novels of the era often progressively erased explicit engagement with logical positivism out of successive drafts until it remained a barely acknowledged but organizing spectre applies to pragmatism too.

At any rate, I'll show that Morris Dickstein's judgement with 100 years of hindsight on the first generation of pragmatism is what those of us with over fifty years of hindsight on the first generation of postmodern project novels ought to say of them too. Pragmatism was, he suggested, "less an attack on the foundations of knowledge, as it was portrayed by its early critics, than a search for method when the foundations have already crumbled" (16). The philosophical arguments I'll show that these novels make about the value and viability of practical deliberation in a postfoundational world make pragmatism a plausible component of their philosophical lineage, just as Wharton or Dreiser are of their formal departures. As I've defined postmodern project fiction in terms of its isomorphic narrative and genre-formal commitments, so its relationship to a philosophy of doubt-based faith may be matched by its use of immersion-interrupting form as the basis of its communication.

Acknowledge that this understanding of the fiction and its place in intellectual history might be plausible, and we will have to substantially revise our understanding of the capacities, development, and future value of antimimetic prose fiction as a whole.

What's Coming Up?

My four chapters each reread one of the novels by which the existing understandings of postmodern fiction were canonized. I read each as defying a different dominant understanding of postmodernism's rhetoric, whose dominance was achieved

¹⁸ "Teaching Notes for 'Literature of Failure.'" Teaching Materials. Folder 128, Box 454.

by reading precisely these novels. Those shibboleths are: the standard misreading of Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion" as a pessimistic document rather than a call for repurposing old forms to new ends; Jameson on postmodern fiction's econo-mimetic "flatness"; Hutcheon on postmodern parody as a provisionalising of the single authoritative discourse of history; McHale on postmodern fictional worlds' ontological instability as a challenge to modernist reading habits. Each reduces all anti-illusionist form to a single rhetoric that rejects categories essential for deliberative agency: I show instead how each novel's convention-departure makes a different specific argument in favour of deliberation's viability.

Chapter 1: I read Barth's *The End of the Road* in the context of the standard misreading of "The Literature of Exhaustion." *End of the Road* is usually read as, in Barth's won words, a basically realistic "nihilist catastrophe" (preface), a kind of post-existential dead end that he transcends by writing "The Literature of Exhaustion" and moving on to fiction that renounces its ability to address non-literary problems. But I show how we might constructively read the actual argument of "Exhaustion"—that any future argument-making fiction won't be able to invent totally new forms and so will have to exploit a meta-awareness of the conventionality of old ones—back into the novel that precedes it. *The End of the Road* uses two very different syntactical forms of consciousness-representation—one a duo-temporal retrospective rationalization, one a conventional linear transcription of thought—and their interaction diagnoses the narrator's insistence on his lack of coherent subjecthood as an excuse for his culpability in the events he recounts. The novel's structure ties its defence of motivated reasoning to the way it makes the "conventional" prose seem fresh when it breaks through the default duo-temporal one. Barth jointly recuperates an older prose-form and a traditional account of the relationship between motivation and action, showing that the new givens he invented the duo-temporal narrative voice to reflect don't have to be paralyzing. In the earliest novel I examine, he's already diagnosing poststructural objections to practical subjectivity as a defeasible exercise in bad faith.

Chapter 2: William Gaddis' *J R* completely dispenses with the convention of transcribing characters' unspoken thoughts, and so is often taken to be an exemplar of the "flatness" Jameson attributes to economic postmodernity and the fiction he thinks merely reflects it. *J R* gets read as mere mimicry of a world in which individual deliberative agency has become irrelevant. But while that world is the novel's starting condition, Gaddis uses variations in characters' speech-patterns to reflect different degrees of implied deliberation, and while the novel begins with the deliberative characters interrupted and constrained to the speech patterns of the non-deliberators, I show how that process gets reversed as the novel goes on. Gaddis argues by these patterns of formal contagion that deliberative thinkers can still transmit their depths, and that the world in which depth-psychology and individual deliberation are an anachronism doesn't have to be a *fait accompli*.

Chapter 3: EL Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* is central to Hutcheon's articulation of postmodern fiction's politics as the undermining of dominant discourses, since it literally presents itself as a document in which a character experiments with a number of different voices in order to try and escape dominant history. But Hutcheon insists that the final value of such re-voicing is the realization that no one form is better than another, which removes the dominant discourse's privileged ground. It's here that she and Doctorow part ways, since *The Book of Daniel* is all about how revelling in a merely delegitimizing parody distracts from the pressing work of developing a specific alternative. Daniel the parodying narrator is himself the subject of Doctorow's own satire, and he's faulted most for what Hutcheon finds most sufficient. Doctorow offers a pre-emptive criticism of the mere-delegitimation approach to parody, and instead argues for the necessity of deliberating about counter-narratives' respective correspondence with the non-discursive world. He rejects the Hutcheon-idea that letting them proliferate is work enough.

Chapter 4 - a Coda: The association between postmodernism's rhetoric and mere proliferation is even more fundamental in McHale's account of the way the fiction uses unstable and multiple worlds to undermine engrained reading habits. My final

short chapter rereads Thomas Pynchon's early fiction in order to challenge McHale's use of *Gravity's Rainbow* as a basis for this generalization. I show how Pynchon's recent fiction, in its increasingly explicit and politicized concern with the question of how it might be possible to bring lost historical possibilities back into present existence, gives us a way to read all of Pynchon's play with the boundaries between worlds as relying on questions of their specific hierarchy, accessibility, and sub-juncture. Pynchon is the one of my novelists with a genuine and explicit antipathy to the legacy of the Enlightenment, but if we understand his ontological experiments as rooted in the historical-metaphysics question of how we can juggle relevant possibilities to make a better world than the one we ended up with, then we can read him as the one most directly engaged with the absolute fundamentals of practical deliberation: the identification of goal states that could improve on the present, and the judging of best means to attain them.

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Finally, then, I offer A) a form-driven rather than historicist rereading of a generation of writers about whom a misleading consensus has persisted for whole critical generations, and B) thereby, a contention that anti-mimetic fiction has the capacity to make specifically constructive philosophical cases in specific historical contexts. The central grouping of postmodern fiction emerges as a finally optimistic and constructive stage in the long US intellectual engagement with the matters of practical living in a foundationless world, and anti-mimesis as a malleable rhetorical resource rather than a prepackaged set of limited ideological commitments.

Chapter 1

John Barth and the Anti-Nihilist Capacities of Anti-Mimetic Prose

John Barth's *The End of the Road* (1958) is the prototype of what I'm calling the *postmodern project novel*: formally anti-realist, philosophically constructive. Yet critics usually treat it as a formally realist expression of the limits of existentialism, with no constructive message to offer. It addresses fundamental challenges to deliberative agency that its own narrator Jacob Horner propounds. First, he denies coherent selfhood: the novel begins with the full paragraph "In a sense, I am Jacob Horner,"¹⁹ and he attributes his thoughts, feelings, and actions to personalities and moods that come upon him like "weather." Second, he suffers from "cosmopsis": the paralyzing contemplation of the vastness of existential relevance, of the infinity of considerations present to every act. The novel's iconic scene features Horner going to a train station on his birthday, where, unable to decide which line to take,

it was there that I simply ran out of motives... there was no reason, either, to go back to the apartment hotel, or for that matter to go anywhere. There was no reason to do anything. My eyes... were sightless, gazing on eternity, fixed on ultimacy, and when that is the case there is no reason to do anything—even to change the focus of one's eyes (323)

This narration of the onset of cosmoptic paralysis alludes to the third challenge: the infinite regress of reason's ground, acknowledging which makes Horner determinedly refuse to commensurate reasons and find grounds for preference. Early on, attempting to reject a recommended course of action,

Instantly a host of arguments against applying for a job at the Wicomico State Teachers College presented themselves for my use, and as instantly a corresponding number of refutations lined up opposite them, one for one, so that

¹⁹ Probably the most famous line of the novel, Barth's archive reveals that it was inserted only in the novel's second draft.

the question of my application was held static like the rope marker in a tug-o'-war where the opposing teams are perfectly matched (258).

Without an external reason to resolve the logical entailment that propositions have matching negations, rationality's deliberative mechanisms are framed as necessarily "held static." If reason can't resolve them, then the tug of war analogy suggests that something equivalent to *force* should do so, but given his already-granted lack of a stable self, no such force exists *within* Horner, leaving his paralysis resolvable only by external guidance. On top of the individual paralyzing claims of each of these postmodern givens, then, they combine to reinforce each other.

The prose style in which these claims are conveyed suggests—particularly in sliding from clauses that index their logic to "I" or "my" into clauses of a more categorical grammar—that Horner's propounding of these paralyzing postmodern givens stems from the kind of persistent motives he wishes to deny having. The novel's plot, though, seems to ratify his pessimism, as it ends with his actions contributing to the death of the woman who may be bearing his child, and his retreat from society. Yet as I'll show, even in this early novel Barth uses the kind of stylistic reflexivity we now think of as postmodern to make a pre-emptive argument *against* ideas about the paralysis of reason that became canonical in the equation between poststructuralist theory and postmodern fiction. I'll show that even the earliest postmodern novels take those for granted, as they use formal means to offer insights that can take us beyond these ideas in sophistication or implication.

The End of the Road does this by reflexively recuperating outmoded prose styles in precisely the manner that Barth's later, more obviously postmodern manifesto essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" advocates. There, he laments that "A good many current novelists write turn-of-the-century-type novels, only in more or less mid-twentieth-century language and about contemporary people and topics; this makes them less interesting (to me) than excellent writers who are also technically contemporary" (66). *The End of the Road* is a novel of two prose styles: one a "turn of the century" psychologism that only occurs in the passages where our hero is motivated to action, the

other being that which characterizes the passages above: a “technically contemporary” modulation of its predecessor updated to embody a mind that rationalizes irresponsibility based on accepting those paralyzing givens: the prose is characterized by sentence-structures that blur personal preferences into universal laws. These modes are sufficiently distinct that rather than reading them as transparent reflections of the same human mind, we have to treat their organization and sequencing *qua* styles as a rhetoric in itself: as *stylistic allegory*. “The Literature of Exhaustion” stipulates that technical contemporaneity is a problem for writers after modernism, because truly individual new forms may have run out. Its optimistic solution, though, is to make old ones work in new contexts: “it might be conceivable to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature... if one goes about it the right way, aware of what one’s predecessors have been up to”(Fri 68). *The End of the Road* fulfills this validity-criterion by making the traditional realist prose the one that—returning at the plot’s most urgent turning point—generates formal surprise. The form whose claim to transparency Barth found outdated gets repurposed and made freshly opaque as our hero temporarily gives up on his proto-postmodern rationalizations, a transformation that governs the novel’s argument about agency.

If postmodern literary theory equated anti-mimetic prose with a challenge to the philosophical assumptions of realist prose, it tended in doing so to limit anti-mimesis to rhetorics of shock, disruption, and negation. Reason was the great object of this attack, and as Christopher Conti suggests, “The theme of paralysis induced by reason is so frequent in Barth’s work as to suggest its foundation” (“NNN” 141). It is clearly one of the novel’s concerns: above the first page of Barth’s earliest preserved draft of the novel, the word “PARALYSIS” looms in title position, albeit crossed out (Archive).²⁰ Yet *The End of the Road* isn’t just an expression of the late-1950s philosophy of deliberative paralysis. Its prose, I’ll show, distinguishes forms of reason and posits that challenges to some are more paralyzing than challenges to others: the forms of reason associated with

²⁰ EotR Manuscript 1, Holograph Drafts, Box 1, Folder 1

traditional prose are recuperated, treated as viable alternatives to a newer prose form that expresses the paralyzing givens that underpin our narrator's philosophy.

The alternative the novel develops involves a complex argument about the intrinsic normativity of inaction, the necessity for practical agents to engage with the possibility of failure, and the structural relationship between the conative and cognitive aspects of deliberate action: ideas that bridge early US pragmatism and recent philosophy of action. These arguments are made entirely through self-reflexive style. Barth's anti-mimesis begins earlier in his career than critics have usually presumed, and from the very beginning critiques ideas about the impossibility of deliberative agency that would soon become canonically "postmodern."

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First, the plot... Horner, propounder of self-instability and sufferer of cosmopsis, gets woken from his most serious paralytic episode by a mysterious doctor, whose advice he follows in applying for a job at a university in a new town. There, he gets to know Joe and Rennie Morgan. Joe, counter to Horner, is dedicated to complete personal accountability; he structures his and Rennie's lives such that all their actions can be fully explained, that their desires conform with their actions and vice versa. Anti-accountable Horner begins an affair with Rennie, who, eventually, trapped between the two philosophies, tries to end it. By the time she manages, she is pregnant, and unsure by which father. Both Joe's and Horner's philosophies commit them to hold the situation in suspension, which tortures Rennie until she sets a dilemma; either she will have an abortion or she will kill herself. But she has no idea how—and no remaining volition with which—to organise the abortion. Joe's philosophy commits him not to intervene, and so Horner has to take on agency in order to revivify the dilemma; he frantically seeks to arrange an abortion, fails, but then eventually resorts to his own Doctor. Rennie goes through with the abortion, but no-one has told her not to eat ahead of her anaesthetic, and she chokes to death while sedated. Horner and Joe are left numb, and the Doctor flees town, asking Horner to come with him so that his cosmopsis can be studied in isolation. Horner narrates the novel from the Doctor's new clinic.

Conti has shown why all of this adds up to a portrait of Horner as an agency-evasive cynic, but I'll show that it's in the prose, rather than in the action, that Barth offers a positive argument—beyond the critique of Horner—for what practical agency might look like in a cosmoptic universe of incoherent subjects.

“Early Barth” Narratives: False Divisions and Philosophical Foundations

The End of the Road was Barth's second novel, composed almost continuously with his first over the course of 1955. Falling outside standard chronologies of postmodernism, these first two novels are often treated as outliers within Barth's own career. Three claims define the standard account of what distinguishes “Early” or “existential” Barth from “Mature” or “postmodern” Barth, with the shift notionally completed by the publication of “The Literature of Exhaustion” in 1967. First, that the early novels are formally realist, unlike the reflexive metafiction of the mature work; second, that the early work is preoccupied by existential concerns of choice-making and worldly agency, unlike the later work's preoccupation with storytelling and imagination; and third, that the early novels offer only pessimistic answers to their existential questions. I'll dispute these tenets—both the stylistic and the evaluative.

The two most substantial recent rereadings of the novel disagree on how seriously we should take our narrator: Michael LeMahieu treats Horner's ruminations as the novel's own, while Conti reads the novel as an indictment of his cynical aestheticism. Yet while they disagree on everything else, both maintain that nexus of Early-Barth assumptions: each concludes that the novel uses realist means to articulate a terminal pessimism, leaving formal and philosophical progress for a later “postmodern Barth.” For LeMahieu, the novel is really about the logical-positivist division between facts and values, but its value-saturated realist prose constrains its ability to think beyond their separation: “its aesthetic resistance to the philosophical realism it desires results in a state of narrative, affective, and ethical exhaustion at the end of the book” (87). It's left to “The Literature of Exhaustion” and the fictions-about-writing-fictions

that followed it to move past that exhaustion. Conti, by contrast, thinks it wrong to treat the novel as ventriloquy of existing philosophical ideas: lamenting the fact that chunks of Horner's narration were excerpted for a textbook on existentialism, he criticizes readings that treat the novel "as if Barth had used Horner as a mouthpiece to set a new course for contemporary philosophy rather as an imp of the perverse to run it aground on scepticism" ("Aes" 81). Conti's focus on the novel's ironic indictment of Horner grants him no more purchase than LeMahieu on any constructive ideas the novel may suggest. LeMahieu's attention to style, meanwhile, in identifying it only as more traditional than the ideas it attempts to investigate, also fails to look beyond the point at which those ideas, in Conti's terms "run aground" in what LeMahieu diagnoses as unilateral "exhaustion." Barth himself sometimes seems to paratextually concur, as when he himself retrospectively judges the novel a "nihilist catastrophe" (vii).

It's precisely through "The Literature of Exhaustion" though that, with a little anachronistic reading, the constructive aspects of *The End of the Road* become legible. LeMahieu repeats the persistent misreading of "The Literature of Exhaustion" as a call for literature to disengage from worldly questions as it leaves "turn-of-the-century" form behind, and to limit its concerns to self-scrutiny. Such accounts presume an equation between self-consciousness of style and hermeticism of concern: consequently, they presume that self-conscious style can't be a resource for productive argument about the extra-literary world. Yet Barth repeatedly insists otherwise: exhaustion is "only the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities—by no means necessarily a cause for despair" (Fri 64), and so "validly" "rediscover[ing]... artifices" can help us "confront[] an intellectual dead end and employ[] it against itself to accomplish new human work" (Fri 69-70). Barth establishes a viable subordinating relationship between the very "intellectual" and "human" realms that critics have taken his work to sever. He does something similar in discussing "how an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work—*paradoxically*, because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation" (Fri 71), connecting generic self-consciousness ("his" "material") with historical engagement ("our time").

Yet this wouldn't mean anything for *The End of the Road's* agency-thinking if these were only the insights of a "later" "postmodern" Barth, leaving behind his "early" "existential" mode. LeMahieu's inattention to this case for the positive "work" that represented older forms can do matches his presumption that *The End of the Road's* forms merely inhibit its philosophy. Conti, too, may treat style as irrelevant to the novel's skeptical characterization of Horner, but if the manifesto explicitly supercedes the novel—LeMahieu notes "what Barth does not include in his self-promotion: any mention of *The Floating opera* or *The End of the Road*" (116)"—then there may not be any mistake.

Even before "The Literature of Exhaustion," though, critics were noting both the parodic aspects of Barth's forms, and their complex relation to his ethical thinking: Richard Noland, for example, suggested in 1966 that Barth "will have to show whether his parody is a kind of artistic trap, and hence an evasion of genuine engagement; or whether it is a real critical technique which reflects Barth's own moral vision." At that stage, he was already able to voice the suspicion of unproductive gameplaying that subsequent critics have applied to "postmodern"-era Barth: he "may use parody as a way of clearing his vision, but he can hardly rest in it if he is to develop at all" (257). Other critics have recognized the early novels' antimimetic inclinations: for Tony Tanner, language in Barth is an alternative to worldly engagement: "language that *appears* in the telling, and which proliferates in arbitrary patterns in exuberant disregard for what is the case. That is what I referred to as foregrounding, calling more attention to language than to what it signifies" (247). For Patricia Tobin, form is a way to "separate the destructive negatives of rationality from its positively creative potential. The light at the end of the tunnel shines through for Barth with the realization that rational mentality also fosters the formal imagination" (52), and hence, again, something like a disconnected end in itself. She singles out *The End of the Road* as not even managing this minor happiness: "Barth's grimmest book, claustrophobic and catastrophic, with no comic opera aboard to float it home free" (42). Early Barth is, for critics from the 1960s to 2010s, a pessimistic diagnoser of the limits of his time's philosophy, who if he offers

any alternative to that paralyzing pessimism, does so only by holding out the prospect of an escape into what Horner at one point calls pure “articulation.” Noland’s negative answer to the question of whether Barth has yet achieved a constructive relationship for parody and engagement epitomises the consensus about *The End of the Road*: its author has “simply taken the fact of nihilism as the subject matter of [his] work without necessarily developing a single philosophical position on which to base a system of values” (240).

Yet I’ll show that, since “The Literature of Exhaustion” clarifies that what Tanner calls the “foregrounding” of narrative language’s opacity can serve “new human work” without being a mere end in itself, the difference between styles of prose and their organization in relation to the novel’s plot add up to an argument that first indicts Horner’s nihilism as cheap rationalization, and then establishes the validity, coherence, and value of his one brief departure from it. This stylistic argument, hinging on the fresh opacity of conventional prose psychology, connects the recuperated validity of the formal mechanisms to the validity of the argument. As “The Literature of Exhaustion” explains how opaque formal recuperations can “refute” apparent “ultimacies” of compositional practice, so such practices in *The End of the Road* create an argument that refutes the apparently paralyzing ultimacies to which practical rationality had come by the mid-1950s.

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Before I examine this prose-structure argumentation, it’s finally just worth clarifying exactly what those ultimacies are and how the novel establishes them as givens to be worked with rather than as fresh new insights.

My introduction discusses how, in critiquing Barth for proposing that cosmopsis is a universal truth, Amy Elias takes the novel’s givens for its insights. None of the critics I discuss above have come any closer to finding a positive alternative to cosmopsis in the novel, since none acknowledge its indications that it takes the problems of cosmopsis, the incoherent self, and reason’s regressive ground absolutely for granted. It cites,

discusses or figures classic and medieval exemplars of paralysis—Horner’s boarding room contains a statue of Laocoon and he mentions Buridan’s ass—and then fills Horner’s philosophical conversation with further acknowledgments of more recent antifoundationalists: Sartre, Kierkegaard, pragmatism. LeMahieu has convincingly argued that the novel’s dialogue about fact/value relations amounts to thinly disguised citation of logical-positivism, and while his chapter on Barth is the only one that doesn’t produce archival evidence of deleted engagement-by-name with logical positivism, Barth’s preserved drafts of the novel show that he did delete plenty of philosophical citation, in particular Joe’s explicit comparison of US pragmatism and French Existentialism, and a moment where Horner compares himself to Descartes in terms of programmatic doubt (Archive).²¹ The novel’s openness about its antifoundational heritage belies the idea that the lack of foundations in Horner’s world could be its full rhetorical payoff.

Various critics have noted the degree to which Horner’s convictions anticipate the tenets of poststructuralism: these constitute the few attempts to reconcile *early Barth’s* methods and insights with *mature-postmodern Barth’s*. The stress on the incoherent self—arguably the one of Horner’s axioms which has the best claim to be distinctively poststructuralist—is established, though, in the novel’s very first line. The cosmoptic scene, meanwhile, assumes the priority of givenness through another conspicuous location: it’s the only scene in the novel to be narrated out of sequence. Chronologically, it precedes all the rest of the novel’s narrated events, emphasising the extent to which it grounds all the novel’s other dealings with decision. Its out-of-sequence narration puts it just after Horner has exposed Rennie to a disillusioning vision of how Joe behaves when he thinks he’s unobserved, and before the revelation that Horner and Rennie have slept together. It thus functions to clarify the exact terms within which the subsequent exertions of agency that will hinge on Rennie’s pregnancy and threatened suicide have to work. Cosmopsis, then, is not built up to or argued for. It is the condition on which the novel is premised. All the novel’s citation and structure

²¹ EotR Manuscript 298 + 164, Holograph Drafts, Box 1, Folder 1 + 3

emphasise that these paralyzing problems are its starting conditions, not its insights, leaving the rest of the novel to examine what is to be done in a world where they can't be denied.

That question then establishes the framework within which the models of action figured by Horner, Joe, and the Doctor—call these respectively “weather,” “mastery,” and “mere action”—have to be assessed. Horner and Joe initially seem like opposites; one invested in the rational accountability of the self, and the other having reasoned his cosmoptic way to rejecting both selfhood and practical choice-making. Joe rationalizes forwards, by imagining how he might be held accountable. Since “the only demonstrable index to a man’s desires is his acts, when you’re speaking of past time: what a man did is what he wanted to do” (300), the only way to make sure that your actions will be rationally justifiable is to make your desires synonymous with reason. Horner, on the other hand, rationalizes backwards, not only in the moment, but crucially from his retrospective narratorial vantage. Early in the novel, he claims a superior sympathy towards anyone who cannot “discipline his standards, down to the last shred of conscience, to fit his behaviour” (281). To be able to do so is the privilege of one who can think after his act is determined, can explain the act in knowledge of its consequence, and Horner’s retrospective narrative vantage allows him to rationalise any action as conforming to his (lack of) beliefs. While Joe must rationalise before he acts, Horner as narrator can do what Joe as character cannot, and construct a perfect match between values and actions. He just happens to value the conviction of irresponsibility for his own actions, matching his actions to inscrutable mental “weather.” This shared rationalizing has a shared consequence: each is motivated by a refusal to act in the absence of total certainty. It’s this shared anti-commitment that finally generates the tortuous suspension that Rennie resolves to escape by the forced choice between abortion and suicide.

When Joe is unable to understand Rennie’s adultery, the natural consequence is that they be left in a painful suspension until he can:

According to my version of Rennie, what happened couldn't have happened. According to her version of herself, it couldn't have happened. And yet it happened. That's why even now we have a hard time believing it did happen... and why everything's got to be held in suspension now until we decide the significance of what happened (362).

In 'The Will to Believe,' William James criticised William Clifford's version of scepticism: "Believe nothing, he tells us, keep your mind in suspense forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies" (727). This is Joe's logic, but it's also Horner's. Tobin Siebers objects to postmodern theory's anti-subjectivism in similar terms: "Skeptics define their virtue as critics in direct proportion to their ability to purify their thinking of 'beliefs'" (12). The resistance to belief, Siebers goes on to make clear, is a resistance to Clifford's "awful risk" of being proved wrong, of being found subject to a false ideology. Horner's refusal to attribute his actions to himself is just this kind of exculpation: he too is initially willing to let Rennie suffer, ending a long balancing of considerations with an anti-conclusion: "I'm not taking a stand... I'm an issue evader from way back. I'll go along with you any way you want" (375). The deliberate suspension of action and the displacement of responsibility for choice, so often given a positive valence by postmodern theory, is in *The End of the Road* mere callousness.

While both Joe and Horner hold their actions to such standards, meanwhile, the Doctor's "treatments" for agentic paralysis all work by divorcing action from considerations of outcome or accountability, making it an end in itself. From impersonating someone else, to "mythotherapy," in which you conceive your actions as fulfilling an already written script, to the minimal connection between "motivation" and action that comes from randomly specifying a destination and then walking there, the doctor's therapies are all broadly parodic of the existential insistence that a foundationless world makes action an end in itself. The Doctor may not be a rationalizer, then, but his models of agency have little to offer in terms of practical agency or its attendant categories: goal-pursuit, longterm coherence, responsibility, and

so on. There's nothing here that can validly resolve—rather than just breaking—the suspension into which Horner and Joe put Rennie.

The moment at which Horner resolves to break this suspension, realizing that he's less committed to his rationalization than Joe to his, is the moment where the novel introduces a new philosophical alternative, and it does so through style. It's in the passages that follow, as Horner frantically tries to arrange an abortion, that we get the novel's most traditional prose: both the prose style and the narrative events are at their furthest remove from the evocation of cosmopsis and self-diffusion on which the novel begins. Yet for critics who read the novel as an expression of pessimism, or an endorsement of one or other character's philosophy, it's precisely this passage of the novel that has seemed most jarring and hardest to explain: critics consistently treat it as an aside from, rather than a crux for, the novel's core arguments on agency. Patricia Tobin finds its representation of active choice-making "severely and comically qualified," while for Charles Harris it's "clearly an exercise in futility... The chapter seems far less an account of Jake's sudden resolve than a parody of decisiveness, further confirmation that events have a life of their own, impervious to Jake's desire to restrain them" (144). Only Ken Pellow and Rita Hug have read it positively, as showing how Horner's respect for Rennie's personhood is "sufficient to overwhelm his usual tendency to examine motivations rather than be motivated. The Horner who *chooses* to help Rennie get an abortion is a decisive, active, un-catatonic, non-self-centred, strategic, and pretty damned efficient fellow" (43). What none of these critics focus on is the distinctiveness of this part of the novel in terms of style.

Two Prose Psychologies

Harris' judgment that the passage seems parodic is, as I'll show, the key to its import. There's a connection between the logical change of mind that Horner has to make in order to end Rennie's suspension, and the fact that doing so puts him into conventional prose psychology. His shift to that prose—freshly, parodically opaque in all

the ways “The Literature of Exhaustion” had recommended—shows him accepting an older mode of deliberative agency that his propounding of the various paralyzing givens seemed to require him to reject. As the prose forms become opaque, so too the model of agency they offer is updated, “rediscover[ed] validly” outside its original context.

The kind of realism that has been attributed to *The End of the Road* is precisely that which “The Literature of Exhaustion singles out as outdated: a “turn of the century” psychologism that aims at the optimal presentation of the moment by moment working of a mind in urgent social situations. This is a prose characterised by the linear, sequential presentation of experiences, impressions, insights and considerations toward a conclusion or an action. If we look to the abortion-organising sequence, we’ll find just this kind of prose. Take this extended example:

Dr. Welleck’s manner gave me some confidence that he could be swindled. For one thing, he talked too much: three of the doctors I’d called had refused to discuss anything at all over the telephone, and none of the others had been anything like so garrulous as young Dr Welleck. Also, from the nature of the conversation I gathered that he was finding it difficult to compete with the older practitioners, perhaps because he was new in town. Any professional man who would criticize his colleague to perfect stranger on the telephone was, I guessed, a man with whom arrangements could be made (407).

Here are considerations arranged into linear sequence by qualifiers like “For one thing” and “Also”; here are the verbs of local mental activity—“I gathered” or “I guessed”—that turn past impressions into present considerations, and all are organized by a consistent deliberative present established by the passage beginning and ending at the point where these considerations add up to the conclusion from which subsequent paragraphs continue. Anyone who wanted to claim that *The End of the Road* was a conventionally realist novel would surely start with a passage like this.

But recall that this is the part of the novel that critics have found weird, parodic, ill-fitting with this realist novel’s main cosmoptic preoccupations. If we contrast this passage with the kind of prose that is basic to the rest of the novel, the kind of prose on which it begins and ends, we’ll see that that basic prose lacks these markers of turn-of-the-century realist psychologism. Take this extended example from the opening pages,

in which Horner explains the difficulties of choosing how to sit in the Doctor's Progress and Advice Room:

You would not slouch down, because to do so would thrust your knees virtually against his. Neither would you be inclined to cross your legs in either the masculine or the feminine manner: the masculine manner... would cause your left shoe to rub against the Doctor's left trouser leg... the feminine manner... would thrust the toes of your shoe against the same trouser leg... To sit sideways, of course, would be unthinkable, and spreading your knees in the manner of the Doctor makes you acutely conscious of aping his position, as if you hadn't a personality of your own. Your position, then (Which has the appearance of choice, because you are not ordered to sit thus, but... is chosen only in a very limited sense, since there are no alternatives) is as follows... (255-6).

This is less a presentation of deliberation than a sequence of claims about consideration given a speciously deliberative subjunctivity. Where the style of the classically realist abortion-procurement insists, per classical realism, on the action as an outcome of thoughts that precede it, the style of prose on which the novel begins and ends separates considerations from thought: although the available options are presented in relation to a "you", there is only one verb of mental action—"is chosen"—and this has no agent. Agential deliberation is constrained to the form of logical deduction, by contrast with the contingent inductive structure of the abortion-procurement section. The style presents the premises of the narrated deliberation as universal truths, but beneath the prose's insistence they are nothing of the sort: Horner's claim that "to sit sideways, of course, would be unthinkable," for example, presents a personal aversion as a literal and obvious cognitive impossibility. A specific narrative situation is presenting *itself* as a universal condition of agency, and doing so at the level of unconventional prose construction.

Recall a similar move in the discussion of cosmopsis, where what seems like a standard piece of free indirect discourse based on Horner's own perspective—"There was no reason to do anything. My eyes... were sightless, gazing on eternity, fixed on ultimacy"—moves into a universal generalization: "and when that is the case there is no reason to do anything—even to change the focus of one's eyes" (323). These pronouncements blend past or subjunctive tenses indexed to specifically located

perspectives into simple-present generalizations about the inexistence of “reasons” or “cho[ices].” After more than a hundred pages of prose given over to such grammatical naturalizations of dubious logic, the restoration of a conventional prose whose forms presume rather than asserting the existence of alternative options and live considerations comes to seem unusual.

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The novel’s two distinct prose psychologies hinge on the fact that the narrator is narrating his own earlier self. Horner, as a narrator, has established psychological grounds for wanting to believe in the unstable version of human consciousness, reasons that become clearer and clearer as the novel goes on and his recounted actions take their place in the build-up to Rennie’s death. Horner exerts his narratorial authority to insist that his actions have always been “both specifically (if not generally) unpremeditated and entirely unreflective.” The acts that contributed to the final catastrophe, he implies, should be related to “The fellow who committed [them],” by what “I would call” something less than deliberated responsibility (349). “Would” here works doubly with its original sense of “wish to.” These implications of the motivation behind Horner’s default mode of narration makes the difference between the two proses crucial to the novel because they represent a distinction between forms of reason. The recuperated style of the abortion-procurement passages is a prose of practical deliberation, a pursuit of contingent goals that has to engage with the possibility of error or failure. That strange default prose, meanwhile, is a prose of rationalization—a retrospective attempt to deny and avoid error, contingency, and unpredictability by aligning his motives with mere logic.

That prior critics haven’t noticed this shift in styles, instead treating the novel as consistently realist, reflects the subtlety of the modulations with which the novel’s default prose accommodates the postmodern givens that made conventional prose psychology less than “technically contemporary.” I’ll pick on three qualities that distinguish it: these are non-standard in conventional prose psychology, but occur persistently in the default parts of the novel, are clearly tied to the rationalizing

promotion of postmodern givens as exhaustions of agentive possibility, and vanish entirely in the passages where Horner is practically deliberating to save Rennie.

For a start, Horner's mental self-quotation when rationalizing and when perturbed are distinct. Early in the novel, he narrates coming home after his first meeting with Joe and Rennie, when the phone rings and he knows it's Rennie asking to meet again. "Rennie, girl, said I to myself, I am out; be content that I don't commit a lewdness with your voice, since you've aborted my infant manic. Ring away, girl scout: your quarry's not in his hole" (275). After the reminder that Rennie's voice comes to us entirely through Horner's modulation, the ostentatiously unnatural diction highlights its own lack of a clear parodic source: in rationalizing himself as selfless, Horner can make his own voice and thoughts maximally idiosyncratic to stress his disconnection from the kind of stable human relations that Joe and Rennie aim to model. But under stress, Horner's mental quotation of himself blends into his narrative prose in standard free indirect style: "the guilt poured in with a violent shock that slacked my jaw... What in heaven's name was I doing? What, for God's sake, had I done?..." (350). As in the above passage the introductory line reminded us of Horner's filtering power, here the equivalent line seems to self-consciously cancel that power out—to slacken Horner's speaking organ—in order to revert to conventionally direct mental transcription. The urgency of the past events takes over the present style, rather than the default mode's usual filtering control over the presentation of the past.

The default style also exploits the transtemporal possibilities of Horner's narration, blending past and present in a single prose. The novel gives us an early clarification of how this works: with Horner notionally narrating an earlier meeting in the Doctor's old Baltimore facility, his reference to "the present establishment" reminds us that he is writing from the Doctor's new Philadelphia facility. Since "present" can refer equally to both settings, his prose treats the axioms of past choices as syntactically "present" to both settings, and transcendently true thanks to his generalizing simple-present tense. This principle then governs the whole subsequent novel. Near its end, Horner discusses having told Joe that he loved Rennie, and tells us "at any rate I couldn't

see any meaning in the statement now.” “Now,” throughout the novel, gives such sentences two available indices, which have different significances before and after knowledge of Rennie’s death. In the past tense, this just seems like another example of Horner’s denial of personal connection to human categories and the language that represents them: he said something but he changes like weather so lacks commitment to its content. But from the present, we can read the now as distinguishing past Horner from present Horner on the basis of what has happened to him and what he’s learned. That makes available a reading something like “couldn’t even if I tried,” which points to the influence that Rennie’s death may have had on the nihilism that saturates the book.

“Could,” too, is consistently used with this dual implication. The archive reveals that Barth added or changed a lot of these over the course of the drafting process, suggesting it was a conscious pattern. In particular, Horner uses it to sustain those faulty reasonings that imply that since he, either in the narrated past or narrating present, doesn’t acknowledge something’s existence then that something doesn’t exist. For example, in a seemingly minor confusion that leads him to turn up a day early for his interview at the teacher’s college, Horner paraphrases his apologetic response to the secretary: “I certainly wasn’t going to make an issue out of it, and for that matter an equally good case could be made for Monday” (261). “Could” here blurs together the factual dimension of when the interview had really been arranged for and the normative question of when such interviews *should* be arranged. Horner attempts to subsume the factual to the normative. Later in the incident, this dynamic leads him to straightforwardly untrue modal reasoning: “Since I would not in a hundred years have been at home enough in Dr Schott’s office to ask Shirley to investigate her files, the question of my appointment date could not be verified by appeal to objective facts” (267). This suggests that since Horner is disinclined to do something, no person could do that thing. At the same time, it articulates a truth contingent on his power over the narrative: if a fiction has a single narrator, there is no way to verify facts about the fictional world beyond what that character presents us. Barth thus, in one language

detail, highlights both Horner's faulty motivated reasoning and the generic conditions that allow him to propound it.

As I've suggested the prose-style interactions bear the weight of the philosophical significance and structure of Horner's change of mind, it's important that this pattern shows up in the context of the Joe/Rennie/Horner triangle. When Joe first confronts Horner with the infidelity, Horner attempts to rationalize his way out of it by appeal to his usual givens: "I don't know what unconscious motives I might have had, Joe, but whatever they were, they were unconscious, so I can't know anything about them.' And, I was thinking, can't be held responsible for them" (358). Horner's first "can" is more dubious logic: that something was unconscious in the past doesn't mean that it's not knowable in the present. Horner's reported thought, meanwhile, establishes the conscious motive that leads him to make such claims. And this highlights the degree to which the past/present play of "can" in this scene establishes how Horner's pseudo-logical narrative style is motivated by his *present* need to be able to avoid responsibility for his part in later events of the same relationship. The way that "I was thinking" stresses the difference between past and present can then be read in at least two ways: either as a deliberate disavowal of having those thoughts in the present, or as a present acknowledgment that his undeniable role in bringing about Rennie's death has stopped him from being able to truly "think" his irresponsibility any longer. That the ambiguity goes unresolved highlights the importance of the duo-temporal narrative situation without resolving exactly what Horner's present logic is. It stresses the fundamental reading condition Conti sets up for the novel: "We must be wary of Horner's attempt to supply us with the terms of interpretation most favourable to a rationalization of his antisocial behaviour" ("Aes" 94).

It would be a stretch to say that this odd, Barth-invented duo-temporal prose is obviously anti-mimetic on its own. But it is genuinely, consistently distinctive, and thereby provides the foil that makes anti-mimesis a rhetorically relevant category when a prose-style usually associated with transparency later intrudes so opaquely that it becomes the one in need of thematic explanation. In order to do that thematic

explanation of the rational-deliberation section, we have to fully understand the position from which Horner otherwise rationalizes such agency out of acknowledged existence.

The novel's organization of opaque rational-deliberation and default deliberate-rationalization prose-forms suggests that the latter provides a viable alternative to the former. Critics have seen the novel endorsing the ideas that structure the misleading default prose. But if Horner's efforts to procure the abortion for Rennie reflect both worthwhile motivations and temporarily viable agency, we're cued to think of this passage as philosophically distinct by its recuperation of the traditional prose style. The interaction, or conflict, between the two prose forms adds up, I'll show, to three related philosophical arguments that are, cumulatively, Barth's contribution to postfoundational agency-thinking. First, there's the implicit critique of the logic and the motives behind Horner's paralyzing rationalizations. Second, the prose of practical deliberation embodies certain values and practices opposed to those critiqued flaws. Third, there's a logical structure in Horner's choosing to briefly reject rationalization for deliberation. Barth associates Horner's retrospective model of philosophy-justifying narration with fixity and error-aversion, and hence with postmodern paralysis. Against this, he defends a warrant structure for contingent deliberation as a non-sovereign but profoundly useful mode of thinking, to which generalised critiques of "reason" or "rationalism" do not apply. Yet finally Horner's reading of his own story prompts him to return to rationalization. I'll show finally how the novel cues us to treat this as a mistake, a diagnosis that opens up into its wider case for a version of rationality unafraid of error and accident.

The Stylistic Argument Against Rationalized Paralysis

Horner's repeated grammatical efforts to claim the status of law for suppositions entirely his own align him with Conti's reading of an earlier Barth protagonist: "the straight-talking narrator who dresses up nihilism as naked truth" (ICS 81). By the

standard logic of unreliable narrators, the novel's consistent revelation of Horner's motivated reasoning ought to trouble the propositions he relies on, a worry that Thomas Schaub has identified: "The novel seems caught in a troubling oscillation between a dramatic critique of Horner and an admission that what he says is inescapably true" (166). This is particularly the case when, as Schaub notes, "Horner is entirely discredited" at the same time as many of his "assertions about language and reality, that must be read dramatically, appear in Barth's interviews as straight assessments of the artist's problems and compromises" (167). The problem for a postmodern project novel as I've defined the genre is to make apparently paralyzing givens compatible with deliberative agency without actually denying them. Horner's error is not in the givens he propounds, but the logic with which he combines them to propound an anti-agentive agenda. To understand the flaws in that logic and the way that Horner's briefly constructive response to Rennie's deadly dilemma overcomes them even though she still dies, we need to fully understand how Horner and his dubious logic are, literally, characterized.

The End of the Road constantly invites us to think about Horner's anti-subjectivity arguments as anti-responsibility arguments, to consider these in terms of revealed motives, and those motives in relation to the gradual revelation of a narrative arc whose events Horner might wish to avoid responsibility for. This might seem to treat Horner as human in ways that anti-mimetic fiction ought, by its very principles, not to. If we think of Horner as a character in William Gass' non-mimetic sense of the term, though—"A character for me is any linguistic location of a book toward which a great part of the rest of the text stands as a modifier... The work is filled with only one thing - words and how they work and how they connect" (interview w/ Gardner 8)—then we can read Horner's significance as the narrator, and his relation to questions of agency, in terms of how the words that represent him *modify* other clusters of words related to categories of agency. Take, for example, the way that Horner and the word "self" relate. We already know, of course, that Horner aims to invalidate the word by rationalizing about the very nature of his being. Yet rationalization is the product of linguistic

structures that, in Horner's instrumental uses of them, entail a self to do the rationalizing. As such, though "self" is a term that Horner as narrator foregrounds for revision, it also modifies the word-structures that constitute Horner.

For example, his claims to be guided by mental "weather" usually come from the position of stable rationalization. Yet under the pressure of narrative events that threaten that account of irresponsible freedom, the language of self creeps into the text free from qualification: his first feelings of guilt follow from his realisation that he "didn't want to think about myself" (350), while after he first sleeps with Rennie "it seemed I had to admit that I was a coward after all... and now I was self-conscious again... my curiosity returned with my self-consciousness" (354). In both instances, there's a connection between the sense of selfhood and the feeling of accusation that Horner associates with the very concept of responsibility. Daniel Majdiak, traces Horner's unreflexive use of "self" to cowardice, suggesting that "from this point on Horner never again totally loses himself in a role; every action he participates in is complicated for him by his awareness of the role" (58). This is right about the scenes in which Horner attempts to rationalize himself out of problems, but doesn't acknowledge that in the practical-deliberation, conventional-prose passages, such self-mention drops away: when he acts in terms compatible with having a self, the concept has no external perch from which to attack.

"Self" distorts the prose most when rationalization conflicts with the need for urgent response, especially to others who depend on Horner. In the self-justifications he relies on to avoid those obligations, he most explicitly sets out his self-conception as a post-existential man. Increasingly, he becomes aware that such wishes might themselves be a basis for accusation: he refrains from using his theory of self to explain his actions to Joe, "for to do so would have been to testify further against myself" (368). This makes clear just how dependent Horner's anti-self theories are on his unified and consistent tendencies: granting the validity of the accusation establishes a self to be testified against, a self that anxiety forces him to acknowledge wherever accusation

takes place. The absence of self is thus an exculpatory maneuver, its pursuit entailing selfish motives that indict by the exculpation's own terms.²²

The complexity of these modifying relationships make even the narrator's relation to his earlier self bear argumentative weight. The novel's opening hedge, "In a sense, I am Jacob Horner" (255) establishes a wobbling relationship between the narrated character and the narrator. There are at least two ways to read it: either as a belief attributable to both Horners that "Horner" is always unstable and so no iteration of him is him in a fundamentally different sense than any other, or as the narrator establishing the tenuousness of the link between the two: "I [your current narrator] am Jacob Horner [the character you're about to read about], but only in a sense [due to the changes that followed what I'm about to recount]." The possibility of the latter reading highlights that narrator and character may have different reasons to be invested in their identical accounts of the non-identity of selfhood. Those reasons hinge on responsibility for Rennie's death. Both Horner's modes of action—the rationalizing and the deliberative—played a part in the events that led to it. But his narration's duo-temporal style elements encode a circular logic: Narrating Horner derives from the fortunes of Narrated Horner only a claim that narrated Horner's initial worldview was right all along. The novel stresses this by specifying from page one that Barth narrates from the Doctor's new clinic. From the start, we know that the narrator still finds himself in the same medical-philosophical situation that led him into the events he's about to recount.²³ In both narratological and intra-world geographical terms, Horner's modifying role as a narrator is *reiteration* despite signs that his ideas ought to have changed or evolved.

²² Insofar as Horner's intellect and the self that underlies it conflict, we might see him as a narrator-structural literalization of the motive-dynamic in Barth's debut novel *The Floating Opera*, whose narrator expressed a need "to hide my heart from my mind" (223).

²³ Barth added the specification of Horner's location late in the drafting process: "(I am writing this ~~in~~ ~~October, 1955~~ at 7.55 P.M. in the evening of Tuesday, October 4, 1955)" (EotR Manuscript 4, Holograph Drafts, Box 1, Folder 1) becomes - "I am writing this at 7.55 in the evening of Tuesday, October 4, 1955, upstairs in the dormitory" (EotR 256). The specification that the narration is not only retrospect but from a very specific place emphasises the narrative circularity of Horner's ending up with the Doctor again, taking a Doctor's-eye view of the whole story he recollects for us.

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The aspect of this reiteration most central to the novel's ideas on deliberation is its aversion to contingency. Horner's attitude doesn't evolve between past action and present narration because for it to do so would logically require him to take responsibility for the consequences of his ongoing commitment to irresponsibility. His grammatically strenuous efforts to make that commitment play out as universally valid generalization reflect his investment in infallibility. Recall again Siebers and James' identifications, a century apart, of the affective attractions of freedom from error or blame in determinist thinking. Horner's commitment is notionally to undeterminable unpredictability, but its fundamental upshot is the same evasion of what James called the "awful risk" of responsibility for error, and it has the same stable affective appeal.

The novel makes this clear by explicitly figuring some of Horner's dubiously universalizing rationalizations in terms of error-aversion. His axiom of the non-preferability of choices means that many of his own are made not on the basis of seeking value but of avoiding pitfall. Looking for accommodation after taking the teaching job that begins his interaction with the Morgans, he finds the first place he visits "too perfect, and I was sceptical... There was nothing to do but take the room... arranging my belongings took but an hour and a half, after which time there was simply nothing to do" (262/3). In the absence of a justification for backing out, Horner's inertial "nothing to do" abdication of agency leads him to a situation with a more general vacancy: the world cannot be made to provide occasions for acting, and so its natural state, and that of all external phenomena, must be to offer "nothing to be done". The passage's structure yet again enacts a false universalization: since Horner desires that there be no reasons in a choice, there must be no viable considerations in the world.

Similarly, the Doctor gets Horner out of his initial cosmoptic paralysis by directly addressing him:

"I realized as soon as I deliberately held my tongue (there being in the last analysis no reason to answer his question at all) that... Not to choose at all is unthinkable: what I had done before was simply choose not to act, since I had

been at rest when the situation arose. Now, however, it was harder—‘more of a choice’—to hold my tongue than to croak out something” (324).

Chronologically taking place before the novel begins, and placed just before what Barth refers to as “the crisis of the novel” (intro) gets underway, this particular cognitive shift iterates, rather than repudiating, the terms on which the narratorial Horner makes strenuous effort to remain paralyzed. The response to the doctor, even though it ends that paralysis, clarifies two of the premises that were motivating it: that choice is unavoidable (“unthinkable” here being much more genuine and literal than in the use I quoted earlier), and that the preferable choice is the easiest one, the one that is “less of a choice.” The exertion of deliberation in tongue-holding thus gives way to a response: Horner’s error-avoidant instinct is to hold his tongue until a compelling reason to use it occurs but, in the end, ‘croaking out something’ is justified by its better fitting his program of minimal exertion. What emerges, then, is an implicit deliberation about which act will best fulfil anti-deliberative criteria.

The deliberateness of Horner’s paralysis is what allows him to deliberately reject it when he realises that not doing so will lead to Rennie’s suicide. Whether the postmodern givens are universal or not, the novel thus suggests, the decision to *let* them be paralyzing is deliberate, however dressed up in specious logic. Horner’s usual rationalizing mode, with its specious logical constructions, insists on these givens and his deployment of them as *cognitive* phenomena, consequences of his intellectual insight. But the novel’s insistence on them as motivated reasoning, challenge to which is registered as affective discombobulation rather than intellectual challenge, suggests that we should view them differently.

The threat of Rennie’s death forces Horner to belie his own generalizations. Motives stronger than the comfort of irresponsibility occasionally discombobulate Horner’s rationalizing prose throughout the novel, just like the unbidden concept of “self” does. Recall Hug and Pellow’s discussion of his change of mind, the threat to Rennie is “sufficient to overwhelm [Horner’s] usual tendency to examine motivations rather than be motivated.” The language of “tendency” here echoes James’ argument

about the possibility of rational action after the exhaustion of cognitive avenues. In “The Will to Believe,” James says that it can be rational, when we come to the end of the knowable commensurability of options without one emerging as clearly better, to take the final decision out of deliberative frameworks: we can leave this adjudication to what he calls our “passional tendencies and volitions” (WTB 233). For James, the passional tendencies are more fundamental to the deliberating self than the purely cognitive mind is. We can rationally appeal to them after cognition runs out of force because they are persistent substrata of our selves, and choosing on their basis can be part of a longer-form, self-orienting plan of action. In this respect, James suggests that the cognitive part of the active mind can defer to the *conative* part: the part that spurs and directs purposive action. On James’ model, the cognitive is usually in service of the conative, but the conative can intervene to act on its own, and when it does so, it will express a purpose rationally consistent with the cognitive deliberations whose goals and directions (in the literal sense of *tendencies*) the conative had always been powering.

Horner, of course, denies precisely that any such consistent self-principle can exist within him, even as, in his world of regressive reason and infinite considerations, *all* choices are implicitly as in need of adjudication by the supra-rational as the choices James isolates. Horner’s postmodernism is so thoroughgoing that he subjects even the conditions James considered supra-rational to a paralyzing impotence. In the terms above, he deploys his cognitive powers to resist the acknowledgment of consistently oriented conative inner promptings. For precisely this reason, the concept of an adjudicating “tendency” can help make sense both of his rationalizations and of his change of mind. We might not instinctively associate meta-cognition with the “passional,” but as the novel cues us to understand Horner’s paralyzing metacognition as *motivated*, it must stem from *some* conative impulse. Horner of course suggests that the only force that determines his behavior is unpredictable mental “weather,” but this is to ignore the parts of his “self” that don’t change under that rubric: his rationalization, and his “tendency to” distance himself from his actions. Insofar as these are consistent, they can’t be the products of the kind of inconsistency he attributes to himself. His

fundamental tendency towards evading issues or choosing not to choose establishes conative consistency. James clarifies this logic within the framework of single choices: insisting that scepticism is always a matter of will and convenience, he tells us “Do not decide, but leave the question open,’ is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and its attended with the same risk of losing the truth” (WTB 229). Such a scepticism “is not avoidance of option; it is option of a certain particular kind of risk” (WTB 241). There is no way, on this model, to truly avoid choosing, or to truly avoid evincing a character by the choice one makes. Consequently, one can’t avoid responsibility by forestalling decision. Any aversion to the risks of option-ranking in practical decision is an acceptance of responsibility for whatever risks the delay incurs.

Barth’s revisions to the novel include an explicit statement of the rationalizing characters’ aversion to options, as the Doctor’s prescriptions for the kind of grammar Horner would benefit from teaching—“No description at all. No divided usage. Teach the rules. Teach ~~prescription~~ the truth about grammar” (Archive)²⁴—were revised to a shorter list: “No description at all. No optional situations...” (259). The revision emphasises Horner and the Doctor’s commitment to the idea that option-avoidance can forestall the onset of responsibility: Horner’s shift then undermines this claim. His seemingly “passional” response to Rennie’s plight is not entry into a world of choice and character from someone who formerly lay outside it, but merely a different revealed preference in answering James’ fundamental questions: are you the kind of person who is willing to risk error to make practical, present choices? and which risk scares you more: the possibility of making errors for whose consequences you would be responsible, or the necessity of being responsible for the consequences of your non-intervention? A positive passional tendency comes to override a negative one, and the novel’s two prose structures manifest the different cognitive structures entailed by differing conative underpinnings.

The difference between James’ model and Barth’s thus hinges on the different times they wrote. For James, the purely-conative’s natural place of intervention is at the

²⁴ EotR Manuscript 10 Holograph Drafts, Box 1, Folder 1

end of cognition's capacities: up to that point, it is assumed that deliberative cognition can deal with most choices. But for Horner, the givens have changed: the basic skepticism towards cognition's agentive value can only be resolved by moving the intervention of "passional tendencies" to the beginning of the process. In James' original model, the intervention of conation was linearly continuous with the prior work of cognition, but in the skeptical era in which Barth wrote, deliberative practice becomes a two-layered affair: we first have to answer the question of whether or not we are willing to be choosers, and then all subsequent choices happen within the framework of that initial choice.

The Coherent Structural Warrant

This double model provides a framework within which older ideas of deliberative rationality can be newly legitimate. It's a specifically recuperative novelty. It offers viable alternatives not only to the problems of empty subjectivity and of paralyzing cognitive incommensurability between choices, but of the regress of reason too.

The first-stage "decision-to-decide" is grounded on conation rather than an appeal to external reason. Once we choose to act rather than to delay, then all subsequent decisions within the span of acting appeal not to reason but to the stakes of that initial decision. For Horner, the overall decision is to act to procure Rennie an abortion, and that initial decision establishes, for granted, that choices will have to be made along the way, and that they will run the risk of error. Once the postmodern givens fail to outweigh the potential value achievable by choice, they don't have to interfere in the second, specific, dependent decision at all. The local, dependent choices made in carrying out this plan then don't have to regress all the way back to the standards of infallible reason. Once goals have been established for a decision, there is an immediate cost-benefit calculation to be made that sets the value of choosing by a given deadline against the likelihood of error caused by the shortened span of deliberation. The postmodern givens remain acknowledged, but the suspensive inaction

they sanction has already been outweighed, so they lose their obstructive power over subsequent practical decision. Doubt and deadlines force us to attempt best estimates, rather than seek perfect correspondence with the truth, and within a warrant-structure based on a project rather than on standards of infallibility, the possibility of error is built in and granted rather than a threat.

The exact structure of Horner's original commitment then reveals some of the values at stake in this logical structure. It hinges on an earlier version of the decision-to-decide structure, as Rennie sets up her abortion-or-suicide dilemma as the only possible way out of the torturous suspense that Joe and Horner's combined attitudes to her pregnancy have established. It's important and explicit that their creation of this suspense is figured as deliberate cruelty, against which the anti-suspensive prose can then embody counterpart values. At the outset of the scene, when Horner puts pressure on her to pick either his or Joe's attitude to the situation, Rennie sees only two unpleasant alternatives:

'I'm postponing as much as I possibly can,' she said, 'for as long as I possibly can. I'm desperate, and that's the only thing I can think of to do.'

'Joe might have allowed for the same possibility all along,' I offered. 'He's not afraid to look at all the alternatives' (388).

Horner's sarcasm associates exhaustive consideration of alternatives with temporal delay. Guilty of the same thing,²⁵ he is well placed to see Joe wilfully prolonging Rennie's "desperation" with rationalization. For each, the wish not to choose wrong overrides the

²⁵ Within his own remit, Horner's suspension of agency can seem like a merely cognitive game, but the previous scene shows him using it to make Rennie suffer even more deliberately than Joe. A long balance of considerations on Horner's part—his attraction to Rennie, that persistent guilt, the potential pleasure of sadism, a sense of what's good for Joe—leads him to an anti-conclusion: " 'I'm not taking a stand,' I declared, 'I'm an issue evader from way back. I'll go along with you any way you want'" (375). Horner thus, by his subordination of deliberative prose to suspensive action, belies his own intention to take no personal stand. It is directed at Rennie as personal violence. Her brief speculation that Horner raping her might end the suspension, since it would allow Joe to read the situation in such a way as to exculpate here merely makes explicit the scene's organising logic: rationalization's fundamentally volitive violence whenever other people are involved. The chapter ends with an image establishing the consequences of his deliberate irresolution—"Rennie sobbed for a full two minutes, huddled in her chair: this affair was indeed tearing her up" (375)—after which, over which, he gives us a final few sentences of his typical rationalizing prose.

possibility of choosing right, and the suspension lets them be cruel to Rennie, who has not been presented with any right option: at this point in the novel she is the pawn between two competing ethics, neither of which she can endorse. She is left, then, to wait for a meta-solution to emerge, for contingency to bring a solution into being.

At this stage, only Rennie is seeking a resolution to the situation. Both Horner and Joe's philosophies remain intact as long as no external solution presents itself, and enjoying Rennie's desperation neither has a reason to seek one. Yet when she says "I'm going to get an abortion or shoot myself, Joe. I've decided" (399), she brings things into the realm of decision even without choosing an action herself. To be held suspended while Joe attempts to find a way to believe in what has happened is more painful to suffer through than either of the options in the dilemma she prefers, even though the suspension would hold true to her values. She decides to decide, opting for a passional tendency over cognitive commitment. She thus performs an anticipatory version of Horner's own leap, moving the situation back into the realm of present choice, where decisions are both necessary and contingent.

To understand why this is a problem for both Joe and Horner, it may help to consider James again. The situation Rennie sets up is of a kind James identifies as unrationalizable: "let us call the decision between two hypotheses an *option*. Options may be of several kinds. They may be—1, *living* or *dead*; 2, *forced* or *avoidable*; 3, *momentous* or *trivial*; and for our purposes we may call an option a genuine option when it is of the forced, living and momentous kind" ("WtB" 227). A living option is one in which both options are valid: "each hypothesis makes some appeal, however small, to your belief," a forced one comes when there is "no standing place outside the alternative. Every dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this kind," while momentousness is defined in opposition to situations when "the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is

insignificant, or when the decision is reversible if it later prove unwise.” The situation Rennie sets up is live, forced, and momentous: genuine.²⁶

This validly motivated change of frameworks still doesn't provide any grounds for her to reason practically, however, as Joe almost immediately cancels the option's liveness.²⁷ His horror at live decisions outweighs his sense of momentousness: Rennie's enlivening dilemma prompts him to insist that one of its options is actually dead: “you don't know any abortionists around here, do you?... you're not thinking straight. You're setting up alternatives that aren't actually open to you” (399/400). Acknowledging this forces Rennie to realize that she has only shifted her waiting for a meta-solution from one level of decision to another. This prompts her to lunge for the pistol that Horner has always considered “the concrete embodiment of an alternative” (394). After Rennie's decision to decide, the gun literally embodies her alternative to an abortion. The deadness of the option of living spurs her to the only live option she has defined: dying. Joe is revealed as sufficiently a rationaliser that he would rather have his wife dead than a dilemma live. When Horner intervenes to take the gun out of reach, he returns her to temporary suspension, both options no longer live. When she then establishes a specific deadline by when the abortion must happen—a deadline at the end of which, since she clarifies that she won't organize the abortion herself, only suicide will be a live option—Horner has to choose whether to act since only he can redeem her suicide from inevitability. Rennie's version of the decision-to-decide is not a successful overcoming of the paralyzing postmodern givens, then. She may decide to decide, but she does not actively decide to act.

That is left to Horner, who first in his leap to stop her reaching the gun, and then in his realisation that only he can revivify her option, becomes the character who enters the realm of practical deliberation and establishes its validity even where postmodern givens (the incommensurability of considerations and the final unjustifiability of values)

²⁶ Decisions, as James makes clear, can be made on a non-rational basis, and Rennie shows this to be equally true of decisions to decide.

²⁷ His commitment to making choices only in certainty of their rightness him necessarily averse to the presence of live decisions, unlike Horner who just prefers not to believe in them.

are granted. With his first intervention, he has made a decision at the level of momentousness. The initial moment is framed as undeliberated but conditioned by his understanding of Joe's goading: "Rennie gave a little cry and rushed to the smoking stand [where the gun is] but because I had seen as clearly as Joe what she was being driven to I was ready when she made her move. I dived headlong..." (400). There are no verbs of mental computation here, and indeed the passage was lightly revised in the composition process so that "*when* she made her move..." replaced "*even before* she made her move" (Archive),²⁸ thus shifting the implication from premeditation to instinct. Instinct in this context cannot be separated from deliberative categories, however. Horner's leap is a passionate action, a clear commitment to the value of Rennie's life. It is framed this way in relation to a moment earlier in the scene where Joe threatens to shoot Horner and the latter, though he feels "sick," remains committed enough to his performance of valuelessness to offers no argument for his life. The leap to stop Rennie, by contrast, establishes the normative basis of Horner's conative systems when cognition isn't given the chance to override them.

Horner's action is thus the *revelation* of his passionate tendency rather than a consequence of cognitive valuation. Even so, it becomes a pretext to maintain his anti-responsibility schtick: when the exasperated Joe demands "Explain why, Horner," he responds "The hell I will" (400). The rest of the scene plays out almost entirely in dialogue, keeping each character's thinking unannounced until Horner "called out as they left" with the offer to organize the abortion himself (401). The only non-dialogue reports of his thought between the leap and this moment are his realization that in Joe he is "deal[ing] with a man who will see, face up to, and unhesitatingly act upon the extremest of his ideas" and his observing Joe pocketing the gun on the way out, looking "extremely upset" (402). His commitment to act combines acknowledgment of the stakes of his leap and an awareness of the danger still posed to Rennie. It is at this second step, the willingness to think about one's own revealed values in constructive relation to contingent external possibilities, that he enters the realm of deliberation.

²⁸ EotR Manuscript, 305, Holograph Drafts, Box 1, Folder 5

Being the sole figure with the will and capacity to revivify the “dead” possibility of abortion requires him to abandon the comfort of his error-avoidant, contingency-averse prose psychology. The emotional involvement that prompts him to intervene in Rennie’s fate is both an acceptance of the necessity of rational action and, crucially, an attempt to restore *her* to a dilemma, to restore *her* to the realm of reasoned choice. In the course of committing himself to her wellbeing, he thus necessarily commits himself to the relevance and viability of contingent choices. Once he has granted the decision-justifying value of saving Rennie’s life, he necessarily has to prefer an option in which it can be saved to one in which it can’t. Given the condition of the deadline, this entails that contingent choice outweighs rationalizing delay. This, then, is the achievement of the Jamesian model whereby conative commitments take the grounding place of external reason, which can work with postmodern givens without either being paralyzed by them or denying them. Until Rennie turns down the first abortion he manages to arrange, Horner’s psychology is thus rendered in the conventional deliberative stylistics of genuine options.²⁹

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This scene is established as a bridge between the rationalizing and the deliberating prose mindsets by its lack of non-dialogue psychological prose, and especially the absence of Horner’s duo-temporal rationalization-prose. The prose construction of the novel makes clearer than the narrative itself that its solution to the problem of agentive paralysis is not mere reflex—the leap for the gun alone—but a recuperated practical deliberation based on having *chosen* action over inaction, the possibility of failure over the comforts of passive freedom from its threat.

²⁹ Rennie and Horner’s misreadings of each other come together on the matter of suspension: at the point of her least and his greatest deliberative urgency, she takes him not to be seeking genuine solutions, but to be recapitulating his earlier games of delay in order to trick her: “If you think I’ll change my mind if you stall long enough, you’re wrong” (416). This at least shows that she is aware that her surviving has value to him on some level, but to read him as a mere staller at this stage shows how easy it is not just for critics but for the novel’s own characters to misread the RLS in terms of Horner’s usual predilections.

LeMahieu, who takes Horner as a spokesperson for the novel's ideas and hence credits Barth with "develop[ing] so fully a character that lacks all character" (103) despite the novel's frequent implications that Horner's anti-character ideas are consistently motivated, claims that Barth's early fiction "narrates its way to an absolutely hopeless state of affairs" (96). Horner does this especially literally, insisting on hopelessness from the narratorial perspective that propounds the rationalizing paralysis that led him into the situation whose ending made him hopeless. The prose medium is essential to all this work. Charles Harris suspects that the reason the film version fails to engage with so many of the book's central ideas is "its incapacity *qua* film—to capture Jacob Horner's inner sense of ontological insecurity and self-estrangement so effectively communicated through the novel's first-person narration..." (138). For Conti, meanwhile, the narrative technique is equally crucial to our reading experience, as "we learn to see the moral dummy behind the mask of Horner's unreliable narration" (82). However, neither pursues the specific stylistic operations through which this "learning" and "communication" works. As I've shown above, these effects can be traced to distinctive and consistent stylistic qualities of the novel's default rationalizing prose. The revealed counter-values of the mind-change scene—the importance of openness to contingency, the willingness to value other people as ends—then raise the question of what ideas and values we can derive from the constructions of the subsequent conventional prose psychology. Do they offer a correspondingly detailed alternative to the commitments the novel reveals underpinning Horner's default bad-faith rationalization? If the prose is so traditional and unremarkable in construction, what can it have to contribute?

What are the new ideas about agency in *The End of the Road*? As I've shown above, they're the old ones, but with a crucial updating asterix attached. That asterix indicates the reflexivity that works as a warrant. The same goes for the prose that bears this argument. The characteristics of that prose gain positive rather than natural or neutral qualities by being set freshly against the foil of the rationalizing prose. As I've said, the novel frames the old prose's conventionality in such a way as to make it conspicuous, to strip it of its associations with transparency. In making it the

unintuitive component in a conflict of prose psychologies, it thus gives it an oppositional power.

The Stylistic Argument for the Value of Foundationless Practical Deliberation

What values, then, does this fresh opacity reveal to be viable and—in the postmodern era—oppositional about conventional prose psychology and its model of agency?

Where James frames decision as having the “strange and intense function of granting consent to one possibility” (WtB 595), *The End of the Road* offers a postmodern inversion of similar values. Horner’s decision to decide is motivated by a refusal to grant consent to suicide, which Joe wished to render the only live possibility. It’s a decision whose value, in other words, is not only the end-point of a single action, but the structural achievement of keeping options open and live along the way, even in an age of skeptical determinism. The historical differences again establish that *The End of the Road* is a distinctively postmodern piece of thinking rather than mere anachronist ventriloquy of pragmatism, existentialism, or proto-poststructuralism.

In “The Dilemma of Determinism,” an important but less canonical precursor of “The Will to Believe,” James established error and regret as necessary conditions of the indeterminate world. If we lament that an event is foreclosed by the making of a decision, we must believe in its having been genuinely available for existence: of determinism and our attitude to it, “The question relates solely to the existence of possibilities” (“DoD” 42). If we grant that existence, we live in “a world in which we constantly have to make what I shall... call judgements of regret” (“DoD” 43). James finally comes down against determinism for a variety of reasons, among which is his sense that the feeling of contingency and the possibility of regret are desirable in and of themselves. For James, though, that omnipresent possibility has a value in itself: “What interest, zest or excitement can there be in achieving the right way, unless we are enabled to feel that the wrong way is also a possible and a natural way” (“DoD” 48). It

makes living exciting. Even regret itself is a valuable error, “the errors included in remorse and regrets, the error of supposing that the past could have been different, justifies itself by its use. Its use is to quicken our sense of *what* the irretrievably lost is...” (“DoD” 48). Error thus has a motivating value, which Horner’s abandonment of the comforting, error-avoidant, loss-avoidant givens of postmodernism finally exposes him to.

James’ terms once again give us a way to understand the value Barth attaches to the conventional agency model, once it’s framed as a contrast to the limitations of postmodern rationalization. Above all, the abortion-procurement passages embody openness to contingency, both in the sense of possible error and general accident. At the most basic level, we now get a prose defined not only by linear presentation of considerations, but also by how many of those considerations represent Horner’s awareness of his own limited knowledge and anticipatory skills: a far cry from the rationalizing prose that made his predilections universal laws.³⁰ Compare that earlier prose’s pseudo-logical circularity, for example, with the following passage, in which he tries to get a fake abortion affidavit signed:

“I found a notary public... and went in quickly before my nerve failed. It is my lot to look older than my years, but I could scarcely believe anyone would seriously take me for a certified psychiatrist. Besides, it is even more difficult to act out a fiction face to face with the man you’re lying to than it is to do it on the telephone. Finally, I wasn’t at all sure that notaries didn’t demand identification before administering the oath and seal...” (411).

Although the deliberative considerations here are narrated after the action of ‘going in,’ they only make sense in relation to a failure of nerve if that failure would happen *after* confronting them. Each offers a reason for the nerve to fail; that the decision was taken on the basis of that possibility means that the considerations must have preceded the choice. The acknowledged possibility of failure, the validity of doubt, thus becomes an incentive not to delay or deferral—as in the poststructuralism horner anticipates—but

³⁰ Singer, isomorph of narratives and compositional... - Art that “honors a determination of subjectivity in relation to what it does nt know... sustains it as a viable choice-making enterprise” (263-4). Cf Siebers on pomo defensiveness against the prospect of surprise...

to action. In the cosmopsis scene, Horner shifts from “there was no reason to go to the hotel” to “there was no reason to do anything” to “there *is* no reason to do anything,” making a rule out of an instance and obtruding that rule into the space before all decision. But in the notary sequence, the general statements like “it is even more difficult...” are subordinated to personal judgments with acknowledged limits: “I could scarcely believe...” or “I wasn’t at all sure...” “Went in quickly,” then, with its specific goal, local considerations, and acceptance of possible error, is a self-aware, practically reasoned decision. This not only establishes Horner’s acknowledgement of contingency, but his willingness to think about his own personal role in any error that might ensue.

When it comes to accident, meanwhile, Horner’s prose in this section is for the first time willing to acknowledge that the world itself, rather than only his internal weather, might be capable of surprise: this fact soon becomes part of the considerations he actually weighs. For example, the notary who Horner gets to sign his bogus documentation struggles, once he agrees, to find the rubber stamp he would need in order to do so: “after my good luck in finding a notary as cynical as he was credulous, could my scheme hang on such a mischance?” (411). Horner here acknowledges, in prose free from narratorial certainty, that both the conditions which justified the success of the decision that led him this far and the condition that may be about to undermine it are equally independent of his own will and foresight.

Harris reads the abortion-procurement section as parodic because of its comic profusion of such moments, each insisting that events have a life of their own, which Horner can’t rationalize away. These events have been strenuously excised from the passages of rationalizing narration, and their return highlights the unnaturalness of that model of worldly action: reason is only paralyzing if it’s entirely averse to the possibility of failure and contingency, and the abortion procurement scene, with Horner’s gradual progression towards successfully organizing one, shows that that aversion is not a necessity. The whole section offers a case study in the viability of concrete engagement with difficulty, as opposed to an error-averse perfectionism.

Considerations of difficulty are here often explicitly figured in relation to considerations of time, contrasting with the rationalizing mindset where time-delays are endorsed as indefinite extensions of ease or indulgent cruelties. The abortion procurement passages don't deny or elide the difficulties they deliberate over, but acknowledge that a shortened timeframe spurs that engagement with contingency. Temporal considerations thus hurry the linear prose along, literally overtaking the rehearsal of options: "To fake a letter was one thing—I could be anybody in a letter—but I found it almost insuperably difficult to be even Henry Dempsey on the telephone: how could I be Dr Harry L Siegrist? There was no time to waste..." (407). Difficulty is, in this estimative moral mindset, no excuse for delay. If Rennie's decision-to-decide aimed to establish a two-pronged dilemma free from the complications of doubt, Horner's similar decision makes doubt and contingency motivating bedrocks. In both instances, there is an explicit rejection of delay, but while for Rennie this involves streamlining contingency, for Horner it involves embracing it. The post-Levinasian ethics that connects acknowledged doubt to suspended decision, and hence with delay, is thus inadequate to some of the novel's central conflicts.

Finally, in terms of the passage's values, the fact that it's motivated by care for Rennie leads Horner to engage more directly with other people's unpredictability than in his attempts elsewhere to explain their actions in terms of his own philosophy. The doubting, contingency-driven psychology of the abortion-procurement prose is notably focused on forms of non-knowledge about people: doubt about their reasons, and speculation about the reasons they may or may not have for believing or disbelieving things relevant to one's own intentions.

On his car journey back from the first stages of the abortion-arrangements, Horner methodically considers known unknowns about the way his potential abortionist Dr Welleck might yet be alerted to the artifice of the scheme (412). No longer such a deliberate sceptic himself, Horner now calculates about the doubts that Welleck may feel, and the action they might justify: Horner fears that his behaviour "might turn that doubt into scepticism" or that acting too "deliberately" might "add to

his suspicion...” (413). Having rationally constructed a lie, Horner now has to rationally turn over its chances of success, precisely in terms of Welleck’s own grounds for doubt about Horner’s action. To act on such considerations establishes that in practical action, reasons, claims to knowledge, and the relationships between the two must not only be rendered commensurable for one’s own reasoning, but in one’s projections about the likely beliefs and actions of others. The doubts that Horner makes a subject of deliberation are not those of a universal scepticism, but based on a targeted acknowledgement of absent reasons for belief, reasons that he needs to direct his energy to create.

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The prose of this part of the novel then articulates alternative values to the limitations and harms of Horner’s default postmodern rationalizations: openness to contingency, awareness of others, acting as part of a project rather than seeing choices as isolated, a good-humoured alertness to the world’s potential for surprise, and the fundamental motivating force of care for others.

Horner’s ability to act rationally and act effectually without denying himself the possibility of error not only defends the possibility of action under postmodern conditions, but refutes a blanket critique of rationality as equivalent to rationalism or rationalization. Harris describes Barth’s career as “ongoing postmodernist critique” (139), and *The End of the Road’s* defence of rationality’s relationship to contingency is set so overtly against the ground of cosmopsis and the strenuous assertion of selflessness that it adds up to a pre-emptive rejection of postmodern claims that the unchoosing space *before* decision is where we have our greatest access to valuable possibility. John Searle, in his mid-1970s debate with Derrida, suggested that the deconstructive invocation of difference and contingency relied on an entirely idealistic conception of reason and so had no bearing in realms of experience where difference and contingency were live considerations. Barth’s stylistic contrast of two types of reason criticizes Horner similarly on the turf of practical agency.

And yet things don't go right when Horner turns to practical action. He successfully organizes an abortion, but Rennie won't go through with it because he has organized it by deception. Almost immediately his urgency starts to wind down, his prose to lose its linearity. The solution of getting his own Doctor to do the abortion comes almost parenthetically. That the end of deliberative agency should be associated with a return to the Doctor is consistent: the Doctor's solutions to paralysis are all anti-deliberative, since fundamentally anti-value and anti-investment. Within this mindset, Horner starts to go meta-cognitive again, comparing his perception of reasons for action to the physical urge of urination: absent a workable ground for deliberation, he finds himself re-stranded between the paralysis of postmodern givens and the inarticulate promptings of instinct. The values attached to the problem have shifted from the possibility of aiding Rennie back to paralysis as a concern in itself: he initially explains his wish for the Doctor's help by saying "I had a touch of my trouble this afternoon" (424).

Of course, that Horner finally rejects his burst of practical decision does not imply that the reader should take it any less seriously. But then, of course, Rennie dies. She dies of what after all this effort seems a mere accident, an unpredictable fluke. So wasn't Horner right? After all that laudable engagement with the possibility of failure, isn't his return to the prose of assured, relieved paralysis warranted? Shouldn't we take this as the novel finally endorsing cosmoptic paralysis as a way of being?

We should not.

A Wrong Reversion

Horner's recursion to the comfort of anti-agentive rationalisation can be explained by the fact that his one failed sequence of deliberations is unique in his experience: as the one time that he becomes genuinely invested in a value beyond his own evasion of responsible selfhood, it's the one time that he faces the possibility of failing by what are briefly his own standards. When Rennie dies at the end of his

sequence of actions, he takes this one failure for law. This final bad deduction and false generalization turns out to underlie the pseudo-logical prose on which the novel began. The rationalisation-prose's unwarranted self-confirming statements about the universality of Horner's paralysing logic, with which the novel opens and ends thus reveal themselves as the projections of a disappointed narrator's retrospection. Horner's abandonment of the lessons of one prose leads to his creation of a less coherent one. His critique of reason turns out finally to be a consequence of bad reasoning.

Joshua Landy, in one of the most productive recent considerations of fiction's non-mimetic uses, argues that the fictive rhetorical value of the Socratic dialogues is not that they present valid arguments engagingly, but that the constrained conceptual world of a fiction better allows the construction of bad arguments that we can train ourselves to identify. *The End of the Road's* ending follows a similar approach, as Horner makes false deductions about agency from the true premises of cosmopsis and the incoherent subject. These are threats only to the kind of deductive reason of which he makes them a subject in his rationalizations, but not to the kind of inductive thinking that characterizes the rationality-passages. Horner's inability to realise that the possibility of error is intrinsic to the psychology he adopted to arrange the abortion leads him to falsely reject all action-motivated rationality. Among Horner's modifying nihilism, though, the novel has presented a passage of viable deliberative action, made valid by its structure of choosing to choose. It's important too that nothing that that psychology brings about is responsible for Rennie's death: she establishes the dilemma as a response to Joe and Horner's collaborative rationalization, the decision to have the Doctor do the abortion comes after Horner has already relinquished his deliberative mode, and the cause of death is an omitted warning that can't be pinned on Horner. Such accidents are acknowledged possibilities under the Jamesian logic of decision, and Horner's failure to realize this establishes that he, the figure of a cynical era, has not learned the rules of the contingent universe. The atmosphere of absolute devastation and emptiness on which the novel ends is Horner's personal response to events, endorsed by the novel as an emotional response but not as a logical extrapolation. The fallibilistic attitude that

conventional prose psychology takes to such a world is compatible with the world's contingency. Horner's final refusal to countenance that the lesson of his experience might be that he was briefly right to engage with that world's possibility of failure suggests that the attraction to a world where we can live "without fault" is the cause of his problems rather than their liberating upshot. Horner's tale is that of a world-saturatingly flawed response to foundationless conditions, not an expression of those conditions' ultimate consequences.

The novel's final couple of lines, in which Horner finds himself "without weather" and gets into a taxi giving the driver the sole direction "Terminal", have usually been read as the expression of what LeMahieu called the novel's philosophical "exhaustion," and Conti its "run[ning] aground." "Terminal," on such an account, would reflect the final exhaustion of options. Yet even on Horner's own terms, the novel doesn't have to end with an equation between paralysis and pessimism. What such readings don't appreciate is that "terminal" is not a complete refusal of choice, but a reversion to the Doctor's sub-normative, anti-rational model of agency. Among the Doctor's prescriptions after his first meeting with Horner is "Take long walks, but always to a previously determined destination" (333). The echo of "termi" at the end of the novel shows that rather than giving up on philosophy, Horner is plumping for the Doctor's minimalist determinism. In James' terms, he's giving up on the "zest" of a world of possible error, and electing the "risks" of suspension over those of action. "Terminal" is a motivated choice of destination, specifying a kind of minimal directionality over other alternatives. The novel's original draft specified "greyhound terminal" as the destination, recalling the train station in which Horner suffered his first cosmopsis, and suggesting that the ending was always intended to be about identifying a *place* rather than an exhaustion. Once again, the novel's final words establish the mindset through which the whole plot is modified for us. Its events are presented under the aegis of a preference for pre-determination over deliberation, one that the novel invites us from first cosmopsis until final paralysis to see as the consequences of inept reasoning and affective tendencies that reflect the era's basic aversion to the possibility of error.

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The End of the Road, qua philosophical fiction, works through two isomorphic projects. It recuperates and makes freshly significant an outdated prose form. And it salvages a model of rational deliberative agency despite portraying a philosophical context that claimed to do away with it. As the fact that the novel begins with the elaborations on cosmopsis and the incoherent subject suggests, the prose innovation is in the service of the agency argument: a challenge to readings of “postmodern Barth”’s emergence as formal first and philosophical second. Barth uses the kind of formal reflexivity and opacity that people have used to define his postmodern period precisely to pre-emptively dispute the philosophical givens we now call postmodern.

Jacqueline Kegley reads Barth as a philosophical novelist, and one who has something to add to existing philosophy. However, her sense of the contribution fiction can make to philosophy is constrained to the two modes I’ve argued *The End of the Road* avoids: the mimetic and the merely critical: “philosophy needs literature to dramatize ideas as Barth has so skilfully done so that one can see the horrors one’s ideas might lead to if taken seriously” (133). The postmodern project novels that follow in *The End of the Road*’s wake offer readers constructive proposal of coherent warrants and alternative values. They might therefore be the ground for a reinvestigation of literature’s philosophical capacities and uses beyond the longform-immersive-thought-experiment model to which Landy proposes his alternative models.

In the essay that updated “The Literature of Exhaustion” for the 1980s, Barth sets his work against not only the surviving orthodoxies of modernism but also the burgeoning consensus of radical experiment:

“If the modernists, carrying the torch of romanticism, taught us that linearity, rationality, consciousness, cause and effect, naïve illusionism, transparent language, innocent anecdote and middle-class moral conventions are not the whole story, then from the perspective of these closing decades of our century we may appreciate that the contraries of these things are not the whole story either. Disjunction, simultaneity, irrationalism, anti-illusionism, self-reflexiveness, medium-as-message, political olympianism, and a moral pluralism approaching moral entropy—these are not the whole story either” (LoR 203).

The End of the Road frames the ideas people now call postmodern as a rationalized, self-interested status quo. Historically, critics took up cosmoptic paralysis as the salient bit of Barth's early work, and saw his later overt "postmodernism" as his way of moving beyond it. Appreciating both the stylistic postmodernity of his early work and the fact that *The End of the Road's* stylistically distinctive default prose frames cosmopsis and the incoherent subject as starting points rather than insights and upshots, we can appreciate his specific, targeted attempts to treat post-existential agentive paralysis as a solvable problem. The novel aims to recuperate the kind of agency that its intellectual cotext claimed to invalidate, by recuperating the kind of prose that seemed to have died out along with that older model of agency. Critics have continued to read the stylistically reflexive anti-mimetic fiction of the 60s to the 80s as a concerted articulation of post-structuralist objections to the practical reason associated with classic realism. But if *The End of the Road* was using prose innovation to establish these postmodern ideas as givens and using opaquely reflexive prose forms to look beyond their paralytic claims as early as 1958, then we might revise our understanding not just of Barth's career, but of postmodern fiction's relation to postmodern theory, and of anti-mimetic prose's relation to constructive philosophical argument more generally.

Chapter 2

Deliberative Rationality Amid Economistic Rationalization: Gaddis' *J R*

Coming at the end of the period I examine rather than its beginning, William Gaddis' *J R* doesn't seem to have much in common with chapter 1's subject, *The End of the Road*. Barth's short novel addresses deliberative paralysis and the preferability of an contingent rationality to an error-avoidant rationalization through careful manipulations of prose-psychological sentence-structures; *J R*'s distinguishing stylistic feature is its complete excision of transcribed thought. Barth's plot takes place within the self-consciously narrowed social context of a three-person friendship on an isolated college campus, whereas *J R* covers the conflict between rationality and rationalization through a vast cast, over 750 pages, in terms of the relationships between corporations, government infrastructure, banks, schools, markets, as well as artists, students, retirees, children. But as I'll show, despite its almost polar opposite stylistic methods from *The End of the Road*, *J R* follows a similar narrative arc driven by a similar emergence of conflict between different styles that stand for different worldviews, beginning with threats to practical deliberation's viability before developing demonstrations of its philosophical defensibility and practical effectuality.

J R's anti-psychological universe is conjured not only by the absence of transcribed thought, but by the linguistic qualities of the dialogue spoken by that world's presiding figures, from the eponymous eleven-year-old tycoon to Governor Cates, the head of the corporation that owns the infrastructure of JR's school. These characters speak in sentences that fold decision and action into a single flow of performative sorting that can act in the world without recourse to unspoken deliberative depths. Here, working out how to turn Native American land-claims into profit for Cates, is his PR man Davidoff:

We don't do it first Beamish somebody else will, got them under the gun now with a move to pull their wigwams right out from under them be lucky to get off the reservation with their hats and their asses, spring this historical pageant to pull them together follows up on the publicity get their claims established and they can sink their teeth in this royalty arrangement with the Alaska subsidiary put a little wampum under their belts for a rainy day (522).

I'll have more to say later about the colonizing vocabulary here, but the syntax encapsulates the default logic of *J R's* world. The unpunctuated prose figures Davidoff calculating robotically on the fly, without any mediation between thought and speech: his spoken words *are* his instrumental reasoning. Deliberative rationality gives way to a quasi-physical rationalization that operates on the objects it considers.

In this respect, Gaddis' novel fits into a lineage that significantly predates the postmodern era that critics (as I'll discuss) usually take it to mimic. His terms comport with Horkheimer's wartime worries about the re-allocation of reason from ends to means:

“Complicated logical operations are carried out without actual performance of all the intellectual acts upon which the mathematical and logical symbols are based. Such mechanization is indeed essential to the expansion of industry; but if it becomes the characteristic feature of minds, if reason itself is instrumentalized, it takes on a kind of materiality and blindness, becomes a fetish, a magic entity that is accepted rather than intellectually experienced” (23).

The connection between such thinking and *J R's* corporate-world context comes in the relationship between industry and “expansion.” The details of Davidoff's syntax make clear how the form of his agency correlates its own momentum with the manipulation of others. As his prose flows in a cause->consequence->new-condition sequence from short complete verb phrase to short complete verb phrase, the relevant verbs establish a clear conceptual relationship between appropriation and manipulation, orbiting as they do the triptych “pull/get/put.” Only in the final line is there a standard conjunction, the consequential “and” which renders the sequence a culmination. The repeated “under” combines with the manipulation-verbs to stress the degree to which this mode of thought and overbearing flow conceptualises itself in terms of power and discourse's physical effectuality. Davidoff speaks almost entirely in clichés, allowing the profit-

motive sequence of clauses to flow maximally unhindered by verbal deliberation. The way this language dissolves the difference between thought, speech, and action explains why “flat” and “flow” are the standard critical tropes for *J R*'s form.³

Yet as I'll examine at length in what follows, this isn't the only mode of speech in *J R*, and the novel in fact develops numerous ways of representing unvocalized thought and its capacities even within the JR/Cates/Davidoff world that aims to eliminate it. That agonistic relationship is constantly foregrounded: take for example this comment on a janitor by Major Hyde, one of the supervisors Cates employs at *J R*'s school: “One thing I don't trust it's a sullen black, not a word out of him just sitting there taking it all in, look at their face and you don't know what's going on inside [...]” (182). The idea that a character could “take in” some of what's going on outside while refusing to offer direct access to their “inside” makes the mere-flatness account of *J R* untenable. We shouldn't, in other words, take the absence of represented thought on its pages to indicate the absence of unvocalised thought in its world or worldview. In this chapter I'll examine how Gaddis articulates a consequential place for deliberative rational psychology in a world whose presiding powers aim to rationalize it out of existence.

Paisley Livingston's work on *Literature and Rationality* distinguishes two approaches: “Not only can we ask how concepts of rationality can be applied to the understanding of literature, but is also possible to ask how literary works illustrate, challenge, and complexify various conceptions of rationality advanced in the social sciences” (11). As I'll show in what follows, *J R*'s stylistic arguments about deliberation's place in the world engage the most influential social science of Gaddis' time to a degree that belies a dichotomy presumed by critics of postmodern fiction who see “stylistic description” as mere distraction from real political criticism.

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³ For fuller examination of these tropes and their saturation of *J R* criticism, see Chetwynd, “Friction Problems.”

Gaddis' first novel, *The Recognitions*, ends with its artist hero heading off to be a hermit: "Now at last to live deliberately," he says, without pausing to explain that he's quoting Thoreau. The phrase recurs in *J R*, as the struggling writer Jack Gibbs, frustrated at a lack of progress during one of his rare chances to sit down uninterrupted by his part-time teaching duties and work on his book about the player piano's place in the history of mechanization, laments the world that presses on his time: "first time in history so many opportunities to do so God damned many things not worth doing, problem's they start with the sixteen ninety-five have to start with the doormat, went to the woods to live deliberately Thoreau says couldn't escape from the Protestant ethic, be the first ones to redeem it Amy make monogrammed doormats deliberately" (477). Matthew Wilkens reads the ending of *The Recognitions* as an archly nostalgic gesture toward the passing of an era in which such a victory by retreat could be possible, and the combination of historical hindsight, irony, despair, and self-conscious impotence in Gibbs' lament seems to bear out the shift between the two novels. Wyatt in *The Recognitions* can depart with a secure resignation to his artist's vocation—"The work will know its own reason" (900)—but Gibbs is stuck precisely because he's so aware of the conditions of his and everyone else's work. Like *The End of the Road*, then, the basic problem in *J R* is the demystified impossibility of deliberate living, which seems to offer an obvious explanation for prose-form deliberative thought's excision from *J R*'s page. As I'll show, the novel does more than just express this new situation.

J R explores corporate and supra-human forms of economic agency as the eponymous eleven-year-old boy takes a single share awarded on a school trip and—in trading it for a set of army surplus forks—begins a brief career of capital exchange that leads to his heading a large portfolio of businesses and assets that, finally, spirals beyond his control. His public face in all this is his music teacher Edward Bast, whose attempts to compose a symphony the novel traces behind all the corporate machination. The novel also follows a cast of secondary characters rooted in the school where Bast and JR meet: Gibbs, Amy Joubert—a fellow teacher who is Cates' daughter—and a variety of other functionaries, friends, peers, and family members of this central group. Tying

human relationships like the failed romance between Gibbs and Joubert inextricably into the institutional machinations of Typhon and the JR Corp, the novel's removal of psychological transcription is usually understood in terms of its attempt to examine what happens at a stage of economic life after the relevance of the individual. Deliberative psychology of the kind Barth's prose-form experiments delineated are left behind in a world where dialogue is instrumental matter. But Barth and Gaddis share two crucial aspects.

Firstly, they share a convention-foregrounding anti-mimetic reflexivity: Barth's in the manipulation of conventional mind-access sentence-forms to render them opaque and allegorical, Gaddis in the way that the excision of conventional transcriptive prose-psychology defies novelistic expectation.³² *J R*'s constantly overlapping dialogue, the dialogue's internal breaks, and the lack of dialogue tags to indicate speakers adds to the disorienting lack of stipulation of what characters are thinking:³³ the effect is a foregrounding of formal unconventionality and the need for cognitive reorientation. The novel also repeatedly draws attention to its own lack of indications of informational salience, as late on when JR pleads to Bast what readers might to Gaddis: "you need to help me out I mean how do I even know whose voice they are talking..." (647). *J R*'s awareness of its own seeming unparsability leads Richard Walsh to treat it as something beyond either mimesis or antimimesis: it's monumentally, self-containedly immanent enough to be "absolutely opposite to metafiction: fiction that presents itself as an equivalent system to reality—not a fiction about fiction but a reality about reality" (NA 38-9). This grants the more standard mimetic reading of *J R* as what Barth would call a "technically up to date" attempt to render a contemporary world to which the individualist psychologism of the traditional novel no longer applies. But those self-reflexive moments point to the novel's awareness of itself as an artefact in the fictional tradition, and the number of specifications of fiction as a theme in Gaddis' composition

³² As I uncovered in "Friction Problems," Gaddis' earliest versions of this novel, which took 18 years from first sketches to publication, were in a conventional prose – the novel's distinctive form took shape over the course of his corporate writing career.

³³ See Letzler's claim that this salience-parsing is not only *J R*'s method but its main contribution to readers, who get to practice information-sifting useful elsewhere in the culture *J R* examines.

notes on the novel suggest that Walsh is as just as wrong to dismiss it being “about fiction” as he is to downplay its being a “fiction” in general.

Secondly, Gaddis’ working notes, his corporate writing, and his sketches of other projects before and during the composition of *J R* all make clear he shared *The End of the Road*’s animating interest in the texture and moral value of deliberation. An abandoned early story, for example, shares Barth’s specifically post-existential interest in how to make moral decisions in a world of accident, while an abandoned civil war play that he wrote concurrently with early work on *J R* he examined the intersection of doubt and free choice in relation to the difference between deontological and institutional justice.³⁴ These stories pre-date the majority of Gaddis’ corporate writing career, which I’ve argued elsewhere was the source of much of *J R*’s distinctive form, but similar notes post-date the novel as well. The corporate work itself is equally notable for an ongoing preoccupation with deliberation and decision-making, as Gaddis’ ventriloquous speeches and training-film scripts for Eastman Kodak and IBM constantly address matters like the difference between human and computerized decision-making, the self-perpetuating nature of supra-human systems, and the role of spontaneous decisions within corporate hierarchies.³⁵ What’s distinctive about the working notes for *J R* itself is

³⁴ The original motivating questions for “Ernest and the Zeitgeist” involve -“the moral investiture must be moral responsibility; but how so if the notion of Deliberate Chance operates. Direct contradiction. Impossible. // Therefore: We must turn from the (Ex.) notion of Logical moral responsibility; to that of illogical but Still Binding responsibility” (Archive: “Drafts of ‘Ernest and the Zeitgeist,’” 444444444444). *Once at Antietam*, meanwhile, sets long philosophical speeches about chance, doubt, and historical agency in the service of a plot about how the concepts of guilt, justice, and responsibility play out in the light of forces bigger than single humans can channel.

³⁵ See for example the IBM training quiz film that would “open with a series of close-ups and short candid sequences reflecting an atmosphere of tension, a critical juncture of decision-making at a number of related levels” (Archive: “+--+”, box 31/468), the Kodak speech on internal communications between technicians and managers that makes institutional agency conditional on vocabulary--“these technical people usually didn’t reach the top echelons of management, where the real decisions are made... in management terms and management language...” (Archive: “A Better Way” (1968). Speech, Chicago, Aug 5 1968. Corporate Writings. Box No. 135, Folder 481) or the IBM educational film on Software that sets the usefulness of computers for processing cumulative “Problems so complex that no single mind could grasp all their elements at once, and act on them at the same time” (12) at the same time as noting the limitations of computers that rely human pre-sorting of inputs, since humans only control systems of information-circulation when those can be “broken down into a number of single, precise, yes... ..or no decisions” (Archive: “software version 1” 13: Corporate Writings. Box No. 134, Folder 478).

the way that questions about existential and institutional agency *interact*: it's in bringing the latter to bear on the former that Gaddis' differences from Barth arise.

Loose notes wonder of Eigen, a minor-character novelist who Gaddis later made clear he based in part on himself, "is he the totally indecisive person? Who works for a JR company in management consultant station, 'decision-making- totally dependent on machines?' (Archive).³⁶ The conditions of that indecision, the same note clarifies, are *The End of the Road's* basic Buridan's-Ass conundrum: "suspended judgment = assigning equal value to all = total indecision = paralysis of the will." What's different in Gaddis, even in these notes, is the infrastructural context. Eigen's indecision is of interest in relation to his place within a particular business economy. Similarly, notes about school psychologist Dan DeCephalis stipulate "It is DiCeph who is finally incapacitated from making any decision what so ever – practically paralysed (courses in decision-making)" (Archive).³⁷ What is at stake here, more than in *The End of the Road*, is the possibility of "making any decision" *within a particular social formation* in which "machines" are changing how we think about decision, while infrastructure gives some institutional agents and not others the position from which to teach, or dictate, how "decision-making" will work in the new climate. *J R* in its published form is less explicitly about Barth-style deliberative paralysis than these notes,³⁸ but it develops their interest in how infrastructural considerations affect the possibility of deliberative agency into a thorough, coherent, style-driven argument about what such agency—whose paradigm in the novel is artistic composition, the project that paralyzes Eigen, Gibbs, and Bast³⁹—might still be able to achieve in a world whose infrastructure and ideology was ever more hostile to it.

³⁶ Loose note headed 'Eigen': Folder 67/274:

³⁷ Loose not headed 'DiCephalis': Folder 67/274:

³⁸ As I'll discuss at the end of the chapter, such concerns make an almost immediate return in his notes toward subsequent projects.

³⁹ As Joseph Tabbi notes in a direct comparison of Barth's and Gaddis' self-conscious form, "Where Barth's authorial self may at times appear wholly reflexive and his fiction refer exclusively to the process of making fictions" *J R* is concerned less "with its own artifice than with defining the social, economic, and technological conditions under which creative artifice can have a place" ("Comp Self" 661).

As I'll show, *J R* examines precisely what kind of a place deliberation can retain in a world and textual form given over to its elimination: the novel's depictions of artistic composition have a lot to do with its answer.

J R's interest in the connection between deliberation and agency, then, is not so purely logical as Barth's, but addresses it in the context of institutional practice and wider cultural politics. This development hinged, as I've argued elsewhere, on Gaddis' practical experience of working in "business" for 15 years after he first mailed himself a copyright-guarding version of the earliest sketch for a "novel about business" whose protagonist would be an eleven-year-old boy. Gaddis' corporate-writing years with IBM, Eastman Kodak, and others didn't just contribute to *J R*'s form, but also its thinking on deliberative agency. That corporate work often started out wondering how to eliminate inconveniently "unpredictable human" elements, but finally advocating "human judgment" as the only bulwark against the problems that supra-human systems treated as ends in themselves could cause (Archive).⁴⁰ That work's *J R*-prefiguring stress on "friction" and "depth" opposes existing criticism's emphasis on the novel's figurations of flatness and flow. And this complicates Frederic Jameson's influential account of postmodern fiction as flat economic symptom, devoid of distinctive style, rhetorical implication, or oppositional force.

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Jameson's account of the economic shifts of which postmodern fiction can never be more than a symptom draw heavily on David Harvey's account of the US economy's tribulations of 1973 as the marker of a shift from an economics of psychology, regimentation, and efficiency to one of proliferation, liquidity, and commodification. Jameson insists that in its determination by economic conditions "the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms" is "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (9), which commitment to flatness

⁴⁰ "Some Observations on Problems Facing Eastman Kodak's Advertising Distribution Department." Dec 1967. Corporate Writings. Box No. 135, Folder 481. See Chetwynd, "Friction Problems" for more extensive discussion of this document and its relation to *J R*.

commits the fiction “to the mission of criticizing and discrediting this very hermeneutic model of the inside and the outside” (12). Jameson never writes about Gaddis, but *J R*, defined by the elimination of the psychological “inside” from its pages and the speech-patterns of figures like JR and Davidoff overtly indicating a lack of underlying thought behind the speech, should surely be a paradigm example, and Jameson’s approach has been fundamental to criticism on the novel. *J R*’s stylistic flatness and flow, on this account, engage its culture by reflecting money’s increasing departure from material embodiment, the increasingly fast and global processes of capital exchange, and the correspondingly supra-human forms of systemic and networked agency that impel such an economy.

Jameson stipulates that his argument “is not to be read as stylistic description, as the account of one cultural style or movement among others. I have rather meant to offer a periodizing hypothesis...” (3). In other words, he’s interested in the ways in which shared historical context explains shared elements of multiple texts. No problem there, except that he uses the flattened consistencies such a generalizing approach generates as *evidence* that the texts he examines have no distinctive elements beyond what he’s reduced them to: postmodernism, once he’s flattened it into something defined by that flatness, means “the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke...(15). This concept of art as distinctive personal signature is precisely what *The Recognitions*’ central forgery-plots examined, and which Wyatt’s final retreat seemed to move beyond. *J R*’s artist-plots, preoccupied as Tabbi rightly noted with the question of where it could be possible to find time and space for composition at all, certainly leave it behind. But Jameson’s nostalgic attachment to it as an era-marker leads him to over-generalize about the irrelevance of style per se: my category of “stylistic allegory” [see intro] insists on the “distinctive” rhetorical implications of “distinctive” styles, without any attachment to the idea that they express “personal signature.” But it’s logically impossible, under Jameson’s terms, for the differences that “stylistic description” could reveal between texts characterized by their period to reveal any politically or philosophically

substantive difference. A “periodizing hypothesis” of the Jamesonian kind suggests that *economic relations at time T_1 are X_1 , therefore artistic forms at time T_2 are all, superveniently, form $X(2)$ at heart*, and consequently his readings in *Postmodernism* are actively hostile to the idea that authors might create “distinctive” effects deliberately, undetermined by underlying economic conditions. Yet if, as my whole project suggests, different anti-mimetic forms can bear different arguments in response to different questions that arise out of different historical contexts, then we *need* accurate stylistic descriptions of the forms’ distinctions before we can analyse what arguments they might be offering within their context. If I can show that *J R* is not stylistically flat along the lines Jameson proves, then this should force a more complex account of its relationship to the flattening aspects of the culture it emerged from.

Not all *J R* critics cite Jameson, but they almost all share this commitment to a “flat” reading of the novel. Even Jamesonian readings fall into two categories: those that take Gaddis to be critically mimicking an existing state of postmodernity (Spencer, Clare), and those who read *J R* as predictive of the distinctive later form of neoliberalism (Allan, Marsh). Less economically orientated are a pair of approaches that can be yoked together in terms of their post-humanism. The first of these, epitomized by John Johnston, takes Gaddis’ dialogue-heavy, hard-to-parse textual worlds to embody the poststructuralist transfer of agency and materiality from people and events to language and writing. The second draws on Gaddis’ explicit citation of figures like Norbert Weiner to read his work in terms of systems theory; for Tom LeClair, this involves authors like Gaddis conspicuously displaying “mastery” of new scales of information-processing in order to undermine Jamesonian pessimism about the possibility of representing or “mapping” a postmodern world-system; for Joseph Tabbi, the interest is in the trans-humanistic developments in subjectivity that arise when individual human experience becomes further and further imbricated in conscious awareness of the suprahuman systems it takes part in. Michael Clune, meanwhile, departs so far from Jameson that his account of *J R* ends up in the same place: for him, the novel is a willfully unrealistic thought-experiment about what the world would look like if

psychology were eliminated in favour of a post-psychological mode of human interaction based entirely on the processing of price-exchanges. What the Jamesonians treat as mimetic symptom, Clune treats as willful and explicit antimimesis. In all these cases, though, there's a tight association between the absence of linear thought-transcription prose and *J R*'s putative commitment to the obsolescence of deliberative agency.

The more humanistic trend in Gaddis criticism, meanwhile, stressing his belated modernism and social criticism, tends to avoid *J R*, and to decentralize questions of forms when it can't. Christopher Knight, for example, treats *J R* at length, treating events and central characters in conventionally realist terms in order to examine the novel's attitude to *bildung* in the context of its treatment of the school system. The humanist account of Gaddis that we might expect to give us an account of deliberative agency in his work is thus unhelpfully detached from the matters of form through which I intend to approach it here. I'm less interested in hashing out the differences between all these critics, though, than in showing how their insistence on "flatness" can be undermined by an attentive stylistic reading of the novel's modes of implication and especially the differing syntactical constructions in the speech of deliberating and non-deliberating characters, and the implications this will have for accounts of the novel's critical and constructive formal rhetoric. The persistent flatness heuristic has three aspects: first, that *J R* makes no presence for the representation of deliberative thought; second, that all the novel's dialogue is essentially one formal element, lacking authorial indications about the relative salience of the information it encodes; third, monolithic accounts of "*J R*'s form" leave no room for it to develop or modulate language-patterns over the course of its 750 pages:⁴¹ Johnston argues that "*J R* intends neither compensation nor redemption; it is simply a demonstration, in the most rigorous terms imaginable, of one aspect of the 'postmodern condition' in which we now live" (205). The "demonstration" approach insists on a narrative as well as a stylistic flatness: *J R* can't develop any

⁴¹ *J R* is a particularly regular victim of the critical claim on postmodern form that you could dip into the novel on any page and enjoy a basically identical reading experience.

perspective beyond the flatness and flow that characterize its basic form. The way it initially frames its world must be its entire rhetoric. It's this that I want to dispute by focusing on the novel's construction of alternatives to the worldview it invents new form to represent.

Perhaps sharing Jameson's presumption of the incompatibility between "periodizing hypothesis" and "stylistic description," few critics have examined *J R*'s potentially critical rhetoric from a stylistic point of view.⁴² I'll show, though, that precisely by doing a more accurate stylistic description, from the starting point of demonstrating that *J R* isn't "flat," we can do a much better, more precise job of periodizing the novel in relation to the way economic thinkers in the period of its gestation addressed the relationship between economics, institutions, and agential power. Even by the standards of its own political self-conception, the Jamesonian approach to postmodern form is too broad-brushed and imprecise to be illuminating.

I'll make this case first by showing how *J R* implies deliberation or its absence through the stylistics of speech alone—for example contrasting JR's unpunctuated flow with Bast's constant hesitations and revisions—then by showing how these distinctions are organized into an argument about the sources and structures of anti-deliberative political power. I'll then show how directly Gaddis' take on the question matches maps onto the Chicago school's major internal debate, between Milton Friedman's positive economics and its suggestion that human idiosyncrasy can be ruled out of economic models as friction is by physicists, and the earlier generation of Frank Knight, who

⁴² Spencer or Tabbi might acknowledge that *J R* has "critical" designs, or isn't mere "imitation of the society it depicts" (113), but these readings of the novel's development of alternatives to the postdeliberative "world-system" it conjures tend to rest only on the logic of Gaddis' response to a question about *J R*'s values: "the opposite of what the work portrays."⁴² Marc Chen tier alone sees *J R* actually representing something beyond flatness, taking its narrative passages to offer a linguistic freshness alternative to the banal flow of dialogue, a relationship he figures in terms of depth along the lines of a bedrock underlying a liquid flow. Tabbi examines the way that the levels of cognition involved in intra-systemic agency map onto the relationship between reader and text, while Angela Allan reads the novel's famed "difficulty" as embodying a transmission of intent from author to reader that in its necessary imperfections undermines the presumptions of perfect exchange that ground the neoliberal worldview it examines.

equated human qualities with ineliminable friction. I then end by showing how the novel represents deliberation's powers and achievements as the power-relations between deliberating and non-deliberating characters shift in its final third. These organizations and modulations make plot events depend on stylistic factors in a way that reverses the mimetic axioms about the priority of event and style, and thus makes the case for the constructive capacities of specifically anti-mimetic fiction.

Dialogic Differences, or How *JR* does Depth

Recall, then, Davidoff's blending of thought, speech, and manipulation into a single instrumental flow of distinctively low-punctuation speech, and Hyde's resentment of being unable to "know what's going on inside" the janitor's head. These establish the anti-deliberative impetus of the novel's politically dominant characters, and young JR's initial success in that world is predicated on his sharing their linguistic modes of thought and action. Late in the novel, as his empire starts to fall apart, he has to tell Bast that the latter is being indicted for insider trading. Bast, now very familiar with the world inhabited by JR, Davidoff, and their ilk, snaps "Inside? That's, how could I be inside there isn't any inside . How could anybody believe the, the only inside's the one inside your head [...]" (644). Bast thus suggests, even in objecting to JR's flattening world, that its depthlessness actually stems from productive depth within its young figurehead's mind. As I'll show, the novel's dialogue and narrative dynamics are premised on the implication that some characters more than others retain a potentially productive separation between their language, thoughts, and actions.

The obvious example of such a character is Bast himself. His dialogue throughout the novel is usually interrupted by the overflow of language like Davidoff's and JR's, but even on the rare occasions that he finds himself free to speak onward, his sentences contain their own hesitations, obstructions and reversals: intimations of unvocalized thought. For example, in the live school-television scripted lecture on Mozart that is our first extended exposure to his voice, his isolation in a recording studio leaves him

uninterrupted by school administrators who watch him from their control room, but his inability to stick thoughtlessly to the script is clear both in content and prose: Mozart's family, we're told,

—spent about four dollars for his funeral but that, that might spoil our nice fairy tale boys and girls his few friends following the cheap coffin in the rain and turning back before it ever reached the pauper's grave nobody could ever find again is, do you know what a pauper is boys and girls? It means a very poor person and and, yes and we don't like to think about poor people no, no let's try to remember this little, little unspoiled genius in his happy moments when he, when he um, yes when he wrote happy letters to people, yes... (42).

This passage starts mid-sentence since Bast's lecture is, on the page, constantly interrupted by the cavils of the watching administrators. Yet its internal hesitancy codes it as resistance to them, even before they get agitated at his swearing and the realisation that they can't interrupt him from afar. The two moments most directly coded as script-departures here are those that involve a content-level sense of hesitation, obstruction or reversal: Bast's narration of the funeral procession turning back, and his assertion of what "we don't like to think about." The occasion for the non-verbal pause of an "um," meanwhile, is the attempt to turn back to "happy moments": Bast's very effort to get back to thoughtless recitation of the script is what draws out the most overt signifier of deliberative hesitation and uncertainty. In the tension between linear script and hesitant objection, this scene separates language and thought on the basis of ideology.

That Bast's deliberative hesitation is coded as *dissent* makes sense of the structural relation his form of speech usually bears to that of his interlocutors. It suggests that the language-agency model embodied by Davidoff or Cates is not a universal, inherent aspect of subjectivity in *J R*, but a local cultural dominant that we have the option of pursuing or resisting. For that reason, the relationship between the modes embodied by Bast and Davidoff is actively agonistic, with a default direction of influence. Take for example the Hyde+janitor scene, in which Bast, as usual, can't articulate a sentence against the flow of instrumental talk:

—Yes well I'm sure he expects, I mean you see I just came in originally to help him to...

[...]

—No I mean I thought that's why the loan was the only way I could...

[...]

—Yes but all I...

[...]

—Yes but listen Mister Davidoff about this stock opt...

[...]

—No well you see...

[...] (541).

Not only does Bast fail to articulate a content-bearing full-sentence, but his attempts decline from verbs of mental operation (“mean” and “think”) to over-ridden “but”s to a conforming statement of Davidoff’s own mental operation “well you see.” Louis Auchincloss characterises *J R*’s dialogue as containing “Every banality the brain of man can devise to evade thought” (Auchincloss), but the way the differing language-forms of speakers like Bast and Davidoff *interact* make clear that the dominant mode of dialogue as often serves to hunt and eliminate “thought” in others as to let any given speaker to evade it in themselves.

This is the organizing dynamic of the novel’s central relationship, between Bast and JR. The basic contrast is evident in Bast’s first attempt to get JR to slow his empire’s expansion:

—No now stop, just stop for a minute! This, this whole thing has to stop somewhere don’t you understand that?

—No but holy, I mean that’s the whole thing Bast otherwise what good is this neat tax loss carryforward and all these here tax credits and all, I mean that’s all Eagle is and see where Piscator says here Eagle probably has this here limited charter so they can’t buy this brewery but if the pension fund could like buy the brewery stock and the dividends could go right in it and cut down what the company had to put in then see we...

—Stop it! [...] (298).

JR's thinking-practice relies on momentum, as his commitment to the "neat tax loss carryforward" makes clear and the subsequent unpunctuated rush of subjunctive "then"s embody in prose. This instrumental profit-mode flow depends for impetus on a figuration of friction: Bast's repeated entreaties to "stop". While both characters' responses to each other begin with "no," Bast's is continuous with subsequent negativity—his "Stop"s or interrupted "I don't"s—whereas JR reverts to active instrumentality as soon as he regains conversational control. JR's "no"s, in other words, represent only the rejection of obstacle, not an alternative to the ongoing flow of the novel's default dialogue. This conversation frames stylistic flow, then, not as an independent quality, but as a deliberate and targeted assault on friction. The world in which friction is a physical and conceptual given is, early in *J R*, the world that language like Davidoff's and JR's overwhelms. And this is especially true where friction is associated with thought, with a mediating depth between judgment and effectual speech. This dynamic of threat aligns our sympathies with characters associated with depth psychology, like Bast the artist, Gibbs the critic, Beaton the lawyerly cog in the system.

This alignment of sympathies comes through the persistent trope of colonization. Gaddis figures deliberativeness as a marginal identity category within the social terms of *J R*'s world. The identity-based forms of colonization central to Hyde's uneasy perception of the black janitor's interiority or Davidoff's need to steal physical space from the Indians function as frameworks for understanding the pressure figures like Davidoff, JR, and Cates put on the novel's different-valued protagonists.⁴³ Nicholas Spencer's geographical reading of *J R* stresses this vocabulary in drawing on Roland Lefebvre: "The threat of the colonization of lived space with which *Gravity's Rainbow* concludes is realized in Gaddis' *JR*. In this novel, abstract space takes dominion in the urban environments of New York, and the possibility of oppositional lived space is

⁴³ And as Bast's failure to get through to Davidoff was represented in linguistic terms, so Davidoff's work on the Indians comes through language that enacts the colonization it describes: he operates by translating interlocutors on whose values he might not have a "claim" into agents who share values he can comprehend—"this royalty arrangement"—in order to win over them to his own values, at which point he'll "pull their wigwams right out from under them."

eradicated” (6). Hyde’s or Davidoff’s equivalent colonization of the space behind speech also applies isomorphically to words on the page: Bast’s language conjures a fictive world in which thoughts that aren’t vocalized can still exist and exert influence, whereas the Davidoff mode attacks this notion, aiming to create a world as flat as a page. The persistent racial analogy appropriates a space of marginality for central characters who—like Hyde’s resented janitor—refuse, or try to refuse, the compulsion to give up the space of unvocalised thought, of deliberation that acknowledges uncertainty and the possibility of error enough that it can’t simply join the stream of instrumental talk.

Deliberativeness in *J R*, then, is both a stylistic and an identity category. Tabbi, stressing the fracture and incoherence internal to each speech in *J R*, claims that “There is no question of staging ideological conflicts or religious crises in the conversations among characters.”⁴⁴ Yet as Davidoff’s overwhelming of Bast and Bast’s attempts to make JR hesitate show, the ideological conflict is staged not as debate, but precisely in the orchestrated confrontation of forms of speech that stand for different modes of thought. Bast and JR differ not just in what they say *about* hesitation and thought, but in its relation to the fundamental structures of their prose. JR’s identification with the market and Bast’s wish to escape its conditioning set them up as opposites such that, if the intimations of pre-vocalized deliberation in Bast’s speech align him with a traditional agency under threat, JR in opposition becomes, as Angela Allan notes, hard to think of “in terms of his intentions” or as “having any individual desires or agency at all” (228). *J R*’s vast array of details and dialogues finally boils down, as Gaddis himself suggested, to a single ideological conflict: “the artist as ‘inner-directed’ confronting a materialistic world.”⁴⁵ In effect, the novel represents the two *characters* as different competing types of *person*, in the sense that grounds Robert Chodat’s examination of changing ideas about human and non-human agency and intentionality in 20th century fiction: “personhood” is the umbrella category for different types of embodied agency,

⁴⁴ Tabbi, “Autopoesis”, 93

⁴⁵ “Finally, it’s the artist as ‘inner-directed’ confronting a materialistic world—brokers, bankers, salesmen, factory workers, most politicians, the lot—that JR himself represents, and which is ‘outer-directed,’ if you want it in sociological terms.” (Gaddis, “William Gaddis: The Art of Fiction...”).

from sovereign human subjects to consciousness-imputed objects to the legal status of corporations.⁴⁶ Bast and JR's novel represents not just a world of flow but a set of conflicts and stakes intrinsic to that world, in terms of the different kinds of beings who inhabit it, and the different linguistic structures that conjure them.⁴⁷

J R certainly takes a normative side in this conflict, and, as I'll go on to show, the novel's rhetorical arc develops by modulations and transmissions of these patterns from character to character: just as the linguistic structures are not "flat"ly identical from character to character, nor is the novel "flat" in the sense of formally unevolving.⁴⁸

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All this is not to say, though, that the novel merely valorizes characters who speak "deeply" and condemns those who speak "flatly". Indeed, the stylistic alignments across the novel's essential battle-line—between artists and administrators—contribute greatly to its development. Characters whose ideologies align with the Cates/Davidoff/JR axis speak some of the least fluent language in the novel, and characters coded as sympathetic or resistant to that anti-deliberative world speak some of the most relentless "flow."

Take Gibbs for example, who gives voice to the novel's most overt criticisms of contemporary culture and its stupefying language. As Patrick O'Donnell says, Gibbs

⁴⁶ Christopher Knight is one critic to have made the case that *J R* creates different kinds of character, suggesting that "we make a mistake if, propelled by our postmodern ambitions, we choose to conflate, or reduce, all of Gaddis' characters into this single posthuman type" (121). Knight doesn't go so far as to imply any structural relationship between *J R*'s "flat" and "deep" character-types, however.

⁴⁷ If Johnston conflated all the novel's characters under the claim that "What we see of them in any given scene is all there is, for they cast no shadows of an interior psychological complexity" (109), Gaddis' fellow novelist Joseph McElroy identifies the ellipses in dialogue throughout *J R* and *The Recognitions* as a sign of "a self hung up in its parts, falling short, doubt's pause, second thoughts" (67): his attribution of some of what's on the page to underlying structures of unvocalized thought importantly establishes that *J R* represents persons capable of doubts, thoughts, a self at all. Both Johnston and McElroy imply that all *J R*'s characters speak the same and so are the same, whereas the core of my argument is that, by transmission of certain patterns of language, the novel posits that different forms of *personhood* become transmissible.

⁴⁸ Marc Chénétier argues that, in rejecting the categories of "psychology" and the "real" in the manner postmodernism is often claimed to, Gaddis' first novel *The Recognitions* resigns itself to the abandonment of "promise" and "possibility." But *J R*'s convention-foregrounding disinterest in formal connection to "the real" means that, while neither JR nor Bast are "psychological" characters in the conventional way, he can still attach a greater degree of "possibility" and "promise" to one of the modes of being they stand for than the other.

“serves as the novel’s heretical voice in constantly questioning and parodying the prevailing discursive orders” (5), and thus seems an obvious candidate for a stylistic figure of friction. Yet Gibbs’ obsessive excoriation of everything that world sets before his eyes falls perfectly in line with the novel’s starting dynamic of unidirectional flow. See this early scene in which he, Bast, and his fellow teacher and love interest Amy Joubert sit in a café on a school trip, and Gibbs turns self-pity into criticism of an acquaintance:

What who Urquart? I’m God damn it I didn’t invent him look at him think he hasn’t got a skinful to get through the day in a place like this? That almost distinguished profile that authority in his face but it won’t stay still afraid people will notice his teeth don’t fit, afraid he’ll lose them and we’ll all laugh so he’s telling that sloppy busboy to clean up a table he’s almost finished anyhow keep his authority intact just those God damned teeth can’t relax for an instant he’s...

—Please stop it!” (118).

Gibbs’ contrarian railing forces Amy into the Bast role, trying to restore frictive hesitation to an all-encompassing flow.⁴⁹ This paints Gibbs’ agonism as the other side of the coin he most deliberately of all our characters opposes. With minimal punctuation and a sole “so” for semantic conjunction, Gibbs’ speech moves from sense impression to speculation to interpretation and back among these categories without articulating one whole idea. As his transitionless shifts from object to object keep obsessively circling back to teeth, they highlight the ways in which a stylistics of flow doesn’t have to entail development or progress: Gibbs’ speech might be better thought of as a paralytic eddy. Unlike Davidoff’s procession through simple discrete verb phrases, for Gibbs utterances from different categories of thought blur into each other, losing the point in proliferation and indistinction. So fast do the impulses flow into each other that they create secondary pseudo-clauses, suggesting that “I’m God” or that someone is “still afraid” or that “teeth can’t relax for an instant.” Each of these bears ironically on the anxious self-conception underlying Gibbs’ perpetual oral agitation. If flow threatens Bast with total subsumption, its stylistic threat to Gibbs is of absolute possession. In

⁴⁹ Indeed, Gibbs is asked to ‘stop’ many more times than JR in book as a whole, almost always by people who share his politics.

subsequent scenes, alone with Amy or his daughter, this feverish defensive torrent does abate, but out in the world he is putatively opposing, Gibbs' efforts at resistance take on precisely that world's semantic structures: an impotent accidental pastiche of all he resents. Correspondingly, he never manages to transmit anything but frenetic flow to anyone else. Gibbs shares a language-structure with Davidoff, then, but is ineffectual where Davidoff is instrumental: where Davidoff can calculate about futures and distances so long as they're comprehensible in terms of price and exchange, Gibbs can't get outside what is directly present to his perception.⁵⁰ He contributes to the flow he rails against, and can't bend its dynamic to his own uses.

Even more complex dynamics between unvocalized friction and spoken flow arise at moments where syntactic flow corresponds directly to the intimation of depth and hence the alignment with the novel's normative sympathy. Amy, Cates' daughter, responds to an indelicate question from his lawyer Beaton about how her divorce and romantic prospects might affect her role in the company by spilling forth:

Mister Beaton that's what we've been talking about! He, Daddy still wants it all to be like it was when I rode at the garden myself with that ghastly Use girl, when her brother came down with Dick Cutler from Choate and, if he could see if Daddy could just see the only men I've met I can imagine getting into, into anything with them he'd die [...] (213).

Here is the familiar under-punctuation: the Gibbs-ish correspondence between a torrent of words and the spur of wounding affects. Yet Amy's subsequent clarification that "I'm sorry Mister Beaton I, I shouldn't talk to you like this but there's simply been no one else..." (214) suggests a different temporality of thought and speech: that of build-up and burst. To get to the point of speaking in this flow, Amy has to have gone some time with thoughts unexpressed: to have been, like Bast, the kind of person for whom having a thought and expressing an action are non-identical.

On the other side of the aisle, school principal Whiteback is one of the novel's most comical characters precisely because, in trying to put Hyde's and Cates' ideology

⁵⁰ Gibb's problem, indeed, is that he lacks the capacity to sort as reflexively and efficiently, so that his book about disorder eventually founders on his inability to sort through his profuse notes.

into practice, his language devolves into almost unintelligible fracture. Here he is asking school psychologist Dan DeCephalis to help break a possible strike action: “As a matter of fact its already ahm, I thought Dan might be some help to us on this as a matter of fact. She, his wife, your wife that is to say Dan, orientationwise that is, I understand she’s ahm motivating factor there activationwise [...]” (177). Whiteback’s language is as over-punctuated and hesitant as Bast’s, even more circular than Gibbs’. His attempt to discuss things “orientationwise” leave his listener entirely unoriented, as the preceding clauses offer at least three modulations of “she” – “his wife,” “your wife” and “that is to say Dan.” Confusion over both referent and addressee make Whiteback’s proliferating clarifications into obfuscations. This is far from Davidoff’s flatly efficient instrumental speech, yet pushing the same politics. How, then, to make sense of this in the light of the equation between language-style and ideology that I’ve identified above?

We can’t merely map flow and friction onto sympathetic and sceptical portrayals of the characters who speak them: instead, they suggest the plurality of modes of personhood that emerge when a culture of “flat” linguistic agency attempts to colonize one of traditional persons. Where John Johnston reads any given instance of *J R*’s dialogue as “not a human being talking but money itself” (204), I’ve shown that the novel’s varied patterns of “talking” point to its array of conceptions of what a human agent can be at this stage in history. Critics who have read *J R* as formally flat and undifferentiated have fallen into the Jamesonian trap of thinking that precision in “stylistic description” can’t be of any use in examining the rhetoric of a novel’s response to its culture. In the next section, I’ll make sense of the seeming similarity between Whiteback’s “ahm”s and Bast’s script-breaking “um”s, showing how the stylistic modulations and transmissions the novel represents between characters add up to a diagnosis of the specifically political valence of this colonizing mode, and what this allows the novel to suggest about possibilities for transmitting other forms of personhood.

“Testored Tailing,” or the Political Organization of Style-Transmission

The fundamental structure that connects economic life to forms of agency in *J R* is embodied in a seemingly innocuous Whiteback stumble. Trying to explain how the school's personality-testing will match each child to an existing set of punch-cards, he tells us:

this equipment item is justified when we testor tailing, tailor testing to the norm, and [...] the only way we can establish this norm, in terms of this ongoing situation that is to say, is by the testing itself (22).

Whiteback's initial stumble, his "testored tailing," flips phonemes just as his testing flips the sequence of norm, data and subject.⁵¹ This articulates *J R*'s central structural principle: the top-down establishment of a norm which then serves to delegitimize anything non-conforming. Whiteback's linguistic slip matches cart-before-horse promulgations of bureaucratic norm throughout the novel, from JR's insistence that Bast legally change his name to Edwerd so as to ratify a misprinted batch of business cards, to Davidoff's circulation of press releases about events that have to be brought about by the people reading them, to JR's convincing himself that his fabricated corporate biography really does make him a "man of vision" characterized by an "austere, indrawn indwellingness" (650).⁵² The last of these makes clear that this model deals directly with modes of agency and personhood; JR knows the rhetorical value of the traditional forms of subjectivity even as, in practice, "indwellingness" is precisely what his, Davidoff's, or Cates' language-actions seek to colonize and eliminate.

Whiteback's "testored tailing" stipulates a normative psychology and then establishes a system of testing and education to bring it into being. The end goal, though, is fiscal, to justify an expense already spent:

the norm in each case supporting, or we might say being supported, substantiated that is to say, by an overall norm, so that in other words in terms of the testing the norm comes out as the norm, or we have no norm to test against,

⁵¹ Spencer makes the punchcard plot his main example of Gaddis' "critical mimesis," though without analyzing the language.

⁵² The archive reveals that JR's faith in his bibliography's truth is one of the fundamental elements of his story: it's present in the earliest full description of *J R*'s projected plot, surviving the changes, and also appears in fragmentary notes that almost certainly precede that ("Summary following opening part" 3). *J R* Composition Notes and Play. Box No. 68, Folder 278).

right? So that presented in these terms the equipment can be shown to justify itself..." (22/3).

Self-justification is central, as the worldview seeks not only to impose but to naturalize itself. In this respect, *J R* might be seen as prophetic of the post-postmodern stage of economic living that theorists call Capitalist Realism: the acknowledgment that part of capitalism's ideological machinery is to delimit the imaginable: "Whenever 'realism' is defined as that which is measurable within a system of capitalist equivalence, then everything *not* measurable according to this standard becomes, by simple definition, unaffordable and unrealistic" (Shonkwiler and La Berge, 2). This is the logic that makes Whiteback's "testored tailing" part of the Cartesian political system in *J R*, and as I've shown elsewhere, Gaddis' criticism of the basic model was worked out in his corporate writing in the earliest stages of *J R*'s composition. Not only that, but he addressed it there through the same vocabulary of "tailoring."⁵³ Just as Gaddis blamed it there on failures of corporate management to understand the interaction of humans and systems, so—even though critical treatments of the novel's econo-political vision tend to displace human agency as a category—Whiteback's linguistic confusions foreground the human dimensions and limitations of *J R*'s political world.

Testored tailing is not just a quirk of Whiteback's personality and language: its top-down intentionality becomes clear as the novel gradually reveals more information about his place, as school principal, in a chain of command down which language and ideology flow. Below him, administering the punchcards that will set the norms, is school psychologist DeCephalis, and below him, reading classroom scripts, are teachers like Bast and Gibbs. Immediately above Whiteback is Hyde, a military man employed by

⁵³ His abandoned book on television education for the Ford Foundation, for example, discusses the possible misuse of classroom technology as "another surrender of content to technique, with test questions tailored to electronic capabilities and, eventually, the course material tailored to the questions" (Archive: *Television for Today's Education*, IV-46. Corporate Writings. Box No. 133, Folder 475) And this matches undated notes from the early drafts of *Agapē Agape*: "just as the product is modified by the machine's capabilities, we ourselves are conditioned for the criteria they shall set" (Archive: Loose note toward *Agape*, 6) And in an analysis of Kodak's internal logistics, he lamented that failures "to follow the prescribed routines which the system is designed to handle," require the humans involved to realise that "such a system demands orders tailored to the system itself" (Archive: "Some Observations on Problems Facing Eastman Kodak's Advertising Distribution Department." Dec 1967. Corporate Writings. Box No. 135, Folder 481).

a subsidiary of Typhon International, the over-arching corporation run by Governor Cates. Cates' language embodies the instrumental, non-deliberative "management" ideology in the novel even more directly than Davidoff's or JR's, as in this passage in which he trouble-shoots issues raised by lawyer Beaton:

First thing I want cleaned up's these damned mining claims Beaton get Frank Black's office find out if they're worth the damn paper they're written on this outfit's in there on mineral exploration just to cut timber get hold of Monty, Interior serve them with an injunction maybe they'll be ready to do business, when Broos calls get him onto that old sheep state... (433).

As the conversations I discussed above—in which Davidoff or JR overflow Bast until his objections degenerate into their vocabulary—demonstrate, this flow of instrumental talk is the norm to which the rest of the world must be tailored, a norm to be transmitted to schoolchildren through Bast's script, delivered to him by DeCephalis, supervised by Whiteback, employed by Hyde, controlled through a variety of corporate functionaries who answer to Cates, whose corporation includes the manufacturers of the school's TV equipment.

Whiteback's seemingly incidental spoonerism epitomises Gaddis' stylistic articulation of how administrative capitalism's worldview actively limits permissible inputs and hence constructs the world it claims only to reflect or enable.⁵⁴ And the connection to broader industrial business practice and yet broader political goals is made even before the plot leaves school turf. The scene's conversation shifts immediately to political matters. Congressman Pecci's impending arrival leads Hyde to ruminate on the necessity of some top-down work on the electorate for the funding of infrastructural expansion—"Getting this budget across is going to take everything we can give it" (24)—and the scene's norm-distorting logic allows him to frame his top-down intervention in the language of liberty, repudiating an objecting superior who would "dictate to the parents of these future citizens that they can't exercise their democratic right to vote" (23/4).

⁵⁴ Focusing more on narrative events than style, Christopher Knight usefully suggests that *J R* is about "American capitalism's rather successful bid to identify reality with itself" (84).

But if Cates' language dictates the terms of a world made in his own image, then Whiteback's malapropisms, his identifying hesitations of "ahm," his incoherent jargon, all clarify that the process of transmitting management's ideological "language" down the chain is subject to human inefficiencies. If Cates, as the absent aegis of this scene, is the disconnected head suggested by DeCephalis' name, then the passage shows how, at an institutional distance from their motivating source, the local pushers of the anti-deliberative ideology have to fall back on their own agency. It's for this reason that DeCephalis—desperately but voluntarily straining to sound like Cates—comes in fact to resemble Bast in terms of hesitation, punctuation, language-revision. As Stephen Matanle suggests, "Whiteback's language is speaking him, dragging him along behind it," and Whiteback is dragged precisely because the language isn't "his": it's pushed on him by Cates through Hyde (115). Everyone below Cates conditions their language towards his with the entropic imperfections of human mediation: as Joel Dana Black suggests, their half-conscious institutional willingness to reduce their inputs to match Cates' mode of thinking makes them "willing captives of a discourse they take to be their own" (165). Just as LeClair notes that Cates' flow of language and mastery of "advanced methods of collecting, sorting, and disseminating information" are maintained at the entropic expense of his body—his "failing health implies the energy cost of information sorting" (98)—so the chain of human minds down which he promulgates his mode of thinking generates language scarred by a similar "cost."

As Cates' passing acknowledgement that he needs Beaton to "find out" some information before he can properly process it shows, the system relies on feedback. But throughout *J R* the top-down promulgation has become so hyperstasized that any upward feedback channels through which these downstream errors could be corrected are eliminated or, more often, perverted toward testored tailing. DeCephalis' own most reasonable ideas get inverted to the prevailing norm as they go back up the hierarchy, as by Hyde:

we key the human being to, how did you put it once Dan? Key the...

—The individual yes, key the technology to the indiv...

—Dan knows what I’m talking about, key the individual to the technology find the soft spots in this budget and we’re in business (224).

Hyde’s distortion conveys the human work involved at each step of perpetuating a system that refuses to process what LeClair calls “negative feedback” (98). Indeed, some of the most notable examples of conversations in which Bast or Beaton are talked over and subsumed come when they’re trying to convey vital information, as with Davidoff’s refusal to process Bast’s protestations that the head of JR Corp is a child: Davidoff instead confirms that he’d heard rumours that the boss “never got out of 6th grade” and takes this as evidence of the insignificance of formal education for a self-made man. Angela Allan reads *J R* as an indictment of the way “the market actively seeks to erase anything that might exist outside of it,” but the work individuals like Hyde and Davidoff do in misconstruing countervailing feedback shows that this erasure is far from an impersonal process (227).

Ralph Clare, in an investigation of literary representations of the corporation that devotes a chapter to *J R*, takes a broadly Jamesonian approach, from which he departs most notably in his insistence on the way that the rhetoric of corporate personhood and supra-human agency can serve to mask the interests of specific individuals.⁵⁵ The structure of promulgation I’m calling “testored tailing” is, on the reading above, an example both of the systemic scale of *J R*’s diagnoses, and of the finally human scale on which it suggests that it can be faulted, blamed, and resisted. If the novel’s default direction of influence shows the top-down Cartesian model of language overflowing interlocutors like Bast or Gibbs and bending their syntax to its terms, then the breakdowns in the system that lead Whiteback’s imitation of Cates to dissolve into perplexity, and that stop people being able to relay information back to Cates, are expressed in terms of the fractured transmission of language from character to character. Whiteback’s various mis-meanings establish the possibility of such breakdowns, and Gaddis thus models both the intended logic of testored tailing *and its*

⁵⁵ His reading of *J R* actually stresses something different: the novel’s investigation of the way the rhetoric of corporation as family can serve to mask the large-scale interests involved.

human limitations right at the novel's outset. And he does so through language, form, anti-mimetically foregrounded *style*.

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As in Barth deliberative rationality was recuperated as an unavoidable response to the kind of unpredictable situations and instinctive commitments that philosophical rationalization couldn't eliminate, so in *J R* the value of deliberation is set up explicitly against testored tailing. The school administrators attempt to refigure the term *deliberate* itself, in precisely these anti-contingent terms: soon after Gibb's broadcast lesson has put deliberateness at the core of the novel's implicit system of alternative values, Whiteback up in the control room notes that among the school expenses to be budgeted for are "predictable, deliberate, you might even say pre-scheduled breakage" (26). Deliberation's relation to the unpredictable and unrationalizable thus has to be defended over the course of the rest of the novel.

This too has its roots in Gaddis' corporate work: constantly there Gaddis identifies "the unpredictable human" as the source of all management's problems, but cautions against a response that would equate managerial efficiency with the removal of humans and the promotion of systems: instead, only "human judgment" could keep the systems targeted to some specific end rather than expanding in and of themselves. Throughout Gaddis' corporate writing, human unpredictability is valuable for offering occasions for judgment, since "Without the stimulus of that sovereign individual... there wouldn't be any reason for change. And planning is change" (Archive).⁵⁶ In defending change-responsiveness, "judgment," and "decision," Gaddis' corporate work attaches value to the other "unreasonable" psychological categories that Gaddis' default corporate discourse sought to eliminate. The testored tailing logic of *J R*'s dominant world thus represents, as I've argued elsewhere, a version of Gaddis' corporate world that has maximally failed to heed his advice about the necessity of respecting the differences between sorting and thinking, efficiency and effectiveness. When some of

⁵⁶ V.B. Phillips. "Effective Generating and Screening of New-Product Concepts," 16. Speech, Oct 31 1969. Corporate Writings. Box No. 134, Folder 481.

Decephalis' students fail to fit into his schema, he blames the fact that "in this computerised scoring the holes that have been punched in some of the cards don't, aren't consistent with forecasts in the personality testing" (23). For the mindset that defines JR's world, mechanical failures are a more plausible source of model-defiance than human inconsistency. As I'll argue in this chapter's final third, the novel finally shows how unpredictable human deliberation can push back and create some genuine friction against the world that sought to eliminate it, and it makes this case by reversing the direction of stylistic transmission. Deliberative stylistics become contagious rather than just objects of attack.

Before I show that, though, I'll take a short digression to show how directly Gaddis' diagnosis of the testored tailing dynamic and mindset engaged with specific economic arguments of his time. Where the Jamesonian account of literature's relation to politics and economics makes it a mere symptom of zeitgeist-type forces, leaving authors little rhetorical control and even less critical agency, Gaddis' ideas came from decades of first-hand corporate-work experience that almost all pre-dated the 1973 events that Jameson wants to make postmodern antimimesis a flat symptom of. The novel deals with a very specific structure of managerial thought with which Gaddis was intimately familiar, and the novel's use of stylistic innovations to raise it as a problem show that its remit was much more specific than mere mimesis of a more general economic zeitgeist. Gaddis' diagnosis engages with a more specific econo-political formation than generalities about "postmodernism" or "neoliberalism" can accommodate.

Gaddis Among the Economists

Recent work on Gaddis and economics has moved beyond the Jamesonian terms of "late capitalism" and "postmodernity" to focus on the concept of "neoliberalism." The basic components of what I've called "testored tailing" in *J R*—the skewing of inputs to what the processor can comprehend, the top-down political motives—match many of

the tenets of neoliberalism as described by critics like Clare, Allan, and Nicky Marsh, even as others—testored tailing’s connection to language, the degree to which its perpetuation relies on agency not just at the top but at every level of its transmission—play little role in discussion of the term. Allan and Marsh in particular stress the novel’s interest in imperfection and failure as a resistance to the neoliberal presumption of market infallibility. While there’s plenty of debate within economics and political theory about whether “neoliberalism” as a concept describes anything especially distinctive, Allan and Marsh are also united in addressing a more concrete source: the writings of Milton Friedman. Friedman embodies neoliberalism for Marsh in terms that match my account of testored tailing: she reads *J R* as “a refutation of the ‘eager and terrible simplification’ of Friedman’s positive economics, a model that assumed it could simply filter-out contingency as extraneous to its predicative capacities” (191). In what follows I’ll examine *J R*’s relation not only to Friedman but to the change he brought about in the underlying assumptions of his home institution, the Chicago school of economics. If Marsh joins posthumanist Gaddis-critics in seeing his treatment of economic agency as, however critical, essentially *prophetic*, I’ll show that the resistant value he attaches to deliberative agency actually aligns him with Friedman’s predecessor Frank Knight. *J R*’s economic thinking engages not only with Gaddis’ 1960s corporate work, but with Knight’s pre-emptive warnings about a Friedmanite anti-humanism, which begin as early as the 1930s. And these warnings are conducted in precisely the terms I’ve identified as central to the corporate work’s contribution to *J R*: the question of how far “human judgment” and the “unpredictable human element” are analogous with “friction.”

So what is Marsh talking about when she makes Friedman’s “positive economics” an avatar for the aversion to contingency? Where Knight was Chicago’s dominant figure from the 1920s until the 1940s, Friedman took over that mantle with the publication in 1953 of his short manifesto “The Methodology of Positive Economics.” Leadership established, he played a major role in the school’s institutionalization and subsequent rise to dominance in US politics: hence the association with “neoliberalism” insofar as

that term refers to the post-70s political landscape. The crucial idea in “Positive Economics” is that the truth of an economic model’s axioms is irrelevant as long as its predictions can be found accurate.⁵⁷ “Positive” is opposed to “normative,” with the then-widespread presumption that a predictive “science” has no normative dimensions. The first crux of the disagreement with Knight (and the relevance to Gaddis) comes in this presumption’s role in the construction of predictive models. Just as scientific models often leave out relevant factors in order to demonstrate the overall causal role of another factor more clearly, so in economics “A hypothesis is important if it ‘explains’ much by little, that is, if it abstracts the common and crucial elements from the mass of complex and detailed circumstances [...] and permits valid predictions on the basis of them alone” (14). This, of course, begs the question of normativity by ignoring how we choose what is to be left in or out. Friedman’s examples of the best procedures for economic science all come by analogy to physics.⁵⁸ A physicist, he says toward the end of the book-length development of these ideas, should deplore the “introduction of factors not included in the fundamental theoretical system, exemplified by the introduction of ‘friction’” (289). And his example of equivalent economic error is to “introduce” idiosyncratic behaviour, imperfect competition or imperfect individual preference-pursuit: to acknowledge, in other words, what Gaddis called “the unpredictable human element.”

Even the putatively Friedman-sceptical movement of behavioural economics⁵⁹ maintains the major implication of Friedman’s approach, which is the shifting of the economically-relevant kind of “rationality” from the actors being modelled to the model itself. Nicola Giocoli sums up his history of twentieth century thinking about rational

⁵⁷ “Hypotheses have not only ‘implications’ but also ‘assumptions’ and that the conformity of these ‘assumptions’ to ‘reality’ is a test of the validity of the hypothesis *different from* or *additional to* the test by implications” (14).

⁵⁸ As Philip Mirowski, a predominant chronicler of the normative and institutional forces behind economics’ rhetorical drive towards claims of objectivity has noted, “the adoption of the ‘energetics’ metaphor and framework of mid-nineteenth century physics is the birthmark of neoclassical economics” (*Against Mechanism*, 15).

⁵⁹ Economics that acknowledges the consistent imperfection of human behaviour, and tries to make this into another axiom that economic models can work with to improve the accuracy of their predictions.

agency—which ends shortly after the publication of Friedman’s paper—thus: “We started from the classical notion of a rational agent inherited from the early marginalist writers, who viewed the agent as a relentless maximiser who aimed at pursuing his/her own goals and desires, and ended with the shrinking of rationality to a formal requirement of consistency” (3). While for Giocoli the “requirement of consistency” refers to the actions of a given individual within a model’s assumed set of preferences, Friedman’s exercise in what Giocoli calls “distilling the formal essence of the notion of rationality in order to make it as general and rigorous as possible” (3) represents a further break (just as the equation of rational economic behavior with the rule-based rationality of physical phenomena had itself required institutional cultivation⁶⁰). For Friedman, a model’s task is “to specify the circumstances under which the formula works” (18). As long as the formula is consistent, there will be some set of circumstances that it corresponds to: for which it “works.” As long as that set isn’t empty, the model is, in Friedman’s sense, “positive.” While Friedman talks about models’ needing to measure themselves by predictive accuracy, he thus shifts the direction of fit involved in “consistency,” especially in relation to emergent evidence. A contradictory piece of empirical evidence no longer has to prompt a nuance in the model, which remains consistent, positive, and so on, in any situation in which the confounding evidence can no longer be found.

Before Friedman wrote, Knight had already objected both to the logic of this approach, and to the misuse of one of its practical implications that animates Gaddis on Testored Tailing. Knight, like Friedman, is best known for offering theoretical

⁶⁰ As SM Amadae discusses in her own history of the concept’s development, “Enough... mid-twentieth-century economists associated deliberate maximization with rational behaviour that, over time, human rationality came to be explicitly defined in accordance with the maximization (or minimization) characteristic of rational mechanics. Thus, in the course of the first half of the twentieth century, the term ‘rational’ came to apply less to the science of economics as a discipline and more to the nature of deliberation on the part of economic actors” (227). The crucial element of Amadae’s account for understanding *J R* on deliberation is that she show just how anxious the theorists were to operate on a pseudo-physical model, so that ‘the nature of deliberation’ had to be one thing, part of the formula, rather than something that could prompt a formula’s revision. So their whole way of thinking about ‘rational deliberation’ question-beggingly installed the Friedman-type model-first version of ‘rational.’

underpinnings for the defence of economic “freedom.” Yet perhaps the dominant thread of his own theorizing on economic methodology is the precise opposite of Friedman’s: the unavoidable relevance of human mutability and unpredictability, and the disanalogy this necessarily establishes between economics and physics. While “As generalized description” economic axioms can be “like the conceptions of frictionless mechanics and... similarly justified,” Knight notes that when we move from generalised description to specific model and hypothesis, a problem arises. Friction is a constant based on universal laws, but humans are not so unchanging:

friction in mechanics involves a transformation of energy from one form to another, according to a law just as rigid and a conservation principle just as definite as the law and conservation principle which hold good for mechanical changes where no energy disappears. There is nothing corresponding to any of this in the economic process. What is abstracted in equilibrium price theory is the fact of error in economic behavior (“E+HA” 103).

Since error is not a law but a category defined in relation to that of truth or regularity, containing no necessary regularity of its own, it is impossible to merely discount error in order to arrive at a generalisable truth. Knight’s case for the relevance of correct *assumptions* is founded on a conviction that humans, and their values, and their cultures, have the capacity to change: capitalist competition, he notes, is treated as a state of nature in economics textbooks, “But all the human interests and traits involved in this type of economic life are subject to historical change. Moreover, no society is or could be entirely and purely competitive” (168). The final sentence here is irrelevant to historical change, but establishes the proximity of Knight’s objections to presumptions about human mutability and to the lazy use of the energetics analogy. Where for Friedman psychological categories are analogous with ignorable “friction,” for Knight, they’re the animating category, “For the human analogue of force is motive...” (150/1).

Gaddis aligns with Knight’s preemptive critiques of Friedman through a shared interest in defending human unpredictability, associating it with deliberative agency, and—as I’ll show in more detail below—lamenting the ways in which political promulgation of a model in which it could be written off as “unreasonable” could lead to targeted attacks on civic freedom. In other words, he’s recuperating a discourse under

attack, rather than merely prophesying the attack itself. The defence is not just of a place for deliberative categories in Chicago's economics department, though, but of their place in the world.

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Crucially, to recall Spencer on *J R*'s geography of economic colonization, deliberative psychology has no *place* in the models of "Positive Economics." Since the interest is only in decisions' predictable outcomes, the mental processes that get us there are irrelevant. One of the normative dimensions of the approach is thus a redefinition of the relevant kinds of agency toward instantaneous sorting and parsing, away from the kind of choices that come with a duration.⁶¹ Gaddis' corporate work had emphasized the need for management to build systems that respected the "time and other pressures involved in decision making" (Archive),⁶² and the stylistic distinctions I've drawn above between the different kinds of *persons* in *J R* show how the presence or otherwise of a gap between stimulus, decision, and action organizes the novel's characters and their interactions. The relocation of "rationality" in Friedman's model essentially separates deliberation, rationality, and agency from each other, taking the establishment and negotiation of values out of the realm of what the economy can call "action." If Horkheimer's beef from the left was that a capitalist system removed rational action from the realm of ends to that of means alone, Knight's very different classical-liberal approach identifies similar limitations to the Friedmanite path:

Traditional economic thought... accepts deliberation regarding means as real, but treats ends as given in the situation and argues that deliberation regarding ends (which common sense accepts without question) is 'really' deliberation regarding means. An objectively scientific view, of course, takes the further step and argues that all deliberation is 'really unreal' at least as to making any difference in the process or result... (152/153).

⁶¹ This is the basis of Clune's whole reading of the novel, which takes JR himself to be a thought-experiment about the possibility of transacting all interpersonal relationships through the medium of price-exchange.

⁶² "Some Observations on Problems Facing Eastman Kodak's Advertising Distribution Department," 7. Dec 1967. Corporate Writings. Box No. 135, Folder 481.

This makes clear the fate of deliberative agency in a world like *J R*'s: its lack of a place in predictive models makes it “unreal,” immaterial, and hence genuinely placeless in the world the models constrain through the logic of testored tailing.

Testored Tailing's basic goal is the elimination of contradiction. The rationality of Friedman's models, when combined with interested political power, became an excuse to rationalize contingent deliberative rationality out of existence. As EF Schumacher noted in 1973 after Friedman's ideas had achieved institutional dominance, “in the current vocabulary of condemnation there are few words as final and conclusive as the word ‘uneconomic.’ If an activity has been branded as uneconomic, its right to existence is not merely questioned by energetically denied” (41). With Friedman's work having redefined what “economic” behaviour could be—not behaviour in a certain category of action, but behaviour that conformed to a certain formulaic model—the “rational” models of positive economics became norms that could be culturally enforced in order to widen the degree of conformity between empirical prediction and model hypothesis. *J R* not only opposes the excision of deliberative space in a world that lets itself be tailored to a Friedmanite model, but gives us a concrete diagnosis of the political structures by which such models can pursue their eliminative work. This structural analysis too was—although no-one seems to have articulated just how its logic animates Friedman's work in particular—part of the economic debate from Knight's early work through the whole period of *J R*'s composition.

So how would that work? The logic was already latent within Friedman's argument. Recall that the success of his models was measured only by their conformity with actual outcomes. Institutional power gives you an option Friedman's anti-normative rhetoric couldn't readily acknowledge. If you're wedded enough to your formula, and you have the necessary power, you might be better off rationalizing the world to your model rather than spending time trying to refine your model until it can do better justice to the existing world.

Knight identified both this dynamic and his own discipline's investment in it: he points to schools of thought that “treat the truth or falsity of propositions in economics

as a matter of indifference or even as illusory, judging the doctrine only by their conduciveness to the establishment of the desired type of social order” (“E+HA” 107). His examples are communism and fascism, whereas Gaddis is preoccupied with the “order” of relationships between kinds of persons, but the dynamic is the same. Knight describes this constantly in terms of economics’ academic ratification of the influence of corporate business on other fields, be this education—as with economics textbooks “produced, like any other commodity, to satisfy a demand, meaning, of course, as always, to ‘create’ a demand for itself” (179)—or electoral politics—“Both finally ‘give the people what they want,’ after doing their utmost to make them want what they want to give” (204). The goal in each case is the elimination of the unpredictable, and with it the psychological. Philip Mirowski explains how the dubious literalism Friedman granted the analogy with physics reified this eliminative project: “when the physical metaphor is imported into the social sphere, neoclassicists were not at all precise about what the conserved entity was, and they have not yet been able to settle this issue. If utility is conserved, then surprize and regret as psychological phenomena have analytically been ruled out of court” (26). To write off “surprize,” or “regret”—or uncertain deliberation as their fundamental “psychological phenomen[on]”—is a step on the way to choosing to eliminate them. Friedman’s essay marked the point at which the discipline of economics removed the options of uncertainty, imperfection, or inconsistency from the agents it then influenced politics to act as if humans could be reduced to.

Friedman’s own language in “The Methodology...” paves the way for such a takeover almost explicitly. One of his “scientific” goals is to eliminate civic dissensus about policy, which, since they’re rooted in “different predictions about the economic consequences of taking action” rather than “fundamental differences in basic values,” can “be eliminated by the progress of positive economics” (5). This eliminative “progress” is framed in terms of marketplace competition and expansion, rather than of approach to the truth: “improving the accuracy of the predictions” is only in the service of “expanding this body of generalizations” (40). We can improve accuracy either through a prediction->world or world->prediction direction of fit, and Friedman cites

Darwin to propound the latter: “Let the apparent determinant of business behavior be anything at all—habitual reaction, random chance, or whatnot. Whenever this determinant happens to lead to behavior consistent with rational and informed maximization of returns, the business will prosper... The process of ‘natural selection’ thus helps to validate the hypothesis” (22). In a world rigged to punish any deviation from a promulgated model of rationality, the success of those who “maximize” according to the model’s rules ratifies the definition of rationality. “Modelling economic behaviour” can, for all Friedman’s anti-normative rhetoric, be a very pro-active affair.

Friedman’s peers were not oblivious to this. Like Schumacher, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen was picking up on Knight’s covalent objections to the misuse of the energetics analogy and the bad faith of the promulgation-structure at the same time as Gaddis was doing his most concerted work in *J R*. His focus on showing how the requisite precision about the physics analogy reveals the flaws of economic approaches (with a focus on entropy that puts him in a self-acknowledged zeitgeist with much of the era’s fiction⁶³) allows him to articulate the logic of testored tailing very precisely:

No social science can subserve the art of government as efficaciously as physics does the art of space travel, for example. Nevertheless, some social scientists simply refuse to reconcile themselves to this verdict and, apparently in despair, have come out with a curious proposal: to devise means which will compel people to behave the way ‘we’ want, so that ‘our’ predictions will always come true... the first prerequisite of any [such] plan is that the behaviour of the material involved should be completely predictable (16).

He further identifies the irony within economics that would preoccupy Amadae in her account of rational-choice theory’s hegemony: models that derived all their moral authority from the attempt to defend rational individual freedom against the threats of totalitarianism end up promulgating a no less coercive control.

⁶³ Georgescu-Roegen dwells in more depth on the flaws in comparing economic models to physical models. He also connects to authors like Pynchon and Gaddis via his interest in the widespread use of the trope of entropy in the 1960s: “Once it was [esoteric], but now it is becoming increasingly popular in one field after another” (4). Literature is certainly one of those fields: Gaddis had published a section of *J R* based on a classroom discussion about entropy just the year before.

Recent historians of the relationship between economics and politics stress just how successful this was in practice,⁶⁴ and the importance of language for making it happen.⁶⁵ Jason Maloy most directly echoes Knight in examining how this process ended up promulgating the logic of marketing in the political civic arena: “the idealized rational actors that inhabit markets were introduced into not only the voting booth (as in Arrow) but also the halls of government” (754). As well as the focus on elimination and narrowed legitimacies that these histories share with Gaddis and Knight, Maloy’s focus on “introduction” makes clear how historians have, like Gaddis, seen these processes as consciously instilled top-down processes, rather than the Jamesonian flat-symptomatic model of an agentless dawning of a postmodern economy or condition through which Gaddis’ own work has usually been read.

The novel is explicit about testored-tailing’s logical saturation of electoral politics as well as the business world. As Hyde’s earlier manipulation of parents to help “getting this budget across” relies on fake outrage that someone would “dictate” that they ignore him, the novel later presents a number of instances in which dictation is promoted as deliberative freedom. One advert, read aloud, appeals to the business-real elimination of deliberative temporality: “Executive’s Complete Portfolio of Letters look, letters you might have to struggle over for just the right phrase completely written for you guarantee save you hours of work, no more struggling over the right way to phrase

⁶⁴ Mirowski and Rob Horn show how the Chicago school’s conscious institutional expansion into politics influenced normative accounts of economic action by making it “impossible within this discourse to regard any economic transaction whatsoever as coercive, which was a massive divergence from prior classical liberal discourse” (162). They also show these changes corresponded with Knight’s disappearance from the Chicago School’s public face: “all and sundry depended on Hayek to keep the project on even keel: no one else on home ground seemed to command the intellectual gravitas or deft punctilio to herd the cats. In particular, Frank Knight was nowhere to be seen in the archival records of these negotiations.” These divisions within the Chicago project, in particular the generational handover in which the classic-liberal reservations of Knight’s era of “free market” thinking got left behind; are not widely known: as Horn and Mirowski note “Henry Simons would have regarded most of this as an utter travesty of his beliefs; but so too would have Frank Knight. The neglect of this divide between classical and neo-liberal Chicago is one of the most disturbing aspects of both the historical and political secondary literature.”

⁶⁵ SM Amadae sees something similar happening in politicians’ concurrent adaption of the language and ideology of rational-choice game theory by politicians in the same era, comparing it to “the state-condoned language of Big Brother that continually strikes words, and hence concepts, meanings, and practices, out of existence” (296).

letters [...]” (386). Another shows explicitly what this looks like when applied to politics and civic feedback mechanisms:

Since we believe you are a deeply concerned citizen whose opinions on the vital issues of the day are formed after careful and intelligent consideration, and since the continued survival of our republic as we know it depends so heavily upon the free expression of such independent views as yours at the highest levels, a letter is enclosed for your convenience which you may rewrite in your own words and mail to your Senator and Congressman immediately” (600).

The logic of language-replacement is closely linked to the replacement of human capacities more generally. Just as JR himself is always anxious to remove humans from his asset-companies, since they’re so much less immediately fungible than any other kind of asset,⁶⁶ so the novel clarifies what a world in which “free expression of independent views” has been fully given over to top-down language manufacture will look like. That advert’s reading is interrupted by a door to door salesman who is incapable of speaking in any unit of language smaller than his entire spiel: “Ex, excuse me madam if you interrupt me I’ll have to start all over again of similar cultural pursuits, this is why we take pleasure in inviting you to [...]” (601).

J R’s economic thinking is more restricted and more precise than readings of it as either flat mimesis or capacious prophecy of general world-concepts like “postmodernity” or “neoliberalism.” Rooted in his 1960s corporate writing, engaged with questions that animated the rise of Chicago-school economics, *J R*’s economic ideas all elaborate a precise central concern: the top-down promulgation of ideas of “reasonable” conduct through politicised economic institutions. And these are expressed through antimimetic style, making the case for “stylistic description”’s value in relation to examining literary texts’ rhetorical engagement with specific historical and political formations. In what follows, I’ll show how the novel’s stylistic rhetoric moves beyond the diagnosis to make an argument for deliberative agency’s ability to push back against the Friedmanite onslaught of testored tailing.

⁶⁶ “that’s mostly what costs so much is all these here people, you know? See because if we could like get them out of there and get his here new machinery which you then divide how long it will take to wear out into how much did it cost you which you get to take that off taxes too you see?” (296).

Friction-Transmission

There are two default directions of language-transmission in *J R*: testored tailing's attempt to push the Catesian flat flow on the world, and other characters' gradual adoption of JR's mannerisms as his influence grows. In a conversation with Bast as the intersection between working for Cates and working for JR starts to overwhelm him, for example, Davidoff speaks a full sentence in JR-ese: "minerals gas timber up to our ass in Indians I mean holy shit Bast what am I supposed to do!" (540). Bast himself has already lapsed into something similar when Crawley, the low-level Cates employee who has employed Bast to compose a soundtrack, reveals that he expected a full recording, not just the sheet music: "No but but holy shit Mister Crawley I mean what..." (446). But as these transmissions express the dominance of one mindset and the inability of anybody stuck in that mindset to develop an agentive vocabulary beyond that of a child, so the novel develops its alternative to that mindset by modulating the default patterns of linguistic transmission.

I'll focus here on Bast and JR's final scene as co-workers, in which the discursive contagion moves against the default, conjuring thought where style and narrative had seemed to erase it. After the earlier scene in which Bast tries to get JR to stop, the two switch places in relation to friction and flow over the course of 400 pages, so that it's JR who finally comes to plead "how am I supposed to stop everything!" (647). Conspicuously inverting their earlier conversation's friction/flow dynamic, Gaddis casts into doubt its suggestion that judgers and doubters must always be on the back foot against the linguistic flow of instrumental flatteners.

While the scene's language still associates JR with frictionlessness—as in his pleasure at reading himself described as "this like greasy eminence behind the whole meteoric rise of J R Corp" (647)—and begins with Bast still on the back foot—"look haven't I told you to stop? When the whole thing started? Just stop and let somebody help you pull things together instead of this more! more!" (647)—the situation in which

they take on these roles has changed. The crisis in JR's empire, and his dawning awareness that the number of moving parts has exceeded his processing capacities, sees him looking outside himself for help, paying enough attention to Bast to notice for once that "You looked like you weren't listening" (645). Bast's role, and style, similarly shifts when his frustrations spill out in exasperation at JR's self-conception as a "man of vision":

You know it's been right from the start your surprise coup taking over Eagle you were more surprised than anybody, you didn't even know what X-L made when you had to buy it you asked me what's a lithograph you never thought of flooding the country with those damn matchbooks till you read someplace you'd already done it..." (656).

Bast diagnoses JR's pretensions to the psychological category of "vision" as the chronology-flipping rationalization of testored tailing. More importantly, this is where the pair's styles flip. For the first time, Bast's words come out as unpunctuated, as free from implication of consideration or revision, as JR's own. And this forces JR into the role of doubter, hesitator, deliberator. Nowhere else in the novel is JR so defensive and lost for words. Bast's subsequent refusal to stay around and argue puts JR in the position of asking for hesitation:

—No but, hey? hey Bast? Wait up I can't hardly see where I'm, hey...? he came on kicking through leaves for a remnant of sidewalk, —I mean what did you say, this, this here man of vision I mean what's so trash about that! (658).

Bast's physically outpacing JR forces the latter into a querying, grasping prose exacerbated by the obstacular world under his feet, having to acknowledge his sightlessness while defending his claim to "vision." In this reversal, JR takes on the kind of imperative frictive or negative verbs he has always over-ridden from Bast and Amy—"wait wait hey quit" (658). And this defensiveness leads to him taking on the hesitations, reconfigurations, and other syntactical intimations of psychological depth that the novel had always associated with Bast's defensive position. For the first time in the novel, there's a gap between JR's words and his actions in which a burgeoning metacognition

can take root: “I mean I’m just finding out everything’s just like the opposite of how I thought” (662).

JR is consequently left to fend for himself not only against the situation spiralling beyond his processing capacity, but against the revealed contingency of the “rules” he adopted from his first meeting with Cates:

I do what you’re suppose to and everybody gets...

—But why, why are you supposed to! That’s what I’ve...

—No sir boy you, I mean like [...] (660-1).

The four discrete words that begin this line fail to quell Bast’s question. Where their previous dialogue has been characterized by JR interrupting and negating any Bast objection with sentences that begin interchangeably with “yes”, “no”, or “okay” followed by a “but” and a continuation of flow, this passage suggests that, in the exhaustion of the instrumental flow style of speech, JR must grasp around for new capacities. This is the scene that opens with Bast’s “the only inside’s the one inside your head,” and it goes on to bear out that JR does actually have an inside, that there’s potentially more to him than the processual mode of exchange-thinking. Forced to confront a world and a co-worker that won’t cooperate, JR is left to deliberate a genuine answer to the question of “what do you expect me to do” that can’t take its cues from the “you” of inherited “rules.”

The irony of Bast’s finally transmitting deliberative language patterns to JR is that while JR’s empire attacks deliberative space, the rhetoric through which he promotes it and comes to understand himself actually relies, like “vision,” on the traditional prestige of mental achievements. On the first occasion Bast challenges him to slow down, for example, JR avoids the transmission of Bast’s language-patterns precisely by laying claim to deliberative work: “No but holy, I mean listen I’m the one that has to figure things up and like make these here decisions with these risks and all like I mean I barely made it

boy [...]” (300).⁶⁷ By the beginning of the pattern-transmission scene, JR has come to believe in the truth and judgments of the promotional biography he has had commissioned about himself: “Men who have worked with him I mean that means me that him, with him for years say his chief characteristics are enormous powers of concentration and a dogged persistence in attacking a problem until he comes up with a completely satisfactory answer” (651). The mental processes it describes—concentration and problem-solving—are the kinds of psychological qualities that his empire eliminates in others, highlighting the gap between the prestige rhetoric and the actual stakes of his empire’s “attacking.”

Yet if the novel’s sub-Cates business figures often lapse towards JR’s immaturity, he, for all his wish to be understood as a thoughtful deliberator, seems to have to actively resist threats of mental deepening, whether these come from figures like Bast, or from within himself. After Bast reports on the failure of one scheme, for example, JR has to face the potential differences between plans and outcomes: “I just, I mean I always thought this is what it will be like you and, and me riding in this here big limousine down, down this, this here big street...” (636). But the minute he starts to feel like there might be something missing, he deliberately stops himself from talking, for almost the first time in the novel, and then goes out of his way to return to a profit-exchange mode of interaction:

I just always thought we’d, we’d, nothing. You want your pickle?

—No.

—Like I’ll trade it for half my...

—Just take it! (636/7).

These moments suggest that, for JR at least, the kind of discursive agency he embodies is not the full limit of his capacities, and that he has to actively resist awareness of this fact.

⁶⁷ Gaddis manages to undercut this. Treating mental work *as* work, JR nonetheless flattens his language, his “and all” undercutting the potential specificity of “these” and making “risks” a generic term. In this context “figure things up” can mean very literally to reduce “things” to “figures”, and to stress the purely mathematical easily-processable sense of “figures” rather than the mental processes of symbolic figuration.

The novel's most self-conscious evocations of the link between flatness and thoughtlessness actually point to the potential presence of thought, and the constructed contingency of the anti-deliberative mindset. The novel prepares this interpretation for us in its very earliest presentation of business-world characters. As Whiteback addresses gym teacher Coach Vogel about the weather, the sun "caught [Vogel] flat across the lenses, erasing any life behind them in a flash of inner vacancy as he returned to" vacuous talk. The flattening and erasing of "life behind" is both imposed from without by the sun, such that Vogel is "caught... across the lenses," but also ratifies a deep inner vacancy 'flashing' outward to become visible. Flatness' self-announcing "flash" thus not only helps us understand it in terms of Gaddis' conspicuous stylistic constructions, but also suggests that unthinking action that defines the novel's business-world characters is a matter of assent rather than inevitability. It answers to the very motivational depths it notionally abolishes.

This seemingly incidental image was important enough to Gaddis that his notes toward the novel stipulate it as the main feature of the scene,⁶⁸ and it draws its stakes from another piece of writing on the relation between thought, language, and political agency. In "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell conjures "moments when the light catches the speaker's spectacles and turns them into blank discs which seem to have no eyes behind them" to encapsulate the relationship between undeliberative language use and a "reduced state of consciousness": "A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance toward turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved, as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself."⁶⁹ Orwell claims that "speech" one "is accustomed to make over and over again" is "favourable to political conformity." This connects the image of Vogel's glasses to those scenes of dictation I examined in terms of

⁶⁸ A loose page trying out different sequences for the novel's early scenes makes the flat-lens image stand for the whole conversation: "Whitebcks pastels, lght ac ross lenses" (Archive: loose note, Box 66 folder 271).

⁶⁹ David Letzler has recently drawn parallels between Orwell's argument and the way JR challenges its reader to work out which uses of jargon in the novel are content-bearing and which low-information "cruft," but he doesn't examine the echoed image or suggest that the essay might be a direct source for the novel.

Friedman's institutionalization. Whether or not this is deliberate citation on Gaddis' part, it certainly establishes the connection between "choosing his words for himself", psychological depth, and the resistance to a coerced "political conformity." The rhetoric that contrasts Bast's hesitant word-choosing with JR's "over and over again" fluency is only possible within the terms of the style, and this early stipulation of the contingency of the default direction of influence allows the novel's eventual reversal of it to make sense.

This equation between buying into the business world and assenting to the culture of mental flattening becomes particularly crucial with regard to JR himself. That JR is not quite such a lost cause as Vogel and co is clear in the scene where the structure of his subsequent empire is established. As a drowsy Bast listens to JR and a classmate in the train seat ahead of him talking about what they can get for free in the mail, JR trails off "in a tone so low it was lost before it reached his image on the dirty pane where he stared now as though staring through at something far beyond" (129). This precisely inverts the relation of thinker to flat surface in the Vogel scene, as well as the association between possible thought and the cessation of speech. Here, JR's staring points us explicitly to "something far beyond," but unlike in Vogel where the depth is real and is cancelled out by the assent to flatness, here the prospect of depth behind depicted eyes is a matter of "as if": if there is something beyond the mirror-JR's features on the "dirty pane," then it will only come into being through the real JR's turning his actually-flat perception into the depth of the "as if." JR's flatness is his childish starting condition, whereas Vogel's is attained. But JR, the scene suggests, still has the capacity to develop a self-conception that could create the kind of thoughtful depth with which Bast is associated.

Bast and JR's final scene as co-workers, then, resolves these earlier, subtler suggestions about JR's capacity for change. It suggests that the "human judgment" Bast stylistically embodies can finally have impact outside the depths of an isolated mind. After Gaddis shows that it(s style) can be inculcated even "inside" JR('s sentences), "human judgment" in the novel's final hundred pages moves outward to some small,

effectual achievements in the wider narrative. The two most important of these—Bast’s successful composition of a small artwork, and Beaton’s redirection of control of Typhon from Cates to Amy Joubert—happen in the hospital room where Bast ends up, having collapsed with fever after the JR conversation. Both the stylistic revelation and the narrative implications of these achievements establish the dual importance of artistic composition to *J R*’s value-system: first as a kind of paradigm example of what practical deliberative work looks like, and secondly as a process tied to the creation of artefacts that can circulate that work effectually in the world and make space for it.

The Deliberative Achievement of Composition

While Bast manages to transmit deliberative hesitancy to JR, he does so only after, earlier in the scene, failing to get him to appreciate a passage of music from Bach. The habits of mind associated with artistic composition are central to *J R*. By this stage in the novel we’ve already seen Gibbs fail to make any progress on his book about mechanization, but Bast’s success with JR is the seeming precondition for his subsequent ability to compose the sonata. *J R* treats artistic composition as a paradigm of the kind of deliberative personhood it recuperates. Critics like Charles Newman and Joseph Tabbi have suggested that postmodern fiction characteristically treats agency in terms of what both call “the compositional self.”⁷⁰ Tabbi draws this figure from an interview in which Gaddis discusses “the real work... the thought and the rewriting and the crossing out and the attempt to get it right.”⁷¹ This frames artistic composition in precisely the pragmatic terms of long-term projects and contingent revision that I’ve suggested *J R* values in general.⁷² Bast’s characteristic stylistic markers of hesitation,

⁷⁰ Newman - “What is most indicative of Post-Modern self-consciousness is the extent to which it eschews the psychological for the compositional self” (44).

⁷¹ Tabbi cites Gaddis’ interview with Publishers’ Weekly: “The compositional self, the being that undergoes ‘the real work... the thought and the rewriting and the crossing out and the attempt to get it right,’ as Gaddis noted in specific reference to JR, is the essential personality, the first-order phenomenon, what, in fact, the book ‘is about’” (657).

⁷² One of the novel’s foregrounded questions, and foregrounded aspects of its American philosophical heritage, is the question Gibbs asks in allusion to Thoreau: that of “What’s worth doing?” The resolution of Bast and JR’s relationship suggests that what’s worth doing may be composing artworks, rather than

after all constantly hinge on his revising spoken sentences in process. The hospital scene represents the culmination of the novel's covalent investigations of what space deliberative agency can carve out for itself in a Friedmanite world, and what it can do to consequentially resist that world.

In terms of space, Bast's compositional achievement corresponds to his vanishing from the page, and hence escaping the flow. Michael Levine suggests that *J R*'s flatness makes it a reading-incompetence to speculate as to the "content of its off-stage halves of telephone conversations" (38). But in four pages of dialogue in which he is addressed by name eleven times, Bast only speaks twice: to tell his lawyer "I'm just listening" and to ask "have you got a pencil?" (677/678). He is thus "offstage" both from the dialogue and from the attention of the narrative voice. We only find out what he's been up to when a nurse brings him dinner, and says "let's just move all these papers and put your tray here, you have been busy haven't you?" (681). His non-presence on the page is what allows him to get his own work of writing done. The intimations of unvocalised depth that characterize his hesitant speech finally generate narrative objects, undermining the equation—so central to the givens structuring JR's world—between speech and the effectual.

"I'm just listening" has a dual implication of its own: Bast may or may not be paying attention to the language from whose on-page, on-stage flow he's absent, but the revelation of his composition clarifies that he has been "listening" to the music in his head. This provides a counterpart to Bast's hospital room-mate, whose blithe monologue (which actually reveals some important information about events at the JR-Corp subsidiary in which Bast's family are financially involved) takes Bast's silence for rapt attention: "He's a good listener aren't you Bast, that's the whole secret of making people like you be an American you want everybody to like you" (685). American

encountering them. Paul Grimstad gives an account of the relationship between composition and what's-worth-doing in his account of Stanley Cavell's place within a lineage Grimstad traces to Emerson and Poe: He takes the core of Cavell's centralising of artistic composition in the value-driven life to be "What is to *count* as an example of composition? Answering his own question, he calls composition the 'search for an object worthy of our attention', a process he describes as an 'experimental problem'" (168).⁷²

personhood is framed as an oblivious outer-directed monologuing that takes the absence of interruption for endorsement: precisely the mindset against which Bast's inner-directed listening finally works. Absenting himself from the constant pressure of outer-directed communication that contributes to the flow of words down the page even as he notionally tries to resist it, though, Bast is able to compose because he works out a way to take himself "off-stage." His work not only creates an outward artefact of "inner-directed" personhood, but carves out a space within the novel's world-building methods for significant thought and action to happen outside the flow.

This interest in deliberation's relationship to Americanness highlights the distinctively pragmatist account Gaddis offers of deliberation's nature and place in an antifoundationalist world. Gaddis' critics have tended to treat pragmatism's interest in outcomes as analogous to Friedman's for the purposes of identifying *J R*'s sympathies and criticisms, as in Christopher Leise's sense of the novel's project as "working to rethink America's reliance on a kind of 'gold standard' that tends to reduce all meaning to a pragmatist's cash value" (36). Yet among his teaching notes for a 1971 course on "The Literature of Failure," Gaddis stresses "I am mainly concerned with the misinterpretation of James' Pragmatism," and suggests that in bringing James up in reading novels about a specifically US kind of failure, the "point is a: how it fit America, b: how it lent itself to misinterpretation" (Archive).⁷³ Leise, in other words, is right about *J R*'s nation-specific take on economic reductiveness: the national rhetoric is central to the way Hyde expresses his place in the testored-tailing system that promulgates a Cartesian style of personhood through his repeated tic about the need to teach children "what America's all about." But as Gaddis teaching notes from the peak of the novel's drafting process suggest, pragmatism functions as an oppositional value to figures like Hyde, precisely because its interest in outcomes as the measure of normative truth relies so heavily on contingency and unpredictability: its imputed psychology is one of long-duration, private and public deliberation about ends, and conscious revision of means in light of new evidence. This is the kind of agency epitomized by Bast or Beaton in their

⁷³ "Teaching Notes for 'Literature of Failure.'" Teaching Materials. Folder 128, Box 454.

long-game projects and eventual achievements, and hence the kind of agency the novel most directly opposes to Friedman-style Testored Tailing.

The association between this pragmatic model of contingent deliberation and the work of artistic composition has analogues: Livingston's defence of literature and artistic composition in general as rational processes, for example, relies on a model of rationality derived from Michael Bratman's work on practical agency, in which "Rationality... is a concept that is only meaningful in relation to the framework of action and the intentional explanations that are appropriate to it. In other words, no action or no intentionality, no rationality" (16). Against a Friedman, this model suggests that if we can't have a distinctive place for the psychological categories that define intentionality, we can't have anything called "action." Writing about literature, philosophy, and law from an overtly pragmatist perspective, meanwhile, Gregg Crane suggests that agency is a category defined by first-person awareness of what makes choices more than sortings: agency is most relevant "in difficult cases where the facts are complex or novel and/or the rules seem to need some form of reconsideration and modification." The emphasis on reconsideration here rests on the same basic insight as the Livingston-Bratman definition of rationality in relation to planning: all these categories become relevant only when we are uncertain of future outcomes. If, by something like the economist's presumption of officially transitive preferences, our choice will establish our ends and automatically be "right," we may do a great deal of computing, but have nothing to deliberate, do no agentic reasoning. Crane retains less of an interest in rationality, since he's examining the moments at which agency articulates itself by the willful resort to the supra-rational category of intuition, but in the vocabulary of willing "waiting" for an external impulse to resolve the intractable problem, he too insists on the fundamentally pragmatist importance of temporality that most opposes deliberation to sorting, Bast to Cates. Both Crane and Livingston stress the relationship between artistic work and this kind of revision-driven, exploratory deliberative agency, and this helps explain why Bast ends up as its central representative in the novel.

This connection between the deliberative, the compositional, and the offstage has animated the novel's *earlier* depictions of artistic work too. Just as the forms of speech are often framed in colonizing terms, so there's a literal elimination of the spaces in the novel's New York where inner-directed listening and deliberation can be achieved uninterrupted. Before he finds compositional sanctuary at the hospital, Bast has struggled to find a space after the outbuilding at his aunts' house is first broken into, then exposed to the elements, and then mistakenly demolished by JR contractors. The world that blithely ordered that demolition then scorns Bast's struggles with equally oblivious irony. When Crawley finds that Bast hasn't finished the compositional work on time, he reads Bast's obstacles in terms that come from presuming Bast to be a JR or Cates kind of person: "I don't like the word slacker Mister Bast but I must say your intention here appears to have been simply to bring this work to a hasty conclusion and get on with these expanding business ventures you've been sitting here discussing all this time" (447). Of course, it's precisely because Bast has been forced to have these interminable 'onstage' conversations that the unvocalised compositional work has proved impossible to complete within the novel's stylistic logic. As long as Bast is talking, he's not composing, because he's not doing unvocalized revisionary deliberation.

The logic of colonization ensures that even scenes that associate Bast with music and sympathetic interlocutors reproduce this distortion of compositional space along colonizing lines. On the one occasion in the novel that Bast meets someone open to reading his music on its own terms, we get a ratification of the successful transmission of feeling:

yes there's a little Rameau there isn't there mmmmmmmmmmm...

—Well his his piece The Gnat I just wanted the feeling of..

—And you certainly caught it didn't you I feel prickly all over now" (547).

Yet with a cruel irony Bast's JR-obligations require him to interrupt *himself*: "yes well that's, that's the string bass but about the cemetary I think you'd better talk to Mister

Hop...” (547). Bast’s distracting work in the JR system denies space to the kind of thoughts that originate that transmissible prickly feeling.

Even so, Bast has throughout this conversation been doing offstage compositional work. When the cab-ride ends and he gets back to his crowded, JR-Corp-leased apartment, he tries to brush off a conversation by pleading “I just want to finish this while it’s still in my head, just to get this last horn part written out” (551). But even music itself then joins in the anti-deliberative onslaught: the hippy musician Al notionally leaves Bast to work, but stops talking only to play guitar in Bast’s ear, “like go ahead I mean I’m for like everybody doing what they want to man, plunka plunka plunk...” (551). The plunking guitar’s assault on Bast’s compositional space is associated with Al’s ideal of undifferentiated and unfiltered expression and desire: the contrast between a merely expressive and a deliberative-compositional relation to art sets the former on the side of the JR assault. Gaddis suggests that Bast’s own emphasis on “listening” is not a matter of joining a community of inspired musicians as much as a step toward the crucial “real work” of “thinking” and “writing,” with all the revision-driven possibility of error. At any rate, it’s this ever-expanding, sympathetic-figure-incorporating, cruel-irony sequence that Bast’s transmission of deliberation to JR breaks, and hence no coincidence that that moment paves the way for an uninterrupted compositional success.

Interruptions and colonizations even more literal explain Gibbs’ corresponding failure, who for all his talk of “what’s worth doing” and “living deliberately” never finishes his book project. I’ve mentioned earlier how Gibbs’ notionally resistant speech gets stylistically co-opted into the very flow that it seeks to oppose, and nowhere is this made more literal than in the scenes that present Gibbs working out loud on his book draft. Tabbi suggests that Gibbs’ critical attitude makes him “the strongest seer Gaddis has yet created,” and the novel’s presentation of him “actually at *work*” gives us “a compositional self... presented with a directness and immediacy... unexampled in recent American literature” (661). But Gibbs’ presented composition makes only the barest changes to the draft sentences it mulls over, nor does it generate an artefact, nor does

Gibbs ever prompt a change in another character's language-patterns. The centrality of offstage thinking to Bast's success reveals the problem in Tabbi's approach: that Gibbs has to deliberate his writing choices out loud reflects his more general inability to escape the determining terms of precisely the world he wants to reject.⁷⁴

The novel stylistically posits an explanation for this: Gibbs' vocalised composition is interrupted constantly by the goings on at the apartment where he's trying to work, with his writing impasses matched by his interaction with the clutter in his writing space (Bast's JR-leased apartment):

he tapped ashes into the enchiladas, tapped one foot against the other on Thomas Register. —Leveling men's claims to being absolutely equal since they were absolutely free, the symmetrical motion of, symmetrical motion of God damn it, the symmetrical motion... he sat there tapping, — where the hell did that come from... and he had the guitar by the throat, plucked it, cradled it and strummed a chord —can't be his no whole God damned thing's out of tune... he hunched over it trying strings, tightening keys —owner must be a deaf mute... he plucked, tried chords, loosened a key, tightened one, tried a string, a chord, a bar —thing of Granados how the hell does it go... he made a fresh start. Another. The long hand crept from NO DEPOSIT, passed the short, the second hand swept past them both to NO RETURN, reappeared and was gone —almost had it that time God damn it just try to get anything done here" (573).

As Gibbs is unable to get below the noises or ignore the objects of JR's world, so they resist his composition rather than vice versa. The writing environment functions as a bridge across which Gibbs' writing-paralysis and his motions correspond. Tapping on the Thomas Register box matches his getting stuck on the phrase "symmetrical motion," while the guitar redirects his attention away from his written critique of the logic of the novel's onstage world to that world itself: "where the hell did that come from" can refer to the guitar registering in his attention, but also functions to remind us of the history of the present moment he's supposed to be writing. This confusion then becomes more total as his "fresh start" and "almost had it" may refer either to continued attempts to

⁷⁴ Tabbi reads Bast and Gibbs as equally viable models for a compositional-deliberative alternative--"Like Bast, who frees himself from J. R., Gibbs provides some hope that participants in the runaway can, like Gaddis, emerge to critique it (Gibbs' book) or furnish an alternative to it (Bast's music)" (101)—but *J R* makes very clear that his book never "Emerges," as Bast's piece does quite literally at the nurse's words.

play the “thing of Granados” on the guitar *or* his work on the writing. The possibility of these verbs of work referring to the distraction—the mimicking of another’s composition, no less—rather than the project reveals how thoroughly his anathemas have saturated him. And it develops a contrast between Bast, who was assailed by the guitar, and Gibbs in the guitar-plunking role of self-assailer.

Chenétier at one point describes his conception of the work the narrative passages do as “3D-ing” the novel. Bast succeeds where Gibbs doesn’t because he is a 3D thinker, able to have without immediately vocalising them. Compare the presentation of Gibbs’ failed compositional work to the first occasion on which Bast is presented at work, just before his first attempt to get JR to slow down:

he sat on the sofa’s edge staring down at a fresh lined page [...] appearing to listen as shreds of sound escaped sporadic partings of his lips, scribbling a clef, notes, a word, a curve, still reaching fresh pages as light chilled the skewed leaves of the blind [...] and read a sharper pencil, a fresh page, pages as shadows rose, crossed, fell hunched as though listening to bring sounds into being [...]” (286).

Bast is able to work and keep “reaching fresh pages” due to the lack of interaction between his own thought and the narrated world. The narrator’s perspective explicitly treats Bast as an integrated element of his scene, able to “listen” to himself, and having all his mental work described by a narrative voice that acknowledges its inability to penetrate into the offstage psychological work of composition: it’s all “as if” and “as though.” Composition is thus figured as private work beyond the reach of the narrating flow of the novel’s worldly voice. Bast keeps making progress registered on the page until he is interrupted. And that interruption comes from Gibbs himself. The novel thus consistently sets up the contrast between the two composers and their eventual degree of success in getting something done in terms of their respective ability to establish mental *space* in a novelistic world that formally represents the physically literal elimination of the spaces where such thought can occur. Gibbs gives up in his composition scene by exclaiming:

How do people [...] have one thought one God damned thought one God damned civilized thought in this whole God damned get that God damned thing once and for all God damn it...! He flung the mop handle pulled aside 1899’s bound Musical

Couriers, Trade Extra 1902, 1911, 1909 —no place to put the God damned things” (586).

The question of where in a world characterized by the clutter of JR’s business projects to “put” the “things” which are “thought” is the question that animates the novel’s form and its narrative arc, and it’s Bast not Gibbs who finally works out the answer that the only place to cultivate them is offstage. Having articulated this, and having shown that it’s possible for someone like Bast to transmit these things into JR the boy and hence *J R* the novel, the novel’s final question is what this recuperation of deliberative space can achieve in the novel’s wider world.

As Bast’s transmission of deliberative patterns to JR is the achievement that paves the way for compositional achievement in the hospital, so that compositional achievement paves the way for Beaton to enact the novel’s most concrete act of frictive resistance to the Catesian hegemony. He reveals that, despite constant commands to sort it out, he has let the period in which Amy needed to sign her rights away expire, thus handing control of the corporation to her rather than the hospitalized Cates. I’ve discussed this moment in more detail elsewhere, but what’s important for the present argument is that even Cates himself implies a relationship between such obstruction of corporate practice and the hesitant, frictive, revisionary deliberation-work of artistic composition. In between Bast’s achievement and the beginning of the conversation in which Beaton reveals his own, Cates complains about a particular subset of his employees: “Always objecting to something only damn reason they’re writers, make their damn piece the country could get on with its business” (693). Cates thus articulates exactly what Gaddis’ artist-deliberators hope to achieve: an obstacular friction related to the depth-psychological nature of their work.

This work’s impact may seem purely negative, but it helps frame the possible value of an achieved composition, over and above the process. As with the brief taxi conversation in which Bast realizes someone is getting what he wants them to out of his musical score, artefacts are shown to be able to transmit the mental qualities that went into their creation. Many critics have already noted *J R*’s self-consciousness about the

kind of artefact it is, as in the scene in which an advertisement for a recording device is dictated, “stressing its importance to longer works of fiction now dismissed as classics and remaining largely unread due to the effort involved in reading and turning any more than two hundred pages new paragraph getting all this?” (527). What these critics haven’t previously understood is the importance of this self-conception in terms of the novel’s economy of the transmission of types of personhood. Angela Allan offers a reading of *J R* itself in such terms, suggesting that its famous “difficulty” establishes a relationship between author and reader in which the latter’s speculations as to the former’s intent create a necessarily “imperfect” transmission, marked by precisely the same kind of communicative “contingency” that Marsh, the other recent *J R* critic to address Friedman, suggested represented the novel’s most substantial rejection of his neoliberal logic of predictability. The completed artwork in *JR*, then, might find its role in the transmission and dissemination of deliberative space even beyond the immediate depths of the mind that created it. Gaddis suggests, in other words, that with the help of precisely-composed artworks like itself,⁷⁵ deliberative space might not just hold out a little longer against the colonizing, eliminative Friedmanite approach toward psychological categories, but actually go about re-conquering some of the lost territory.

Before 1973, and After 1975

To return to my main interlocutor, then, *J R* is not, as Jameson’s account of postmodernism would entail, flat in the senses of stylistic undifferentiation, disinterest in depth psychology, or lack of formal development over its 750 pages. We can only appreciate its unflat design by the kind of laborious “stylistic description” I’ve attempted throughout this chapter, and such description is precisely the key to—rather than a distraction from—identifying its fine-grained engagement with economic and political aspects of its historical context. Unsurprisingly for a novel composed over a near-20-

⁷⁵ Christopher Knight usefully clarifies the difference between being able to generate contingency and the frequent postmodern appeal to non-deliberate composition: “Gaddis is not a writer who relies on accidents; he is probably our most deliberate writer, an author who, as he says, ‘even outlines paragraphs’” (131).

year span before its publication in 1975, *J R* is not merely a symptom of events in 1973. This counter-Jamesonian approach also gives us reason to revise the usual understanding of *J R* as prophetic posthumanism, rather than an attempt to recuperate a Knight-style faith in the robust contingency of “human judgment.” As with the other novels I examine here, what Gaddis called *J R*’s basic “stylistic departures” initially serve to articulate the challenge posed to deliberative agency, but modulations within those initial formal terms develop a recuperation of that agency’s viability over the novel’s span. And the commitments are antifoundationalist but essentially pragmatic.

Nevertheless, to go right back to where I began, *J R*’s very different stylistic procedures from those in *The End of the Road* make its particular recuperation very different as well. *J R* focuses on recuperating deliberative *space* rather than Barth-style scrutiny of the logical viability of forms of deliberation take that space for granted. Different antimimetic forms make different constructive arguments. Yet recall that Gaddis’ working notes for *J R*, particularly the early ones that presumably predate his shift into the no-transcribed-psychology form in the 1960s, were full of Barth-style notes about deliberative paralysis, profusion of options, and so on. As Michael LeMahieu has shown that many novels of this period start out with explicit references to logical positivism in their drafts, but lose them by time of publication while remaining animated by the basic questions, is there a case for seeing *J R* as a Barth novel in disguise?

The best argument against doing so can be found in the notes for the first project Gaddis started and abandoned after *J R*. This, as he mentioned in only one interview before he gave it up, was to be a western, since “every American writer should have a Western in them” (Archive).⁷⁶ His archive preserves some very sporadic notes on “The Blood in the Red White and Blue,” which reveal that, *J R* having made the case for the viability of deliberative space, Gaddis was ready to return to the Barth-style questions that treat that space as well-argued for. The novel would have addressed issues of causality, responsibility, decision, and knowledge: a melancholic paralysis-of-the-will

⁷⁶ Hunter Low Files, Box 1, Folder 2.

figure would be encouraged by a nihilistic mythopoesis-advocate like Barth's Doctor to carry out a violent action, unaware that the encouragement merely came as the result of a wager between the nihilist and a judge that the former couldn't get the melancholic to step up to agency. The western's fabric, the notes suggest, would be conversations and internal deliberations about a "Whole string of these arguments that defeat wesrern [sic] reason," about "why have faith with possibility of wager when things can be manipulated and the end made certain," or about the agentive force of consciously fictive motivations. Crucially, Gaddis saw this proposed return to pre-*J R* questions as an explicit continuation of *J R*'s arguments: "the problem of indecision & eventual paralysis of the will // how [melancholic] & Gibbs (what is (not) worth doing) relate" (Archive).⁷⁷

This all frames *J R*'s arguments about resisting the elimination of deliberative space as separate but related questions to those of paralysis caused by specific arguments and deliberative textures. *J R*'s arguments about deliberation come 17 years after Barth's but are logically precedent to them. With the argument made, literature might return to Barth-type questions on surer footing. Of course, Gaddis abandoned this project almost instantly. His subsequent novels aren't so rigorously excised of transcriptive psychology as *J R* is, but nor can they reasonably be read as about Barth-ian questions. *J R* thus stands almost alone as Gaddis' novel about the value of deliberative agency, but its attempt to recuperate viable *space* for deliberation make it, though it came late in the genre, perhaps the most logically fundamental of the postmodern project novels, establishing the ground that all the others require.

⁷⁷ "Notes on Western," Aborted Projects. Box127, Folder 452.

Chapter 3

Daniel's Mockery, Doctorow's Satire: A Postmodern Fiction Against Postmodern Parody

Linda Hutcheon's still-dominant mid-1980s account of postmodern fiction's political capacities prioritises parody. The genre she identified and constructed, the *historiographical metafiction*, combines reference to real historical events with foregrounded fictionality, in particular a comprehensive assemblage of discourses and perspectives that includes imitation of authoritative history. That authority is thus revealed as a portable discourse rather than a natural quality. All postmodern fiction, on this account, combines antifoundationalist assumptions with a refusal to indulge in modernist hermeticism: it "satisf[ies] a desire for 'worldly' grounding while at the same time querying the very basis of the authority of that grounding" ("HM" 5). Juxtaposing forms of narrative discourse, in this model, is intrinsically counter-hegemonic action because such linguistic iconoclasm has one core victim: whoever the parodist, "the battle would still be against an official language" (*Irony* 71). Historical fictions that acknowledge their own fictionality and partiality should help counter-narratives to proliferate, and thus open up previously unheralded historical possibilities at the margins of culture and discourse. In this chapter, I show how one of the central novels in Hutcheon's account—EL Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*—in fact offers a pre-emptive critique of just this kind of faith in parody's historical capacities.

The Book of Daniel—a fictive retelling of the Rosenberg executions, assembled in many voices by the Rosenberg-analogue Isaacson's son for submission as his doctoral dissertation in history—is certainly self-conscious about its fictionality, and its narrator

is certainly a parodist.⁷⁸ Foregrounding his obsessive acknowledgement of his inherited relation to state power, veering between quotation, ventriloquy, impersonation and performances of objectivity, Daniel's project—and the novel that is the text he finally "submits"—seem to fit Hutcheon's idea of the polyvocal parodic work that vindicates the marginalized against the forces behind "official language." What, then, should we make of the moments when Daniel's parody is clearly turned not against "official" institutions, but the very figures he's so conscious of sharing marginality with?

In his dissertation's compositional present, for example, Daniel describes his youthful response to the fact that, at the shelter where he and his sister Susan were sent after their parents' arrest, the mentally handicapped Inertia Kid had become aware that Daniel courted popularity by mimicking him. Daniel's explicit present acknowledgement of youthful cruelty already takes for granted that linguistic appropriation can be a tool of the privileged rather than the marginal. This sense of guilt leads him to precede his tale of the Inertia Kid by demurring about his own relation to parody: "This is the only time I my life I have ever performed. I haven't got a performing nature" (171). Yet the passage—starting with that duo-temporal "this"—makes clear that Daniel's parodic performances cover a lifespan and a range of forms. The original mockery is precise: Daniel tells us that "without having to think about it, I was able to do a perfect takeoff" (170). But in the novel's present, his discourse is a spiral of absurd exaggeration:

He knew what I was doing. I feel terrible. I feel the sickness of someone who has sold out. Occasionally in certain lights the idiocy of his expression was momentarily erased. His face was comely. I knew he was handsome and wise. I was afraid to look at him. I adored him. If I had stayed at the Shelter I could have taken care of him and protected him from impersonations. Could Roy [an athletic 'star' at the shelter] hit a ball, jump as high? (174-5).

⁷⁸ Through his dissertation, Daniel himself is responsible for voicing his world's historical figures, while the narrative development avoids linear telling to trace his memories, his present-day digressions and obsessions, to insert "official" accounts of events or reflections on his motives, all building toward the narration of the scene in which his parents are executed by electrocution.

The movement through this response to the acknowledgement of cruelty is itself cruelly parodic: from his reported sickness, through reformulations of the Kid as beatific, wise, revered, to the punchline of projected athleticism, Daniel constructs his own present sickness and sense of sell-out as of equivalent risibility to the idea of the Inertia Kid as baseball star. This is discourse coded as travesty by its intensification from reasonable to ridiculous. The movement is away from a plausibly felt remorse and, through parody, away from the work of self-scrutiny that it might prompt. It's this novel-long indictment of Daniel's parodic "performing nature" for its aversion to real possibility that makes Doctorow's novel a pre-emptive rejection of Hutcheon's postmodern politics.

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So how does the Doctorow/Hutcheon conflict on parody fit into my wider concern with pro-deliberative stylistic argument? *The Book of Daniel*, like all the novels I examine, starts from a seemingly paralysing agentive problem. Where Barth was interested in the logic of choice-making, and Gaddis with finding space for deliberation in a world of depthless speech-acts, the problem Doctorow sets himself to investigate is social location's—or, in Hutcheon's terms, ex-centric identity's—subordinate relationship to hegemonic narratives. Daniel's particular paralyzing problem is that the experiences which constitute his legacy have been mythologised so strongly by both the state whose power marginalises him and by the persisting Old Left that any action he takes in relation to that inheritance looks like reiterating it: "I am deprived of the chance of resisting my government... If I were to assassinate the president, the criminality of my family, its genetic criminality, would be established. There is nothing I can do, mild or extreme, that they cannot have planned for" (72). He must, therefore, fulfil a legacy without embodying a "genetic" determinism, and so must generate from that inheritance possibilities for which the powers that marginalise him have not already planned. What distinguishes Doctorow from Barth and Gaddis is that he makes his case about viable agency primarily by showing how and why his protagonist fails.

Hutcheon rightly identifies Doctorow's preoccupation with discursive approaches to this problem. Daniel is dealing with the inheritance of a struggle and of a symbolism.

When his sister Susan tells him early on from her bed in an insane asylum that “you get the picture” (9), she is referring to his understanding of their situation, but also to a literal inheritance: a protest-poster of their parents that she has left for him to collect. Later in the novel and earlier in its chronology, Susan has berated Daniel for failing to support her establishment of a fund in their parents’ name, which would, she thinks, “indicate... the proper assumption of their legacy by the Isaacson children” (79). The ambiguity of “their” here, like that of “get,” establishes the givens of Daniel’s project: that his parents leave *their* experience, and that by doing so they also leave a duty that is *his and Susan’s*: to turn that experience, his got understanding of it, into something alive. How, he wonders, can he recuperate parental experience past the useless martyrdom for which “the picture” stands: “You’ve got these two people in the poster, Daniel, now how you going to get them out?” (42/3). Fidelity to their experience, recuperation of their relationship to historical possibility, a way to avoid “keep[ing] the matter in my heart” (17): Daniel’s varied goals all require re-voicing history in such a way as to change its path. Yet since Daniel parodies his parents with the same aversive cynicism as he does the Inertia Kid, his novel-long project of voices achieves no such path-change.

Doctorow and Hutcheon differ on the relationship between discourse and deliberation. Characterizing postmodern fiction in terms of a textualist anti-foundationalism that refuses to adjudicate degrees of correspondence with the pre-discursive world, Hutcheon stresses only the articulation of one’s own perspective and the reduction of hegemonic discourses to the same status as all others. This rules out two deliberative imperatives: that marginal counter-narratives must compete among themselves, and that marginalized individuals must self-scrutinize and hold their political programs to standards outside those of self-expression. If the mere articulation of a counter-narrative is automatic counter-hegemonic work, there’s no room for different forms and structures of discourse-appropriation to have different implications. Across Hutcheon’s many accounts of specific novels, therefore, only one particular narrative gets countered:

the decentred perspective, the ‘marginal’ and what I will be calling the ‘ex-centric’ (be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) take on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogenous monolith (that is middle-class, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed (*Politics* 12).

If the Inertia Kid is paradigmatically marginal, and if Daniel’s parents are paradigmatic victims of that monolith, Doctorow’s sceptical treatment of Daniel’s parodic inclinations emphasizes not the evils of the monolith—which the novel takes for granted—but Daniel’s own failings. The parodist, more than the hegemon, is the object of the novel’s own satire. This satire suggests that Daniel’s cynical response is not inevitable, and asks what possibility he might have generated had he acted otherwise.

Where Hutcheon propounds parody as a way to undermine any discourse’s claim to greater connection with Reality than any other, Doctorow faults Daniel for interposing parody between himself and the reality of the world he has to change. Where Hutcheon insists on the counter-hegemonic sufficiency of the mere proliferation of articulated counter-narratives, Doctorow faults Daniel for failure to weigh the relative strengths of the narratives he can propound. Where Hutcheon suggests that parody will always direct a reader’s credulity away from official inscriptions, and that *away* is the only important direction, Doctorow insists on the importance of orienting oneself in relation to pre-discursive reality.⁷⁹ He suggests instead that fresh historical possibility only becomes accessible when marginalised counter-narratives take on the responsibility of ongoing self-scrutiny about their correspondence with the possible world. His presentation of Daniel’s parodies is less a Hutcheonian handbook than a study in failure, demonstrating parody’s limitations as a tool of political critique and a mode of historical action.

In this emphasis on the relationship between self-scrutinizing practical deliberation and responsiveness to pre-discursive conditions, Doctorow argues not only

against too great a faith in the delegitimizing modes of parody, but against all forms of postmodernism that equate anti-essentialism or antifoundationalism with disinterest in narratives' *correspondence* with the prediscursive world.⁸⁰ If the novel pre-emptively critiques Hutcheon, it makes this case against its contemporaries more explicitly. Daniel's dissertation director is named after one of Doctorow's most vocally anti-correspondence novelist peers, and Daniel connects name and commitments:⁸¹ "I ask the question of professor Sukenick: when do we suspend criticism" (192).⁸² This allusion suggests firstly that the canonically postmodern worldview is by 1971, as official overseer of Daniel's project, already institutionalized, not marginal. Today, even after the passing of postmodern theory's academic heyday, Hutcheon's model, with all its suspensions of marginal self-criticism, remains authoritative in accounts of postmodern fiction and of the triangular relation between conspicuous fictionality, historical politics, and marginal identity. In what follows, I aim to show that a better understanding of Doctorow's treatment of parody's critical limitations can not only improve our understanding of the capacities of anti-mimetic fiction, but restore that fiction's contributing role in theoretical investigations of that triangle.

I'll make this case in four parts: first, some methodological clarifications about the relationship between parody and fictionality; then, the ways Doctorow frames

⁸⁰ While most of my subsequent examples from Hutcheon's own generation of both postmodern theorizers and feminist political thinkers, the obvious aegis figure for the disinterest in correspondence is Richard Rorty.

⁸¹ While part of my project is to separate out authors whose forms and commitments are too often conflated, Doctorow and Sukenick are already far enough apart that they tend to come down on opposite sides whenever people do parse the generation. Daniel Punday's distinction follows the usual dividing line: "We can distinguish between two traditions within recent experimental American fiction: the historical and self-reflexive. In the former category we can place writers like Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and EL Doctorow; in the latter we can place writers like Raymond Federman, Clarence Major, and Sukenick. Although early criticism tended to celebrate the radical formal experiments of the latter group—in part because this group was more insistent on offering the explanations of their own formal goals that I have quoted in this section—the former group has garnered the lion's share of recent study" (52-3). What this dissertation—and this chapter's treatment of conspicuous fictionality—shows, however, is that the former group are equally formally self-reflexive: the difference between the groups is not in the Degree of formal self-consciousness, but the rhetorical modes and philosophical commitments they put it in the service of.

⁸² As I establish in [Appendix A](#), Ronald Sukenick is perhaps the most coherent self-theoriser until Kathy Acker among those of Doctorow's peers committed to the hyper-articulation of the postmodern givens against which my tradition of authors work.

Daniel's parodies of marginalised figures in the novel's first half as pathologically avoidant of contact with genuine historical possibility; I then examine where this re-situates the novel, and postmodern fiction in general, in relation to feminist political models of plurality and pluralism; finally, I show where Doctorow suggests that the kind of possibilities Daniel's parody shirks might viably be found, by examining what Daniel's recitations of critical-theory narratively forestall in the novel's second half.

Part 1: Entailments of Travesty

The Inertia Kid section clarifies that we should understand Daniel's response to his paralyzing problem in parodic terms. Doctorow and parody are central not only to Hutcheon's account of all postmodern fiction, but also to the similarly totalizing Frederic Jameson: parody is the shared axis across which they most strongly disagree. For Jameson, postmodern fictive form is all parody, but mere pastiche, "a neutral practice... without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists" (17). This is parody as cynicism about historical agency: where Hutcheon finds postmodern parody a universal challenge to the power of the single discourse History, Jameson sees it as the hollowing out of literature's capacity to represent history directly.⁸³ Doctorow's value, for Jameson, is that his formal innovations in novels like *Ragtime* at least register this as an inescapable problem, presenting a world "condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history which itself remains forever out of reach." Such is that situation, though, that Doctorow can only present it by a kind of sad jerry-rigged compromise: "he has to convey this great theme formally (since the waning of the content is very precisely his subject, and, more than that, has had to elaborate his work by way of that very cultural logic of the postmodern which is itself the mark and symptom of his dilemma" (25). Jameson's language suggests that "formal conveying"

⁸³ Jameson, for whom all productive agency is historical in the Marxist sense, associates the "new depthlessness" of postmodern form with a "consequent weakening of history" (6).

must be a weak last resort rather than a medium-specific artistic achievement, and that the ambitions of “postmodern” form must be limited to mirroring and lamenting. There’s no room here for anti-mimetic forms capable of constructing, modelling, or arguing for alternative worldviews. Hutcheon’s counterpart optimism—whose Bakhtinian foundations presume, against Jameson, a relationship between mere discourse and agentive social life—at least avoids these dubious claims, but as long as these remain the dominant accounts of postmodern fiction,⁸⁴ we’re stuck with competing reductions of parody—and postmodern form in general—to a single mode with a single rhetoric: neither can account for the distinction between Doctorow and Daniel’s parodic modes.

Beyond the merely literary-critical, Hutcheon’s faith in parody has roots in a wider mid-1980s wave of feminist scholars across the disciplines revising their disciplines’ thinking about plurality and validity in terms of discourse-mastery. The feminist sociologist Patti Lather, for example, aimed to “rupture validity as a regime of truth... displace its historical inscription toward ‘doing the police in different voices’” (674). Exposing methods whose claim to objectivity had become naturalised for their actual contingency and self-interest would open a space for “counter-practices of authority that are adequate to emancipatory interests” (674). Like Hutcheon Lather suggests that ex-centric experience will be “recognised” the moment the “official” language is undermined, and that discourse-mastery and the foregrounding of “self-conscious partiality” (Lather 683) is sufficient to this end.

The stakes of this movement were, finally, a re-writing of the concept of validity in discursive terms.⁸⁵ Doing away with the dominant notion of truth as correspondence to objective facts—which Lather like Hutcheon associates with hegemony—measuring a project’s validity by its demonstrated range of methodological repertoire rather than its

⁸⁴ Particularly since, as I discussed in the introduction, no alternative account of postmodern form has superseded them and Brian McHale since the 1991 publication of Jameson’s book.

⁸⁵ Lather, propounding the parodic mode for a non-literary field, hoped to “reinscribe validity in a way that uses the antifoundational problematic to loosen the master code of positivism that continues to so shape even postpositivism” (673).

application of dominant standard, sociologists could pursue new forms of knowledge. Hutcheon and Lather both proceed from a Rorty-an antifoundationalism which suggests that, since a narrative that foregrounds its own narrativity foregoes the claim to greater grounding in some “objective” account of experience or factual conditions than any other, there is nothing for such narratives to contest other than discursive centrality. This leads, in its purest form, to an attack on the idea of public discussion about commensurable stakes. This attack resolves into directness by the early 90s, in texts less concerned with parody per se than with the fundamental discursive-power questions of whose voice is granted public recognition. Writing against categories like pluralism and deliberation through attacks on their public state-mediated modes, thinkers like Ellen Rooney and Lynn Sanders base a defence of marginal interests on that basic anti-foundationalism, and a rejection of the category of “general persuasion” (Rooney 63). Their positive proposals thus align with Hutcheon’s, limited to articulation and awareness alone: Rooney recommends “the foregrounding of interests, with exclusions as the inevitable and clearly articulated consequence” (63), and Sanders that testimony be prioritized over deliberation.⁸⁶ This movement’s fundamental disinterest in constructing grounds on which to dispute relative correspondence to the prediscursive world rules out the possibility that marginal methods like Daniel’s parody may be invalid, that the marginalised and excluded could have any duties of self-scrutiny, any external standards to hold themselves to in pursuit of their own interests. This is the underlying logic of Hutcheon’s account of postmodern fiction’s political methods.

⁸⁶ In her Althusserian argument against pluralism, for example, Ellen Rooney refuses “debate” whose bad-faith, exclusionary, pre-determined terms encode the wilful exclusion of marginal experiences and attitudes unamenable to “general persuasion.” She calls instead for modes of public interaction that acknowledge “the irreducibility of the margin in all explanation” and promote “the foregrounding of interests, with exclusions as the inevitable and clearly articulated consequence” (63). Combining such commitments with a radically-incommensurable account of “interests” rule out public models for even the minimal sense of deliberation (purposively weighing alternative actions against each other in relation to the value of achieving particular goals) with which this dissertation is concerned. And the stakes tend to blur public objections into the private realm. Political theorist Lynn Sanders’ “Against Deliberation,” a kind of culminating document of the movement in which Hutcheon’s, Lather’s, and Rooney’s work constitutes the consolidating stage, also treats deliberation as a merely public matter, acknowledging no connections between the internal psychological forms of deliberation and the public world. She argues against the concept *tout court* on the basis of its potential public misapplication.

Sharing terms with these subsequent non-art-focused thinkers, Hutcheon suggests that “postmodernism is about art’s dispersal, its plurality, by which I certainly don’t mean pluralism. Pluralism is, as we know, that fantasy that art is free, free of other discourses, institutions, free, above all, of history” (*Politics* 191). Plurality here names the postmodern preoccupation with cultivating unconstrained proliferation at the expense of refining decisions through deliberative weighing. The geometry of “dispersal” recapitulates Hutcheon’s implication that ex-centric narratives never collide and conflict, but only draw power away from a contingent centre. “Away” is here, again, the only important direction. This plurality founds its claims to political validity precisely on the rejection of competition, of correspondence, of all forms of multi-directional refutation, which it calls pluralism; it’s fundamental to the historiographical metafiction model that its marginal narratives do not compete, they merely accrue. The constructive options open to marginal resisters, then, become limited to the generation of new narratives by self-expression, and the adding of these new narratives to the general anti-hegemonic mass: both actions intrinsically and sufficiently serve ex-centric interest.

Doctorow starts from disagreement with this sufficiency-claim: the Inertia Kid passages show that parodic articulations can reinforce marginality, while Daniel himself knows that mere re-voicings don’t change the underlying world: his parents “suffer the same fate no matter what version is told” (63). If their experience is to be repurposed for “emancipatory interests,” then it is not sufficient merely to articulate it from a previously unofficial angle. Daniel’s accuracy as a mimic of “official language” is not in doubt, but in Lather’s Dickensian terms, he “do the police”—the official, the authoritative and the powerful—in fairly accurate voices; it’s the ex-centric for whom he reserves the voices caricatured enough to be “different.” While *historiographical metafiction*’s core argument is often taken to be the promotion of the claim that there is more than one truth in any history, this is not the limit of Doctorow’s argument: he

acknowledges the plurality of interests and perspectives while insisting that there are some conditions immune to simple re-narrating.⁸⁷

The Book of Daniel offers an alternative interest-foregrounding, antifoundationalist account of marginal agency that nevertheless makes correspondence fundamental to “emancipatory projects.” Subsequent work in the tradition of anti-foundationalist feminist political theory out of which Hutcheon’s model grew has generated many accounts of agency, solidarity, and praxis that row back the disinterest in correspondence or formulate new accounts of validity that aren’t mere self-assertion. But the criticism of postmodern fiction has remained in Hutcheonian mode. Happily, I hope to show, the fiction itself was already well ahead of that game. The novel has its own coherent take on the interaction between concepts like validity, interest, marginality and possibility whose definitions in contemporary literary scholarship come almost entirely from Hutcheon, Lather and Rooney’s critical generation. Closer attention to the novels whose formal practice was a model for the theorising, I suggest, can make the fiction important to the current trajectory of the theorizing.

Finally, it’s worth examining what critics have lost in attempting to move beyond Hutcheon by leaving the question of parody behind. Occasional criticisms of her treatment of parody have emerged, in particular of her model’s inability to distinguish directed impersonation and the mere proliferation of unhierarchized discourse-forms: this may stem from conflation in her major influence Bakhtin himself.⁸⁸ Most attempts

⁸⁷ In the wake of Hutcheon’s work, though, he is often treated as a paradigmatic example of this approach: see Philipp Löffler, for example, who uses Doctorow as the paradigm “postmodern” historical novelist defined by “sceptical statements about the reliability of historical knowledge” to contrast with the “pluralist” Don DeLillo, characterized by his awareness of historical actions’ being “historically limited because they are tied to the inner logic of closed cultural systems” (36). Löffler’s “pluralism” is defined by an ability to imagine futurities free from the “limitation” of past history, which, as I’ll show in this chapter’s final section, has a lot to do with Doctorow’s approach. Complicatedly, “pluralism” is Löffler’s term for an approach to history and knowledge that treats it as produced in the interest of “individual life models” rather than abstractly or objectively (28), which is to say, his version of “pluralism” is motivated by the same logic for which Rooney attacks “pluralism.” I’ll complicate things further by connecting Doctorow’s deliberative imperatives to a kind of pluralism....

⁸⁸ Alan Singer identifies the weakness of Bakhtin’s model of parody as his treating Syncreisis (proliferation based on natural differences) and Anacrisis (dialogue based on intended distinction) at the same

to re-read the workings of postmodern historical fiction, though, have done so by sidelining the question of parody, leaving Hutcheon's account of it intact. The focus of such rereading has been whether postmodern fiction was ever so disinterested in the accessible Real as Hutcheon and Jameson took for granted. Where Amy Elias reads postmodern fiction's historiography in terms of its engagement with an inaccessible but organising "historical sublime," and Eric Berlatsky includes Doctorow among the authors he sees making an ethical case for supra-verbally mimetic engagements with an ineffable but palpable historical real (189), both downplay the fiction's interest in the practice and stakes of discourse-appropriation. Such approaches can't tell us anything more than Hutcheon about Doctorow's treatment of discourse, and they leave intact the central tenet of Hutcheon's model that I want to dispute: that wheresoever postmodern fiction parodies, it does effectual anti-hegemonic work. In the occasional persisting discussions of the fiction's *discursive* politics, Hutcheon's model, founded on the presumption of that disinterest in the prediscursive real, continues to dominate.

The strongest developments in line with my counter-Hutcheonian reading of Doctorow have thus tended to come from critics interested in postmodernism but discontented with the totalizing nature of the dominant accounts of its formal politics. Timothy Bewes, for example, noted in the late 1990s how postmodern theory had ossified to such a degree that "any attachment to useful notions such as identity or subjective agency is dismissed as 'essentialist' by a banal sensibility for which 'irony' and 'parody' enjoy the status of perverse creeds" (47). These creeds may not dominate literary theory as they once did, but insofar as the experimental fiction of the postmodern era remains presumed to share values with theoretical "postmodernism," authors like Doctorow remain presumed guilty of the creed. As Bewes suggested back then, more precision about the formal distinctions of individual texts may be the only way to shake this conflation. Sue J. Kim, meanwhile, makes a similar case about the reductive equation between philosophical anti-essentialism, formal anti-mimesis, and

level. Hutcheon's use of Bakhtin to endorse her emphasis on proliferation seems to suggest that any valid Anacrisis will essentially do the political work of Syncreisis.

the promotion of ex-centric interests, her central question being “why... does just the fact of recognizing this basic nonfoundationalism become a means toward liberation? And why does the reverse... immediately become politically reactionary?” (8). Offering first an explanation for the discursive emphasis of criticism of non-realist fiction by authors of marginalized identity,⁸⁹ and then readings of specific texts that show how specific forms offer differing arguments about race, she dissolves the conflation of ex-centric interests, non-realist form, and singular counter-hegemonic rhetoric. For both Bewes and Kim, the imperative is to get at a better account of the political implications by being more precise about the specifics of the form.

Critics who approach postmodern historical fiction without Hutcheon’s awareness of their interest in the forms and stakes of historical discursivity lose a lot by the omission, then, but plenty remains to be done to overcome the reductiveness of her formal account. Doctorow pre-emptively disagrees with it, figuring Daniel as a master of discursive appropriation, whose interests are always to the fore, yet whose methods fail by the standards Hutcheon, Lather and others propound. The novel clearly traces this failure to parody’s shirking of the imperative to deliberative self-refinement: the very orientation for which Hutcheon’s peers, with their focus on the value of mere articulation, celebrate it. Doctorow, by contrast, suggests that readers should avoid the temptations of revelling in delegitimizing parody if they share the novel’s “emancipatory interests.” As I’ll show, the fundamental flaw of previous criticism has been its misunderstanding of what the novel’s fictionality allows Doctorow to argue. It’s on this aspect of his medium that the novel’s covalent treatment of parody and of marginalized historical agency hang together.

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Berlatsky defends postmodernism’s capacity for constructive ethical thought by defending its capacity for mimesis: “While it is common to read postmodernism as

⁸⁹ Of the critics who set the agenda for this field in the 1980s, she notes “because their primary concern at that historical moment was to argue against essentialisms, they focus more on the power of social articulation than of social structures” (31).

antimimetic and therefore inimical to ethical investigation, it is perhaps now time to confront the postmodern as a version of mimeticism and as a confrontation with the ethical, whatever its historical origins” (196). His apparently alternative approach maintains the logic of the “therefore”: only by rejecting antimimesis can a text “confront the ethical.” As I’ve argued throughout this project, though, the ethical concern with deliberative agency in the novels I examine is articulated through antimimetic techniques that make an awareness of their fictionality and prose-conventional departures essential to their rhetoric, and Doctorow is no exception. *The Book of Daniel* does make the difference between the discursive and the real salient, but within formal structures that rely on readers’ awareness that what we’re reading is discursive material that operates on fiction’s ontological conditions.

These conditions have led to confusions that range over the full set of critical judgments about Doctorow’s degrees of mimesis. Steven Weisenburger (of whom more later) explicitly leaves *The Book of Daniel* out of his book-length account of the “delegitimizing” strain of postmodern satire because he sees it as less concerned with discursivity than with representing history in “a tense, psychological treatment of the trial’s aftermath as seen through one of the surviving Rosenberg sons” (190). This odd account treats Daniel as realistic to the point of being real humans’ offspring. Hutcheon, meanwhile, talks on different occasions about the novel aiming to recuperate the experience of the real Rosenbergs, and of Daniel’s presentation of the Isaacsons entailing that the real Rosenbergs’ failures of postmodern understanding make them responsible for their own deaths.⁹⁰ If Hutcheon and Weisenburger court ontological incoherence by mixing the blood of real and fictional creatures, Jameson is unable to acknowledge that under postmodern conditions one realm might viably bear on the other: he denies the historical relevance of rhetorical parallels Hutcheon identifies between Doctorow’s presentation of three distinct families in the much more Hutcheon-compatible *Ragtime* on the basis of “Houdini being a *historical* figure, Tateh a *fictional*

⁹⁰ Discussing how Doctorow’s novel narrates “The Rosenbergs” leads her to argue that “the victims” are death-culpable for their “faith in both history and reason.” (*Poetics* 54).

one, and Coalhouse an *intertextual* one” (22). Before I pursue the details of my rhetorical understanding of Doctorow’s critique of Daniel, then, I need to show how the novel steers its readers a coherent path between taking the objects of fictionality—foregrounding fiction as ontologically intermeshed with the Real, and maintaining an unbridgable chasm of relevance between ontological kinds.

Understanding the work parody does in the novel requires understanding exactly how the varying layers of parody depend on the novel’s conspicuous *fictionality*. Hegemonic history, in Hutcheon’s model, is undermined by its revealed inseparability from fiction, but the equation cannot be total. Theorist of fictionality Richard Walsh, in quibbling with Hutcheon’s reading of parody in another historiographical metafiction, rightly makes the distinctions: “The status and rhetorical stance of the author, Rushdie, is elided with that of his fictional narrator, Saleem Sinai...” (41/2) and “Saleem doesn’t parody here, Rushdie does” (42). The same objections, as I’ve suggested, apply to Hutcheon’s treatment of Doctorow and Daniel: the root problem is the conflation of narrativity with fictionality.⁹¹ It’s important to my reading of the novel that Doctorow exploits the pragmatics of fictionality, while Daniel only narrativises. As its name suggests, historiographical metafiction *requires* that readers be aware of the fiction’s fictionality: without such an awareness, the authoritative discourse-forms of ‘history’ could not be undermined by their setting in a fictional context.⁹² Yet fiction is more than just an ungrounded form of narrative. It conjures “existence” in specific ways that bear on its rhetorical methods, and on the question of how possibilities can be said to exist internally to its world.

⁹¹ Debate rages over both concepts, but in this context the major difference is that narrativity concerns the processes by which eventual material is selected, connected, and presented, whereas fictionality is an ontological category concerning the ontological distinctions between the narrated world and the world in which the author and reader interact. Crucially, the narrativity-conditions of real and fictional material are not identical, as the conditions in which it makes sense to think of material being *excluded* from narrative presentation don’t match up.

⁹² That’s brought to bear by the shift from Rosenberg to Isaacson – a kind of pseudo-paratext. Footnote: Things like triple ending might seem, but no conflict between them: paradigm narrativity, the matter of provisional selection.

Geoffrey Harpham's reading of the novel gives a simpler example of how fictionality and narrativity get conflated. Like Hutcheon, he usefully sets out to acknowledge the specifically formal qualities of Doctorow's work, above and beyond a mere thematic treatment of history. Like Hutcheon too, he relies on the fact/fiction opposition to account for what he calls Doctorow's narrative "technology", and like Hutcheon he identifies Doctorow's central "project of treating historical fact in fictional terms" (?), eventually "sett[ing] the opposition of fact and fiction in favor of the latter" (?). *The Book of Daniel*, on his reading, shows how epistemologically responsible narrative generates itself out of the very impossibility of assembling a single stable historical truth from facts accessible only through mediation.⁹³ The conflation of fictionality and narrativity comes when he talks about the competing credibility of different assemblies: "The factor of plausibility introduces a fictional element into the description" (82). What he means here is that acknowledging the selectivity and presentedness of facts casts them back into the realm of fiction.⁹⁴ But narrativity selects details—through whatever kinds of mediation—from an array of them that do exist. By contrast, fictive events don't pre-exist their articulation. Their relationship to narrative is hence different: narrativity applied to the factual can miss or mischaracterize events, but fictional events construct their world without being selected from an array. When Harpham and Hutcheon talk about fact/fiction relations in Doctorow, they use "fiction" interchangeably with narrativity. The ontological difference, though, is crucial to the novel's rhetoric. My interest will be less in how Doctorow reduces fact to the status of fiction than in how he uses antimimetic fictionality to make arguments about our relation to prediscursive fact.

Narrativity for Harpham grants an ethical freedom: "In redescribing the Rosenberg case, the novelist can feel that he is not violating an original factuality, for

⁹³ In an interview, Doctorow has said that criminal trials particularly interest him in general as exemplars of the instability of narrativity: "facts are buried, exhumed, deposed, contradicted, recanted" so that a "trial shimmers forever with just that perplexing ambiguity of a true novel ("False Documents" 227, on Harph 82).

⁹⁴ As Hayden White notes, that selection and presentation gives an authority and sanction to the chosen arrangement, in the literal sense of "author."

the event is already only accessible through fiction” (82). Yet consider the Inertia Kid: Doctorow’s use of the “technology” of prose fictionality, rather than narrativity, lets him argue that Daniel is violating the figures he parodies. This phrasing might seem to lapse into the ontological confusions of Jameson or Weisenburger. In a novel that foregrounds its own fictionality, why talk about figures who can be violated or undermined at all? Daniel disavows his “performing nature,” but as a fictive dissertation-compiler, that “nature” is—following William Gass’ anti-mimetic model of character as “any linguistic location in the book toward which a great part of the rest of the text stands as a modifier” (“A Debate” 28)—to be the modifying interface through which all the novel’s language gets organized. But Daniel himself is a purely discursive existent. What can it even mean to talk about corresponding to pre-discursive objects in his world? How, more rhetorically saliently, can a fiction as overt as Doctorow’s about its own fictionality offer its reader worldly imperatives, let alone imperatives about the political importance of correspondence? As a Gassian modifying-location, Daniel’s modifications of other characters are always inflected in terms of performed motive. And those inflections and organizations are constantly coded as cruel, reductive, cynical. How can one “reduce” another character who equally has no existence beyond their discursified form? That is the core of Doctorow’s exploitation of the “technology” of fictionality.

Daniel’s travesty parody of ex-centric figures like his family and the Inertia Kid conjure a difference between discursive and real material, internal to the fictional world. The purest example of this is his grandmother, Daniel narrates only in order to reference her confusion at her daughter’s conviction. As a minor character, who shares Daniel’s sense of unmoored bewilderment in part because she is an immigrant who still doesn’t speak fluent English or understand the workings of American politics, the grandmother is presented through a parody of immigrant testimonial narrative. Daniel’s ventriloquy of her wartime suffering and immigrant alienation is mockingly couched in a wheedling address to a “Mr Editor” whose name is repeated like a charm against obscurity and impermanence (64/5). Playing up her ex-centricity, Daniel doesn’t posit it as of equivalent value and seriousness to the “official” state-promulgated justification for her

daughter's execution, but travesties her wish for her ex-centric experience to find public recognition. While Daniel's parodic presentation foregrounds the market logic by which experiences like his grandmother's are mediated, it, rather than recuperating the experience or transforming the logic, just reiterates their existing subordination. Insofar as his mastery of ex-centric discourses points us to marginal experience, it's to compound that experience's prior defeats and rule it out as a source of present possibility.

That's the rhetoric, but it relies on an ontological technology. Since she's fictional, we can't talk about a grandmother that pre-exists Daniel's parody: she exists only in the language coded as cruelly distorting her. Yet that coding entails a difference between real and parodic woman. Our notion that Daniel scornfully exaggerates her experience (which we know doesn't exist) is a matter of generic pragmatics: travesty presumes a less risible original, so recognising the forms that code travesty posits an undistorted ordinary experience. Thus, though it is never narrated in its origin state, and so doesn't exist in our world even as text, we still, thanks to the pragmatics Doctorow exploits, conjure grandmotherly experience as an anchor for the exaggeration. Elias suggests that in postmodern fiction, "whether or not such a historical sublime exists is less relevant than whether a literary text posits its existence" (44). Doctorow's approach doesn't suggest that the grandmother's experience is sublimely ungraspable by Daniel: quite the opposite; if language couldn't do justice to her it wouldn't reflect badly on him that he distorts her. But Elias is right to identify the act of *positing* as the fundamental operation.⁹⁵ If Doctorow's interest was in the marginal experience itself, which corresponds to Elias' sublime, he could have invented some specifics to present. But he sticks to positing it in absentia as a pretext to suggest Daniel's failings.

⁹⁵ What she and Berlatsky lose in departing from Hutcheon's focus on discourse-wrangling is the ability to give an account of why parody could still remain a relevant category. When she suggests that "Allusion," as "the presenting of the unpresentable without presentation" (60), is a major postmodern mode, she loses the thread that allows Doctorow to "posit" the grandmother's presentably undistorted origin-experience without presenting it.

This is the logic by which Doctorow, without narrating it, is able to suggest that historical possibility ‘exists’ to be better- or worse-corresponded-to within the novel’s frame. It suffices that Daniel’s discourses are coded as missing it.⁹⁶ And this coding conditions what we can reasonably say Doctorow’s novel offers us. We can’t access the experience of the novel-world’s marginalized, as Berlatsky’s re-mimeticising gestures suggest. But the propositions and imperatives that make sense internally to Daniel’s world—“resorting to parody will distort your relation to real conditions”—for example, can be extrapolated and applied within our own.⁹⁷ Where Hutcheon’s sense of postmodern fiction’s rhetoric relies on the blending of fiction and the “real” to enact a unidirectional undermining of the latter, the logic by which Doctorow can criticize Daniel’s parody just by presenting it exploits the *separate* logical conditions of fictionality to generate extrapolable imperatives about historical reality and historical action that we, in the world we share with him and his book, can adhere to. The novel can provide its readers conceptual models that apply *within* frames of existence, models that can be extrapolated from the fictional realm to our own so long as the concepts at work in each are shared (which given the intelligible-language-composition of the fiction, they must be). These propositions themselves are then equally deliberable in the world the fiction conjures as a hook on which to hang them, and in our historical world on which it aims to bear.

Such propositions would lose validity if the novel shed its conspicuous fictionality and tried to ground them on an existent human Daniel, of the kind Weisenburger presumes. The novel’s antimimetic reading pragmatics *do* require us to think of Daniel in terms of human motive. But, to return to Gass’ definition of character as a modifying “linguistic location,” the novel’s language, rather than its fictional characters and events, is the existent entity that can actually do work in our historical

⁹⁶ By the same token, the ex-centric figures of Daniel’s world may not exist, but the coding of travesty suffices to frame him, in Harpham’s terms, as “violating” a duty of recognition towards them.

⁹⁷ Doctorow’s skeptical treatment of Daniel’s discursifications generates a historiographical metafiction within which parody harms the ex-centric more than it promotes their recognition, and in doing so provides an extrapolable rhetorical imperative about the relationship between discourse and pre-discursive experience in our own historical world.

world. Daniel is not, therefore, a presentation-independent human mind, but just the “location” through which the novel’s language becomes intelligible in motivational terms: a rhetorical depiction of a parodic rhetor, a discursive figuration of a discursive figurer. The “motives” our fictional pragmatics attach to him are thus just coded intersections of interests in the light of which we can judge certain modes of discourse-dealing in terms relevant to our own agency (and to that agency’s own relation to interests that Doctorow suggests we should share with Daniel’s project).

If Daniel’s problem is to manipulate pre-coded discourses in such a way as to open up historical possibility, it is Doctorow’s to manipulate the codings he attributes to Daniel in a way that influences his historical reader. The novel’s posited historical possibilities emerge rhetorically, therefore, through the implication that Daniel’s language has scanted them. Doctorow is thus able to create imperatives about taking correspondence between agency and reality seriously through fiction that denies that it narrates a world of correspondable objects.

If we grant this account of fictionality’s fundamental role in the novel’s rhetorical pragmatics, we see that the relationship between Doctorow’s authorial agency, fictionality and productive agency within his world is distinct from the relationship between Daniel’s authorial agency, narrativity, and productive agency within his. For Hutcheon, “introverted intertextuality” and “the ironic inversions of parody” make history and fiction entirely interchangeable in their ability to ratify or interrogate each other: “there is no question of a hierarchy, implied or otherwise” (*Poetics* 28). This makes sense of her conflation between Doctorow’s and Daniel’s parodic authorial work. But it is the asymmetry between fictive and historical agency with which Doctorow must work to have fiction generate rhetorically exportable arguments about how deligitimation, discursive power and historical possibility interact. In what follows, I’ll show just how precisely he exploits this asymmetry’s pragmatics.

Part 2: Rhetoric and Refutation

Parodying the Parodist

On the above account, *The Book of Daniel's* pragmatics of travesty foreground the stakes of discursive practice's correspondence with real conditions. The novel makes clear early on that the standards by which Daniel can judge his fulfilment of his legacy need to take account of actualities beyond discourse. His fierce sense of his parents' failure follows from his awareness of how wilfully, blindly doctrinaire their communism had been: he scorns his father because "the final connection was impossible for him to make between what he believed and how the world reacted" (32). "World" here could refer to the physical objects of the universe, to a population of people, or to the various interacting belief-systems and discourses within which his father's politics operate. Which the novel is emphasizing is clearer in the light of Susan's earlier claim about the rhetorical importance of setting up the foundation to "indicate" the "proper assumption" of the legacy: "Indicate to whom? Daniel wanted to know. Why to the world, Susan said" (79). Daniel's disregard for this "world" contrasts with his indication of one to which his father ought to have conformed. The only sense of "world" that applies to the latter and not the former is that of "the world" as the set of things which *are*, regardless of judgment or perception. If Daniel's project is a discursive one, Doctorow suggests that it needs to take account of non-discursive conditions. Daniel needs to avoid reiterating the version of history already presumed by the consensus-world Susan addresses, but also to make sure whatever he generates corresponds to the world of historical existents better than his father's beliefs did.

If simply uncovering and articulating historical experience, rather than actively repurposing it, were Doctorow's intent, he would gain little from fictionalising the Rosenberg trial. One of the novel's epigraphs, from Walt Whitman, stresses the imperative to mobilise past defeat: "I play not marches for accepted victors only, I play marches for conquer'd and slain persons." The fictionalisation, with its ability to imply failures of correspondence, allows Doctorow to depict the failings of one such project of mobilisation. Daniel's travesties never generate a march: his critical voicing of his grandmother or his parents merely reiterates the conditions in which their legacy

strands him, his cause and his interests. For Hutcheon “the villain” against which Daniel has to strive “is not one known individual but the US government and judiciary, perhaps even all of American society” (*Poetics* 24/5). If this villainous ‘all’ derives its coherence and its villainy from its perpetuation of “an official language,” then both Daniel’s parody of his parents’ language and Doctorow’s criticism of Daniel’s reductionism can be judged by their capacity for generating action incompatible with the narrative that language encodes. We need, that is, to share Daniel’s oft-expressed, rarely practiced belief that we should judge a resistance project’s success by the worldly productiveness, rather than the mere articulation, of its counter-narrative. The starting point for investigating the novel’s critique should thus be the moments where Daniel’s practices match up worst with his goals, where Doctorow figures practices as wrong options.

The cruel exaggeration of the grandmother passage conditions the more obviously political process of giving his parents voice. Early on, for example, he notes that: “they were Stalinists and every example of Capitalist America fucking up drove them wild. My country! Why aren’t you what you claim to be? If they were put on trial, they didn’t say *Of course, what else could we expect*, they said *You are making a mockery of American justice!*” (40). They lacked knowledge, he suggests, that would have been obvious to anyone without their ideological blinkers, while their Stalinism followed from buying too strongly into, rather than sensibly scorning, the traditional hagiography of America. For all his hindsight, though, Daniel’s mode of parodic presentation here doesn’t tell *us* anything new about American justice; it merely ridicules an obsolescent discourse while blurring it self-defeatingly into his own. The repeated exclamation-points are the marker of exaggeration, shifting statements designated as reported speech into the fatuity of his grandmother’s invented appeals to Mr Editor. Yet we can read the second exclamation point either as a bathetic intensifier of his parents’ indicated speech *or* as Daniel’s own exclamation at the silliness of the appeal; the first, coming outside of a specified quotation, we can take both as Daniel parodying a similar despairing cry *and* as his own exclamation. Through this ambiguity, Daniel identifies his own sense of ex-centricity with that of his parents, an identification rendered impotent by the same

mocking punctuation that established it. Neither identification nor mockery advances the appropriated discourse beyond the state-compromised point at which he found it.

The phrase ‘fucking up’ points us back to that central question of *correspondence*. The parents’ outrage is prompted not by any error—to use that sense of fuck-up—on the state’s part, but precisely by the system working as intended. The error is in *their* inability to adapt their expectations and beliefs to the consistent workings of hegemony that are part of “the world.” Daniel’s mastery of his parents’ discourse, his awareness of their ineffectuality in the face of a system that didn’t play by its own justificatory rhetoric, is a warrant for his seeing their old-left worldview as not merely defeated but *refuted* by its failure to conform with conditions outside their heads. Yet in reiterating that narrative of defeat, Daniel’s travesty aligns his methods with those of the state he’s supposed to be resisting.⁹⁸ His compounding of his parents’ defeat here endorses the words they didn’t say: “what else could we expect.” Such words disavow perception’s relation to possibility, and Daniel’s greater hindsight accuracy leads him to a greater passivity, an even more thorough acceptance of the status quo, than his deluded parents’. Rather than seeking ground for action, he compounds his sense of predestination. This is parody as a mode of exacerbation, not recuperation.

Daniel doesn’t lack for awareness of his world’s real workings. Critics like Steven Cooper, on this basis, read his critique of the old left as something like Doctorow’s own view, valued even in the absence of a practical upshot for doing justice to the historical objects: “the result is a sympathetic but clear-eyed portrait of his parents and their policies.” (116). But in combination with his tendency to travesty, Daniel’s “clear eyes” lead him toward passivity, a wilful blindness about possibilities beyond those officially handed down. His particular form of clarity is thus a failing: its take on correspondence

⁹⁸ In 1994’s *The Waterworks*, which post-dates Hutcheon’s take on *The Book of Daniel*, Doctorow’s narrator, the aging newspaper editor McIlvaine, considers the fact that so many of the most scornful people he knows have at least one person they treat with uncritical faith: “We have our mothers and brother... whom we exempt... for whom the unrelenting intellect relents” (122). Daniel’s intellect, which ranges over the book in an unrelenting quest to reiterate existing refutations, has little interest in exemption, and indeed is turned most fiercely on those with whom it most identifies.

pays attention to what actually is, but not what could actually be.⁹⁹ Cooper accepts Daniel's practical aversion to possibility rather than his notional commitment to it, because he like Elias and Berlatsky ignores what Hutcheon gets most right: Doctorow's central concern with parody. Seymour Chatman, attempting to parse the different currents within Hutcheon's monolithic model of postmodern-parody, expresses a wish to "reaffirm the centrality of ridicule to parody" (33). For all Jameson's refusal to believe that postmodern parody can suggest that "alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists," Doctorow can only indict Daniel for the limitations of his travestic mode if some standard "exists" within Daniel's world about the relationship between the pre-discursive and the "linguistic" by which travesty can be judged to fail. If Daniel can be *blamed* for his failings by standards he himself acknowledges, then we have to see postmodern fiction's use of parody as something more susceptible of rhetorical control than a mere symptom of some pervasive "postmodern condition."¹⁰⁰

So why does Doctorow suggest that Daniel shirks possibility in this project-sabotaging manner? The questions of cause and motive emerge in the relationships between different kinds and targets of parody: imitations of official language and imitations of incidental characters, grotesque exaggerations and pitch-perfect mimickry. The Inertia Kid section is a crucial axis for these relationships. Daniel's parody moves outward from the uncomfortable realization of his own guilt, of the Inertia Kid's

⁹⁹ Catharine Walker Bergstrom endorses Daniel as one among many narrators who Doctorow "endows with the right to mete out... justice through narration, they constitute his call for the balance of power available in a 'narratocracy'" (39). Her model doesn't treat such a 'narratocracy' as a space of deliberation-forestalling narrative equivalence, but she still gives Daniel too much credit. Like Doctorow's other narrators, has "a gift for truthfulness, a portrayal which becomes all the more convincing through their expression of uncertainty about this gift..." (39). Daniel's truth is at the level of personal honesty: however much his treatment of his fellow ex-centrics might make us pause before handing over the justice-allocation reins, he's certainly up front about his own failings and predilections. The more that what Daniel tells us is coded as true, the more thoroughly it's coded as inevitable and unproductive. As I'll discuss later, there are various potentially new truths he approaches, but actively forestalls telling.

¹⁰⁰ Disagreeing with Hutcheon about Doctorow's *Ragtime*, Jameson is curiously averse to acknowledging Doctorow's plausible control of the novel's rhetoric, or readers' capability of understanding it: a clear parallel Hutcheon points out between three families is written off as "thematic coherence few readers can have experienced," while any connection between the way the novel writes about its early 20th century narrative and its relevance to the world in which Doctorow wrote can be no more deliberate than "something like an unconscious expression and associative exploration" (23).

awareness. Travesty is a shirking of the unease that acknowledgment might prompt. This aversion's centrality to a scene so distant from national politics figures it as a part of Daniel's psychology that *underlies* parodic articulation of his parents' experience, rather than a mode exclusive to his recuperative project.

Recalling the journey to the shelter, Daniel notes that "In times of crisis I am always sensitive to people on the periphery. The cab driver was named Henry Lichtenstein, and his number was 45930" (148). While this is clearly self-ironic, the conflation between sensitivity to people and accurate replication of detail provides a model for Daniel's unproductive treatment of the Inertia Kid and other marginal figures. The self-indicting irony of his claim to have been extending empathetic acknowledgment by mimicking the Kid highlights that he knows that the parodic intellect is as strong a tool for compounding authority as for accessing alterity. Daniel is shown content to dwell in what Emma Goldman in *Ragtime* calls "the consolations of cynicism, of scorn, of contempt..." (49).

Goldman is suggesting that in accepting these consolations the ravaged socialite Evelyn Nesbit merely perpetuates the system at the hands of which she first benefitted then suffered, and Daniel's cynicism too involves complicity. Specifically, Doctorow consistently suggests that Daniel cherishes his marginality. As Charles Altieri suggests of postmodern art's ubiquitous claims to counter-hegemonic power, "the very clarity of the moral situation offers dangerous temptations to revel in righteousness," (475). Daniel laments Susan's reductive "moral clarity," but finds a similar opportunity for revelling in the seeming inevitability of his project's failure, of the incorporation and subsequent complicity of all forms of resistance to working hegemony. His "revelling" in Goldman's "consolations" is thus a way to preserve the marginality from which he and many of the other characters in the novel gain cultural capital, while also being able to congratulate himself for being "clear-eyed." This approach travesties the truth-correspondent model of validity: he knows that the state has not changed and is unlikely to change, and so in picking a mode of historical action that reiterates that fact, his actions are hardly likely to be proved erroneous. The affects here—comfort, self-

congratulation, and so on—are subjects of Doctorow’s critique just as much as the epistemological laziness they motivate.

Daniel’s affective motives evolve his mockery from tendency to compulsion. This is clear in his earlier admission that while he may have “reasoned” that impersonating the Inertia Kid would win him the admiration of an audience, “I found myself doing the Inertia Kid when nobody was looking” (171). As in the stylistic tics that I examined in my earlier chapter on John Barth, this syntax emphasises the lack of reasoned control over action: in “found myself doing” the action precedes the awareness that could regulate it. The syntax also figures “the Inertia Kid” as a set of moves, as much like the Watusi as a person. The compulsive roteness of this imitation makes a ritual of Daniel’s mode of barely-reflective parody, and so dehumanises him too. “Doing the Inertia Kid” alone, without inspiration or audience, he dwells in a state of mimicry sufficient unto itself. Divorced from the purposiveness of satire or parody and prompting tortuous retrospective rationalisations, mimicry is as much a pathology here as the political capability Hutcheon calls it.¹⁰¹

Various critics have yoked together Hutcheon’s sense of Daniel’s productiveness with interest in the positive value of wilful unproductiveness, by attributing postmodern interest and effectuality to the affective patterns Doctorow foregrounds here. For Patrick McHugh’s understanding of Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, for example, some kind of paradoxical resistance might emerge from the acknowledgement of its impossibility: he sees a character dwelling in “the realm of postmodern affect, enjoying his anger and frustration, enjoying the pleasure of impossible resistance,” suggesting that the only “ground” for future action will come from giving up on “the truth derived from historical consciousness, which teaches him only about powerlessness. Rather,

¹⁰¹ The connection recurs throughout Doctorow’s work. For example, in *The Waterworks*, the equivalences between the mimicries of the frustrated satirist Martin and of the “tic-ridden stuttering spastic” (271) Monsieur replicate many of the conditions that make *The Book of Daniel* sceptical about the political sufficiency of linguistic appropriation. The links between Martin’s frustrations and the emergence of a pathology apply also to Daniel, whose sense of endless complicity is as plausible an outcome of his tendency to nihilism as a source.

potential liberation rests with his own futility and frustration” (18). Exactly how this would work is not specified except by the implication that if historical consciousness = powerlessness, then non-historically-conscious mental states should generate power, but the pattern matches the way that critics of Doctorow have associated affective extremity with the novels’ rhetorical imperatives. John McGowan notes of *Ragtime* that “What I think we can fairly say is that [Doctorow] is fascinated by, and to some extent able to get inside, the mentality that is attracted to pure destruction, the *acte gratuite* of the anarchist bomber, no matter what motivates it” (166). Eric Dean Rasmussen, meanwhile, notes how Daniel’s sexualized cruelty permeates the whole novel, identifying “the text’s global affect – vicious eroticism” (192). Viciousness and destruction are particularly ‘global’ in *The Book of Daniel* because they’re so clearly attributed to the character who assembles, and hence in Gass’ terms “modifies,” every piece of discourse in the book. Doctorow attributes Daniel’s parodic methods to particular psychological predilections, and reading his treatment of his parents in terms of his treatment of the Inertia Kid, we can see that among these is a “fascination” with the processes of dehumanisation and agential paralysis. But while McGovern and Rasmussen both go on to offer McHugh-vague accounts of how their affects might escape hegemony, Doctorow seems pretty explicit that Daniel’s parodic political practice merely promulgates an already destructive, vicious and pathological attitude to experience and possibility.

The stakes of Daniel’s seeming contentment in this pathological dehumanisation of his parodic models are set out by Molly Hite in an essay on Robert Coover’s metafictional Rosenberg novel *The Public Burning* that takes its title, “A Parody of Martyrdom,” from a pro-execution essay by Leslie Fiedler. Hite notes that Fiedler and Robert Warshow were “concerned to establish the Rosenbergs as ontologically lacking: as not possessing humanity in Fiedler’s account, as not possessing full existence in Warshow’s” (89). In both cases, Hite demonstrates that the essayists derive such conclusions from analyses of the Rosenbergs’ written documents, their ideologised language; they treat speaking from within a paradigm as inherently dehumanising, as

evidence of human unsalvagability, and hence as a warrant for the execution. Pointing to someone else's language as evidence of their being already discursified works to refute not just their worldview, but their right to full acknowledgment. Daniel applies this logic to his own parents: like the reduction of the Inertia Kid to a set of moves, Daniel's parody reduces his parents to imitable language, and so treats them as refuted. In a mode of public pluralism like Karl Popper's *Open Society* (at the peak of its normative influence around the time Doctorow wrote), refutation is the prompt to search for newer and better ways of working, but Daniel's reiterative mode of refutation generates no such search for improvement. His energy goes toward refuting that which already lacks force, rather than present practices whose refutation might *generate* new investigative avenues and possibilities. He constantly parodies that which he acknowledges a duty to generatively recognise, and the parody does exactly the opposite of the possibility-generating, horizon-expanding work that Hutcheon claims for it.

The *historiographical metafiction* model, then, leaves us little room to consider the sceptical portrayal of parodists in ostensibly parodic novels. Parody can figure in canonically postmodern fiction—fiction that exploits its conspicuous fictionality—as a method of complicity with, rather than subversion of, dominant narratives. Doctorow's novel repudiates both the validity of hegemonic power, and the old-left grand narrative that arises to fail to sweep it away, yet it reserves its fiercest and most direct criticism for the default response to *that* narrative's failure: the resort to reiterative parody. Doctorow offers Daniel's failures up for satiric scrutiny. In a move that Hutcheon's genre hardly permits, he parodies the parodist.

Refutation, Self-Criticism, Competition

If Hutcheon's model doesn't allow us to deal with this asymmetrical reflexivity, there are readings of postmodern discourse-appropriation that do. Steven Weisenburger usefully distinguishes between traditional, generative satire and—his own coinage—degenerative satire: “The purpose of satire in the degenerative mode is delegitimizing.

Loosely in concord with deconstructionist thought, it functions to subvert hierarchies of value and to reflect suspiciously on all ways of making meaning, including its own” (3). Weisenburger shares an investment in “delegitimizing” with Hutcheon or Lather, but they differ on the stakes. For Lather, marking “provisional space” was the motive for pursuing a “generative methodology,” her search for a “new science” judged its own validity by the degree to which it “registered” fresh “possibility.” Weisenburger suggests that the novels of his tradition—from which he pointedly excludes Doctorow as a realist—are less interested in new potential than in merely pointing to the way things are. In their refusal of claims to generativity, he shows how those novels fetishize complicity, self-implication, the compromise of human subjecthood: the very obsessions for which I’ve suggested Doctorow faults Daniel. Doctorow’s clear sense that disinterest in new possibility is a failing aligns him against Weisenburger, and alongside Lather’s sense of a discursive project’s goals (if not of how to pursue them).

While Weisenburger’s model allows us to conceive of a fiction in which the parodist may himself be subject to parody, then, it still doesn’t let that reflexivity ground an imperative to self-refinement. He and Hutcheon have in common that they neither propose nor desire that one counter-narrative might be judged superior to another in relation to some external standard implied by the parodist. He can thus no better account than she for Doctorow’s analysis of parody’s strategic failings. Just acknowledging the parodist’s susceptibility to parody won’t get us from Hutcheon’s model to one where counter-hegemonic programs can be judged *more* or *less* viable.

To dismiss the sufficiency of delegitimation is not at all to dispense with the generative value of refutation, however. Why, for example, does the novel focus more on the weaknesses of programs of resistance than on delegitimizing the “official” narratives against which those programs range themselves? Daniel’s parodies are more self-indicting the more directly they have to do with the analogy between his parents’ situation and his own, the more the parents’ proven historical wrongness seeps into his putatively still-open present. This is summed up in the way he treats his father’s relation to the history he lives in as overly mediated by the one he projects: “American

democracy wasn't democratic enough. He continued to be astonished, insulted, outraged, that it wasn't purer, finer, more ideal. Finding proof of it over and over again – the struggle is still going on, Pop! – like a guy looking for confirmation” (40). The present “still” of the interjection may come either from a collaborative young Daniel giving his father the confirmation he seeks, or an older Daniel ironically confirming the failure of his father's procedures of proof by interjecting untimely enthusiasm. In either case he acknowledges the ongoing “it” for which Paul repeatedly seeks an incentivising proof, which in a similar ambiguity may refer either to the work of state machinery or the necessity of struggle against it. The interjection's complexity thus at once points up Daniel's predicament – the inheritance of an unchanging legacy of struggle – and the inadequacy of his parodic response. Doctorow shows Daniel's cynicism to be as wilfully unproductive as his father's idealism. Daniel's cynicism-reflex, as it instantly negates his struggle-impulse, applies parodic refutation to two figures who are determinedly, self-constructedly, marginal. The language of the left points to the respective failings of two generations of the left. As a subject for parody American Democracy, the syntactic subject of the initial sentence, barely gets a look-in.

As do all its central figures, then, *The Book of Daniel* takes the evils and the strategies of state hegemony absolutely for granted: rather than its insights, these are its givens. Instead, it prioritizes careful scrutiny of the way that those characters respond, the counter-narratives that they manage to propose. As Daniel is scornfully parodic of the discourses that sustained his parents, so *The Book of Daniel* is sceptical, subversive and humorous mainly against those who share its emancipatory interests. It does this satirical work on such marginal figures, I suggest, precisely to help readers who share interests with them resist better, and look in the right places for possibilities of doing so.

The Book of Daniel figures its goals in terms of the ability to generate new knowledge for the characters in the novel and for Doctorow's readers. These two groups are consistently connected by Daniel's treating the reader as a peer, at the level of interest and commitment, and at the level of knowledge of the historical conditions he and they ostensibly share. The questions I have suggested that *The Book of Daniel* poses

are predicated on the reader's acceptance of two circumstances (available to readers of even Doctorow's earliest fiction) that Daniel mocks his father for eliding; the historical failures of the left's own grand narrative in undermining hegemony even as it attained its own forms of cultural authority, and the present evidence of the incorporation of resistance by hegemonic structures. Daniel's marginal heritage is sufficiently assumed, indeed, that he can make parody of it; he notes of the Sacco/Vanzetti case that "The story of this trial is well known and often noted by historians and need not be recounted here" (25). For Hutcheon, by contrast, historiographic metafiction provides that "implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogenous monolith we might have assumed..." (my italics). Her implied audience, her "we," thus comes to each new text, or to the contemplation of the genre as a whole, without any prior knowledge of the role that marginal forces have played in the history of the monolith's inscription. Parody always alters their horizon away from the officially inscribed expectation, and away is the only important direction.

When Hutcheon says "Perhaps it is another inheritance from the 60s to believe that challenging and questioning are positive values (even if solutions to problems are not offered), for the knowledge derived from such inquiry may be the only possible condition of change" (7/8), she suggests that questioning can always uncover relevant novelty valuable enough to compensate for the neglected practical endpoint. Both Doctorow and Daniel, though, write for an audience that is, to some degree, aware already of the history, the voice, and the specific historiographical perplexities of the American Left. Fictions whose narrative modes differ from the "official" can't rest on that alone, but have to *use* those forms to offer viable new knowledge, approaches, or insights judgable in relation to future solutions.¹⁰² The requirement to *improve* the challenge a counter-narrative is able to pose in response to its failures is the particular

¹⁰² Plenty of postmodern fiction falls into precisely this trap. Marilyn Maxwell, for example, rightly criticizes the limitations of Donald Barthleme's attempts to dethrone the "official" and promote the "ex-centric" in *The Dead Father*: "he presents female emancipation in the text as a form of linguistic experimentation that is intended to offer an alternative to the self-aggrandizing, often violent tenor of male 'speechifying'... [but] By reducing Julie's feminist anger to a new, but incoherent, female discourse, Barthelme flattens out her identity to a voice that breaks free from the traditional, linear speech patterns of the Dead Father, but which carries no pragmatic value or political import..." (46).

“inheritance from the 60s,” in Hutcheon’s term, with which Doctorow and Daniel have to work.

Daniel is already, like the reader he addresses, well aware of everything that Hutcheon expects to shock them with the force of the new. Daniel’s presumed addressee and Doctorow’s implied reader, in 1971 when left commentary was moving overground due to resistance to the Vietnam war, already knows more than Hutcheon’s of nearly twenty years later. Daniel himself has this as taken-for-granted general knowledge because of his father: “he told me about Sacco and Vanzetti. About the Scotsboro boys. He ran up and down history like a pianist playing his scales” (35). The exclusive voice of the “history” that legislated the deaths of Sacco, Vanzetti, Isaacson is conflated with the rote voice of his father’s counter-history. The problem is not that Daniel’s reader needs illuminating as to Sacco and Vanzetti’s place in left history, but that Daniel’s treatment of his parents reduces them to the scale-y husk that they themselves made of Sacco and Vanzetti. The novel’s sceptical treatment of Daniel’s response entails that a better response could (by someone in his fictionalised-history position) and can (by readers of the novel made aware of the failings of his program) be developed by moving onward in accordance with each particular refutation. And as ex-centric interests can be pursued better and worse, so the novel suggests that the confrontation of different ex-centric approaches—for example between those of Daniel and his parents—should compel each other to self-scrutiny about how to improve. Such projects, in other words, need to *compete*.

The novel’s investment in genuine competition between narratives, whose relationships should force each to strive for greater validity, is specifically a warrant for *self-criticism*. Bimbisar Irom is one critic to have noted the significance of that competition to Doctorow’s work, and rightly sees it as crucial to Daniel’s sense of his parents’ wrongness: “To Daniel, his parents exist in a hermetic cocoon where the possibilities of competing interpretations are missing” (71). He reasonably extends this to the novel’s portrayal of both Old and New Left, each as guilty as the other of “deafness to other competing voices and narratives” (76). Yet for all his sense that this is

one of the novel's central questions, he sees Daniel's parodic ability to juggle and juxtapose many voices as solving it. In identifying Daniel's achievements with the novel's, he cites both Hutcheon's model of parody and Rorty's of irony, even though both resist the notion that facts beyond discourse can bear on the competition between narratives, let alone constrain marginal figures in their discursive pursuit of emancipatory interests. That constraint is deliberative in subjecting the competition to criteria external to mere self-expression.

Insofar as its correspondence with the actual possibilities of the situation dictates the validity of a program of action, refutation and the forms of challenge that work through delegitimation are only likely to generate new knowledge if they work sequentially to hunt those possibilities down. Questioning is not the same thing as measurably approaching, and Hutcheon's lack of concern for "solutions" seems to accept the neopragmatist idea that if solutions are never final, then it becomes impossible to make practical judgments about whether or not each decision, each action, brings us nearer to them. Sean McCann and Michael Szalay, as part of a far more pessimistic take on the 60s inheritance, critique the contemporary persistence of New Left idealisations of spontaneity and chance: "Any plan of action seemed in this context an overly rationalizing, managerial endeavor" (444). This attitude saturates Daniel's paralyzing awareness that "there is nothing I could do... for which [the state] cannot have planned." Planning is at the heart of what threatens Daniel: no wonder he affectively aligns himself against programs that would demand it of himself. Yet Doctorow also seems to suggest that such planning is Daniel's own best option: if public rationalization is the threat, private rationality may be the solution.

In this lineage, too great a sense of meliorative consistency between actions, of consecutive refutation, of informed sequencing, of investigation as a sustained project, is critical anathema.¹⁰³ Daniel's aversion to this ongoing meliorative work is, like his compulsion to mimic the Inertia Kid, characterized in terms of affective motive: in his

¹⁰³ Daniel's own encounters with the New Left leave him queasy at the spectacle of just this kind of fetishized disconnection, but it's a mode to which he himself gives in, fully aware of its failings.

ironic portrayal of the effect Paul's arrest has on the fabric of his youthful experience, he laments that "I missed my father's voice analyzing, endlessly analyzing and exposing the lies in the newspaper... I missed his truth" (160). Paul's refutations, his exposures of lies, are valued here more for their amniotically comforting ambience of "truth" than for anything they actually achieved. Daniel figures the sense of certainty that comes from repetitively critiquing what you know to be wrong in a tempting, nostalgic light. For all that Paul's refutations are "endless," they apply to only the one "newspaper," aligning them with Daniel's recursive refutations of Paul's own beliefs. This opposition between comfort and generativity, tied to Daniel's retreat from possibility into repetitive refutations of the same few narratives, establishes pathological reiteration as a failing, and thus posits a mode of sequential thinking that could actually sustain the project whose duty he bears. Refutation can only be a spur to the provisional if it itself is mobile, sequential, meliorative, planned: it should get us closer to knowing what the actually-existing possibilities *are*, rather than reiterate our awareness that obsolescent narratives are still where the possibilities *aren't*. Practical deliberation is the category under which refutation and the uncovering of possibility can be related. It is precisely in the procedures the New Left identified with rationalization that Doctorow suggests we can rationally pursue emancipatory interests against rationalizing state power.

The Rorty-an 'neo' version of pragmatism I've suggested underlies Hutcheon's, Lather's, and Rooney's antifoundational claims departs from the originary pragmatist heritage in its complete erasure of Charles Peirce's overtly sequentialist thinking. For Sidney Hook, writing in Doctorow's time from within that Peircean tradition, "All technological behaviour is purposive behaviour; the purpose provides a test of relevance, and the achievement of purpose, a test of the adequacy of alternative means suggested" (54). Technology—the term Harpham had used to describe Doctorow's self-conscious foregrounding of the conditions of historical narrative—refers in Hook's formulation to any adaptation of knowledge about existing situations for their improvement. Hook's model, which prioritizes the abductive identification of testable new means, reveals a limitation in Harpham's: if the goal is "alternative means," then Harpham's stress on the

narrative re-organization of known building blocks gives us no path beyond what Doctorow faults Daniel for: the failure to realise what alternative blocks might exist, or what the blocks we misread really are. The value Hutcheon's account of parody attaches to "recognition" finds an echo in Hook, for whom this technology frames "knowledge as a form of acknowledgement—an acknowledgement of the nature of materials" (540). If Daniel's parents are among his materials, then clearly Daniel knows their nature, but his technology of parody, with the deontologising implications Hite notes, is both a failure of acknowledgement in terms of alterity, and crucially forecloses on "alternative means."¹⁰⁴

The idea that we won't find "technologically" reliable means except through purposively structured, sequential, directed inquiry is where Doctorow's interest in refutation meets with his investment in the recuperation of possibility.

Part 3: Deliberation, Private and Public

Plurality and Pluralism

The Hutcheonian model that advocates plurality over pluralism prioritizes accruing narratives and dispersing authority; these narratives never orient towards each other but only take on direction in relation to the single centric narrative. As a result, their only direction is "away." Pluralism, for all that it means very different things to William James, Karl Popper, and Ellen Rooney, differs most fundamentally from plurality in its requirement that interpretations interact, compete. For the purposes of

¹⁰⁴ Berlatsky rejects "Postmodern meaninglessness..." in similar instrumental language: "the claim that there is no meaning, no truth, and no reference is a version of totalization that denies the tools we do have both to access the past and to construct an ethics in response to our encounter with it" (35/6). Hook gives us a framework in which to judge Daniel's language-appropriation relative to a purpose: it gets at Doctorow's project better than Hutcheon or Weisenburger because it acknowledges pragmatically that "we do not have to know what is ultimately or absolutely true or good in order to know what is truer or better" (Hook 48). David Herman, writing just as the plurality model was emerging into critical dominance, wrote a notably less influential rebuttal of what he defined as its "vacuous pluralism": the "nonsensical... idea that, at any given time, an unconstrained plurality of legitimate interpretations holds for one and the same artifact, situation, event or object" ("Ulysses" 65). His most practical objection comes in the Peircean terms raised by Szalay and McCann's stress on *planning*: "vacuously pluralistic interpretations have not even a minimal structure of directedness" (69).

my argument, it may be thought of as “plurality competing relative to standards.” For Rooney, this competition enshrines standards determined by hegemonic interest as the falsely naturalized condition of public inclusion, and so entails the rhetorical exercise of power under the guise of a mere meeting of rhetorics: “pluralism’s hegemony is due in part to its broad, generous invitation to all comers to join the ‘dialogue,’ that is, to try to *persuade* all the other members of the pluralist community” (61). The processes of exclusion, the workings of power, the constitution of centrality and ex-centrality, rely on the masking rhetoric of pluralism, which will grant everyone franchise as long as they’re willing to be convinced along existing lines. This is a model of pluralism as an entirely public, entirely supervised form of contestation. It treats deliberation as a public practice of persuasion defined by the exercise of power over those already marginalized.

Yet my minimal definition of Doctorow’s pluralism makes no claims about the public origins of the standards to which a narrative should hold itself. Discussing the academic legacy of the 1960s in terms that could be equally applied to the legacy of the 1980s theorists I discuss, McCann and Szalay note that inquiry in the humanities is now dominated by “theories that invoke the singular, the individual and the inassimilable against the basic elements (norms, institutions, deliberation) of the public realm” (459). All Doctorow’s novels are to some degree about the consequences of public discourse: he examines not only the processes of private deliberation, but its public procedures and constraints. *The Book of Daniel’s* imperatives to deliberation, however, are primarily about the ways in which private interests can seek grounds to resist publicly promulgated consensus. Doctorow’s fiction’s rejection of the sufficiency of proliferative plurality does not range it, as Rooney and Hutcheon suggest it must, against emancipatory interests.

The core ethical objection in Rooney and Sanders is that pluralism and public deliberation, in their requirement that the marginal play by the rules of the centric, structurally perpetuates something like Daniel’s bad-faith dismissal of his grandmother or the Inertia Kid: a refusal to take them seriously as loci of experience, knowledge, and interests. Sanders, for example, propounds testimony as an alternative to deliberation,

since it “more plausibly encourages mutual respect—something that advocates of deliberation, after all, really want” (350), while “What is fundamental about giving testimony is telling one’s own story, not seeking communal dialogue” (372). The Doctorow/Hutcheon axis, though, hinges not on whether the ex-centric should testify, but what public use that testimony goes on to have. Hutcheon’s model only provides for testimony to be articulated, to add to the non-hegemonic mass, and then, as Sanders’ rejection of dialogue seems to suggest, to be left without further engagement. Doctorow’s critique of Daniel seems to raise similar issues insofar as it matches Charles Altieri’s critique of the merely delegitimizing strain of postmodernism as something incapable of generating new respect: “It cannot actually focus substantial political discussion, because its language of resistance allows neither the self-representation nor the respect for the other necessary for significant debate” (238). On Hutcheon’s model, new testimony might redistribute a quantum of the zero-sum respect hoarded by the hegemon across all testifiers, but any given testimony receives none of the respect of subsequent engagement.

Sanders doesn’t seem to want to imply this: she hopes that “testimony could open the possibility of reasonable, collective consideration of novel, if disquieting, perspectives” (372). But what would that “collective consideration” be if not some form of public deliberation? Testimony adds to what Hook called our “material” in ways that Doctorow faults Daniel for not seeking out. The simplest way to grant testimony the value Sanders attaches to its material possibilities, is to see it as a pre-requisite for good subsequent deliberation.¹⁰⁵ Once articulated, for it to be of any subsequent value, it has to be subject not only to endorsement and ratification, but to practical service of external conditions and goals. Her critique is not of deliberation per se, but of public deliberation organized badly. In a review of Rooney’s book, Harpham suggests that the Althusserian worldview of pervasive false consciousness is as much a matter of ethical as of political paralysis: we would be “poorly served by the rejection of pluralism in favor of

¹⁰⁵ if for Roeyn the problem is “inevitable” “exclusion,” the solution for deliberators is to exclude as little as possible.

a model of an aggregation of exclusivist discourses, practices, and values that presume a condition of general incomprehension and *unpersuadability*” (12). That “aggregation” is the imperative at the heart of Hutcheonian models of postmodern fiction’s politics, but Doctorow’s treatment of Daniel’s polyvocal, mono-insight parody suggests that the compiling of voices is no guarantee of respect for each. Nor of practical benefit: mere delegitimation has a hard time organizing alternatives.

It’s perhaps for this reason that subsequent work in the lineage of Lather, Hutcheon, Rooney, or Sanders has reconsidered what ex-centric deliberation of goals could look like, often by redefining respect and validity in relation to disagreement. Such models take the plurality of viable criteria and knowledges for granted but build outward from this insight. From Chantal Mouffe’s development of an agonistic model of public politics that makes the construction and negotiation of new hegemonies part of the promotion of worthwhile interests, to Linda Zerilli’s Arendtian redefinition of validity through redefinition of human difference from the “passive” and “ontological” to “an *active* and, as I show below, *imaginative* relation to others in a public space” (145), the goal has generally been to, in Zerilli’s terms, make the intrinsic competition of marginal worldviews “the condition of, rather than the problem of, intersubjective validity” (146), and hence of respect for subjects. The goal is not to attack one central power through mere articulation of correspondence-evasive testimony, but the granting of a supra-discursive “worldly reality” that “involve[s] challenges to, and changes in, our criteria” (145). This is precisely the correspondence-driven self-criticism Doctorow’s indictment of Daniel’s parody promotes. And as self-criticism, it works at the private as well as the public level of practice, with Doctorow’s focus on Daniel’s psychology setting up a clear sequential subordination. As McCann and Szalay suggest, though, these developments in the theory of plurality and marginal interests haven’t made their way back into criticism of postmodern fiction, which remains resolutely Hutcheonian and consequently anti-deliberative.

If Rooney and Sanders, in their arguments against Pluralism and Deliberation, focus on the public risks of coercive “persuasion,” it’s not clear how their confluences of

appeals to worldly correspondence and enactments of that public coercion would warrant their critique applying in the private realm. Taking Rooney's insights about intrinsic exclusion to be a general warrant against deliberation, for example, requires two unjustified extrapolations. My minimal definition of pluralism—plurality competing relative to standards—doesn't entail that those standards originate in centric structures of power. As Doctorow's treatment of Daniel shows, ex-centric interests are a standard by which some counter-hegemonic narratives can be judged better, because more effectual, than others. The imperative that emerges from granting the plurality of criteria is for the ex-centric agent to choose among them in relation to their own definition of their interests. This imperative, though, commits us to comparative criticism of marginal narratives, voices, or actors by standards they may not have provided.

The second contention is that ex-centric narratives can gain nothing by being subjected to such standards, or from coming off worse in interaction with discourses of power. As with responses to refutation, a sequential model of failures or defeats gives direction to the search for generative, effectual possibilities and procedures. The possibility of a marginal narrative's refutation in its interaction with conditions outside itself merely establishes the importance of a directed program of action, as against the plausibly refutable belief that acting in one's own interests regardless of countervailing external conditions will willy nilly redistribute power. Doctorow's foregrounding of Daniel's ex-centric legacy, the novel's focus on exclusion and refutation, and Daniel's own sense of complicity in pursuing methods he knows don't fulfil his project, are pluralistic insofar as they acknowledge the possibility of external constraints on validity and hence promote the weighing of alternatives relative to various valid standards.¹⁰⁶ Absent from the plurality-model's vision is the potential for parody, rather than

¹⁰⁶ Seyla Benhabib argued against trying to make a feminist politics out of the combination of Rooney-style Althusserian distrust of any compromise between articulated interests and what Herman called postmodernism's "vacuous pluralism" for precisely this reason: "The rhetorics of language Lyotard espouses does not distinguish between raising a validity claim and forcing someone to believe in something, between the coordination of action among participants on the basis of conviction generated through agreement and the manipulative influencing of the behaviour of others" (114).

undermining the dominant culture, to spur marginal narratives to scrutinise themselves and become more effective resisters, capable of constructing better alternatives. Harpham's review of Rooney stresses that "the commitment to truth must include as part of its interior self-description the willingness to modify, qualify, complicate, or reverse any commitment as a response to compelling arguments, a response to facts" ("Review" 11). This willingness can help organize public practice, but it is first and foremost an attitude of individuals: the basic form of private pluralism and deliberation. And it's this that Doctorow emphasizes in his depiction of Daniel: someone who has to sort these commitments out at a personal level before he can start pursuing "emancipatory interests" out in the public.

Among the rhetorical imperatives generated by Doctorow's technology of conspicuous fiction, then, is to believe that the current methods of emancipatory programs can be refuted if they fail to turn an acknowledgement of excluded experience's existence—the Hutcheon, Rooney, Lather sense of "acknowledgment"—into something genuinely workable and sustainable against the excluder—Hook's sense. Doctorow's is a model of historical counter-narrative whose onus extends beyond the point of articulation at which the proliferative postmodernists would circumscribe it, to a duty of self-scrutiny and self-improvement in relation to emergent conditions. Since articulation represents a goal in itself for those postmodern thinkers, it's no surprise that ex-centric self-scrutiny is so little of their concern: parodic counter-narratives bear no self-critical obligation, since their wilful provisionality made no claims to correspond to fact, truth or history in the first place, and their good work rests in the act of their formulation and expression.

The thinkers I've focused on thus value singular ruptures over sustained programs of investigation. However, in doing so they fail to give any reason why any one counter-narrative should retain attention after the moment of its own articulation: without that attention, the value of mere 'recognition' is harder to defend. This animates Seyla Benhabib's preference for a feminism that would acknowledge postmodernism without making what Herman called its "vacuous pluralism" into an

excuse to prioritize mere articulation over practical engagement with pre-discursive conditions: she like Doctorow and all the novelists I examine seeks “an epistemology and politics which recognizes the lack of metanarratives and foundational guarantees, but which nonetheless insists on formulating minimal criteria of validity for our discursive and political practices” (125). This posits two stages of deliberation: first that of choosing criteria that align with your interests, and secondly that of choosing what actions will interact with the world to best advance those interests. In the second half of the novel, Doctorow’s elaboration of Daniel’s failure to do either begins to indicate where we might actually seek recuperable historical possibilities: by cultivating habits of recognition based on surprising continuity rather than reliable rupture.

Part 4: Misuses of Mimicry

Perhaps aware of the problems of letting his private affinity for travesty dictate his notionally outward-working project, Daniel, around the novel’s halfway point, lets up on the travesty and starts to venture outward in the narrated present, meeting the celebrity New Left “revolutionary” Artie Sternlicht and getting beaten up at a protest. The latter bathetically echoes his earlier description of his father’s beating by a crowd of anti-communist protesters. Daniel’s desultory attendance at the protest contrasts with his conviction that his father’s beating had been a conscious decision to die for beliefs. After the beating fails to kill him, Paul puts back on the glasses he had handed off before he went to meet the crowd: Daniel watches his broken face, noting that “he looked at me through glasses that were unbroken” (51). This physically ratifies Daniel’s sense that whatever the world did to his father could not change the filters through which he viewed it; Daniel’s own brief contact with the front line of public dissent, though, leaves him similarly barren of new insight or historical possibility.

He turns instead to the narration of three crucial encounters: his mother’s courtroom encounter with Mindish (the family friend who informed on them); his own trip in the novel’s present to visit the senile Mindish; and his last visit to his catatonic

sister in her room at the asylum where she has ended up after giving up on her own ability to “assume the legacy” productively. Yet each of these encounters is delayed by Daniel’s second mode of parody: not the travesties he directs against those who share his ex-centric relation to power, but his accurate renditions of authoritative discourses.

While Daniel is constantly to be found appropriating a flat academic discourse that might be aligned with power structures and with his thesis’ “official” Sukenick-audience, this language is rarely employed to subversive effect. For Hutcheon, accurate replicative parody “is not imitation; it is not a monologic mastery of another’s discourse. It is a dialogic, parodic reappropriation of the past” (72). She takes the novel to unequivocally endorse Daniel’s occasional Frankfurt-school riffs, reading the novel’s most famous passage—Daniel’s critique of Disneyland—as the author’s own contention that theme-park history is “not a critical and parodic transgression that might provoke thought; it is intended for instant consumption as a spectacle void of historical and ethical significance” (*Poetics* 25). Daniel’s ventriloquistic critique, by implication, is just such a transgression. For readers who can by this late point of the novel identify the Disneyland spiel as an instance of a repeated tendency, though, the “provoked thought” might be less about the capitalist apparatus of spectacle (which the novel takes for granted throughout) than about why Daniel prefaces all his narrations of important personal encounters with drawn out recitation of other people’s critique.¹⁰⁷ When Daniel spiels, monologic mastery is all he’s displaying. FrankfurtSchool is an entirely centric

¹⁰⁷ McCann and Szalay have little time for “the frequently reiterated conviction that merely adopting that language amounts to a political challenge to contemporary society” (459). Adopting left language is not enacting left politics. Andrew Pepper reads such citations and adoptions in concert with Hutcheon’s conflation of Doctorow and Daniel, suggesting that “Doctorow even invokes Marx to make this point” (480), when noting Daniel’s comment that “that is why Marx used the word “slavery” to define the role of the working class under capitalism” (BoD 134). He not only conflates their language, but their attitude to historical phenomena. The effect is to give far too much credit to the source materials for fresh insight relevant to Daniel’s situation, and for novelty to the reader Doctorow addresses. Furthermore, it is to treat all ventriloquy of authoritative right-wing discourse as delegitimizing while treating all ventriloquy of authoritative left-wing discourse as insight-generating. There are no grounds in the novel for this distinction. We should read them, I suggest, as equally barren iterations of what Daniel and his audience have already heard, deployed to forestall the narration of possibilities that do not yet exist for Daniel, and of sections of coded-significant discourse not yet given fictional imagination by his readers.¹⁰⁷ Doctorow locates possible insight in the encounters that are being deferred rather than the accurate-parody language that is deferring them.

discourse in Daniel's academic and political circles; what's most salient about the Disneyland "analysis" is not the old insights it repeats, but the way it delays the narration (and hence the fictive existence) of his encounter with Mindish. Before each of his encounters with crucial relationships, changes in which between narrated past and narrative present threaten to alter Daniel's paradigms, he unspools general, impersonal critique of institutions: discourse of which he is a comfortable master and which therefore bears little relation to the uncertain encounters it delays. Daniel shuns the cognitive possibility that may inhere in his family's experience by repeatedly travesty that experience, and he defers the possibility that may inhere in unparodiabale encounters by interposing pseudo-critical ventriloquy. It is when parody drops out of the text, as it tends to after these palate-cleansing delays of monologic mastery, that we are in closest contact with the possibilities of historical experience.

State as Parodist and the Problem of Complicity

There are three relationships that stay clear of parody, that resist Daniel's efforts to parody them: those between Daniel and Susan, Daniel and Mindish, and the Isaacsons and law. The last of these is central because it is the one thing in the novel whose details Daniel has mastered without being able to mock. Where Susan and Mindish, catatonic and senile, each represent something of the ineffable, the legal system is all discourse. It is an element of the novel (and the history) that is conspicuously ridiculous and resolutely unparodied. Hutcheon is right to see the legal system as the villain, precisely because the ludicrous logic of conviction is played out for us in the novel so often, by so many different figures, all of whom are unable to halt it. Her notion that the powerful institutions are the parodied ones, though, is entirely undermined by the seriousness of its portrayal.

The legal system appropriates everything in the exaggerative manner Daniel appropriates ex-centric discourse. This is clear for example in the way that the defence her lawyers cook up for his mother Rochelle, the "sexual motivation," is "not true

because it makes too much of the truth” (202). The necessity of going through a “ritual” of defence about which Rochelle “doesn’t care” (202) nevertheless forces her into a public parody of both her convictions and her private affections. The trial’s ridiculous logic is described to Daniel by journalists and lawyers, who might be expected to speak from within the hegemonic discourse, and by his parents and Sternlicht, who might be expected to speak from outside it. But the terms each uses are the same, and Daniel himself finds no way to appropriate them beyond the morbid, comic recurrence of electrical imagery, drawn from the trial’s outcome rather than its process. Here the novel’s location of pejorative parody on the side of the powerful is almost unavoidable, and it is precisely the impossibility of parodying *this* parodist that motivates the novel’s historical questioning.

The historiographical metafiction model suggests that articulation of one’s ex-centric experience is sufficient work to undermine the centric power-structures of discourse, but Doctorow’s figuration of the state establishes that any articulation is immediately susceptible to the state’s own, much more efficient, parodic apparatus. Nothing Paul and Rochelle say or feel can’t be exaggerated, deontologised, turned against them. The picture out of which Daniel needs to get his parents started out as a protest image—one that he first saw looking down from stage in the process of being presented as a protest rallying point himself—and ends up as hegemonic narrative. Not for nothing is that moment on stage narrated at the beginning of the novel and again immediately after the conclusion of the trial scene. The state’s dominion over expression is an alpha-to-omega axiom for Daniel, and he can’t ridicule it. After the investigators first come to his parents’ house, he watches them talking before they depart: “the sense is of serious and irrevocable paperwork, and I find it frightening” (106). The present tense applies equally to the narrated and the narrating temporality. Daniel’s fright may be leaking into the present from the past, or the past from the present. The state’s ubiquity, in this instance, dictates his own temporal language-games.

The state is not unlike Daniel in its aesthetic taste for the trivialising and the delegitimising, but is a great deal more effectual. Early on in the novel, Daniel establishes how much of his own political tradition is composed entirely by the forces against which it ranges itself: “I tell you this (who?) so that you may record in clarity one of the Great Moments of the American left. The American Left is in this great moment artfully reduced to the shabby conspiracies of a couple named Paul and Rochelle Isaacson” (110). Nowhere is this “artful reduction” clearer than in the language through which he finally narrates the execution scene to which, he suggests, the whole novel has been building up. His long delay in getting to this point has been due to his wish to renarrate it in an “out of the picture” mode, but it was state-authored theatre at the time, and is doubly so in his retelling: Daniel is not really in control of the electrocution even in his own book. This narrative’s careful authorial decisions are attributed to a force beyond the narrator: “First they led in my father. They had rightly conceived that my mother was the stronger. All factors had to be considered... They wanted it to go smoothly” (296).¹⁰⁸ Here again is the association between state and planning that Daniel uses to avoid planning of his own.

The electrocution’s consequences, meanwhile, are similarly orchestrated. The great left counternarrative conspicuously fails to manifest itself: “Nothing had gone right. No cause had rallied. The world had not flamed to revolution” (296). The implied inevitability and meta-historical causality of the Marxian grand narrative is shown powerless beside the constructed aesthetic narrative of the trial.

Nothing new can emerge in such a situation. For the reader too, this is all old knowledge; as the definite article demonstrates, “the” electrocution was what was coming all along, fulfilling a narrative desire by bestowing the ending that was decreed as an ending by history, implicitly by the central power-structures that Daniel wishes to critique. Daniel’s implied reader, then, has always known what was coming, and has always relied on Daniel to try to avert it, or at least make it new, make it open. Daniel

¹⁰⁸ Recall again Daniel’s awareness that “there is nothing I cannot do... that they cannot have planned for”: the way he narrates the electrocution establishes a consistent lineage for this planning mastery.

has tried to do so by parody, his projected reader perhaps has hoped that he might do so by unearthing fresh information or fresh openings in moments of encounter along the narrative way. But he has not, and the novel immediately begins the first of its three endings. The final message with regard to parody is one of complicity.

The earlier courtroom scene, meanwhile, is followed by a pessimistic passage about resistance's contribution to any functioning circuit. So if not all delegitimizing parody is generative, and all non-exaggerative parody is compromised, does the novel suggest that all historical action exacerbates central power, that all resistance merely strengthens its own chains? For critics who equate Daniel with Doctorow, the answer may well be yes. Harpham and TV Reed both read the novel as primarily about readerly complicity in the language games by which hegemony is narrativised and promulgated. Crucial to such readings are the novel's various meditations on the electrical circuit and its requirement of resistance. For Reed, "ubiquitous electrical metaphors come to embody the simultaneously destructive nature of power. The electrical metaphor becomes pervasive until it takes on a kind of ominousness even in mundane places" (296), while Harpham takes these metaphors as Doctorow's way of saturating the text with something other than state power (which seems to ignore the reasons Daniel has a distinctive relationship to electricity in the first place). This formulation gives the agency to the metaphor, as if it has insidiously wormed its way through the text, independent of the narrator.

Often, though, it seems more reasonable to see such moments deployed by Daniel for the sake of morbid humour or pejorative parody. For example, when he is seeking out the psychiatrist to revenge Susan's exposure to electro-treatment, Daniel notes that "had he been a killer he would have moved quietly. But preceded by his shock waves he alerted the supposed victim, sending him a signal of the ritualistic nature of his fury... He was GONE!. A lucky thing too, I would have killed him" (206). Here the language of shock-waves is part of a set-up for a punchline; elsewhere in the text the mention of electricity can be a joke of its own. The joke is tied to his project of parody, relying on language's non-transparent relation to the world he conveys: the

language of ‘shockwaves’ is part of a ritual, not a part of the fabric of the novel’s projected world. Reed thus misreads the way that the electrical tropes are deployed,¹⁰⁹ deriving the dubious claim that the novel is resigned to complicity from the evident fact that our narrator is obsessed with it.

As such, resistance as inherent complicity seems less an inevitability than a product of Daniel’s morbid, cynical approach to his project. Electrical tropes flow through the book as a matter of pathologically compulsive parody, not as elements of Doctorow’s own project of which his narrator is unconscious. They can be understood, since electricity is the State’s province, as Daniel delaying a real reckoning with alternatives to the State narrative by reiterating its saturating power. It is in the relinquishing of this reflexive tendency to discursification that Doctorow posits that Daniel might access historical possibility.

Parody-Free Relationships and the Location of Possibility

Early in the novel, Daniel introduces Mindish for the first time with youthful present-tense thoughts on this family friend: “I hate Mindish. He seems to me an insincere man” (43). Though we as readers do not at this point know anything about Mindish’s role in the trial, reading Daniel’s judgement in the available sense of a present narrator’s expostulation establishes how clearly Daniel, in the narrative present, thinks he understands what Mindish stands for. There is little sense this early in the project of Mindish as complex or unfamiliar. However, after narrating his mother’s perception of Mindish’s testimony in the trial scene, the wonder he is able to feel on her behalf encourages Daniel to take the trip to Florida. Managing not to parody his mother’s perspective in the trial scene opens up into realisation that the experiences he travesties elsewhere may be yet-unknown to him, that possibility may inhere in them.

¹⁰⁹ Daniel evokes electricity in his parents or his sister just as one might mirthlessly pun Reed/read; the association is annoyingly, compulsively available, and an ironist like Daniel can shore his resignation by giving in to it.

This establishes for the first time the novel's contention that something which resists parody is something of historical value, worth encountering. Rochelle contemplates the forthcoming court scene with this knowledge that is only about to dawn on Daniel as he narrates her: "suspense as to her own instinctive response to the sight of Mindish is her only interest" (202).¹⁰ Yet neither Rochelle's nor Daniel's final encounter with Mindish is either a confirmation of prejudices or subjection to the state power he colluded with. In both cases, our perceivers are surprised, and have their paradigms undermined.

Rochelle narrates the long-anticipated catching of Mindish's eye in court in terms of what it isn't before she gets to her surprise at what it is: "he presented the private faith of a comrade" (281). This prompts her to remember she, Paul and Mindish in better times. Encounter with Mindish is encounter with the past with which she and he are both continuous; it undermines her anticipatory assumption that "We have all changed in seven months. All the cells of our brains are changed and our beings are no longer what they were" (202). Yet his conspiratorial, private gesture refutes her anticipation that her knowledge of his betrayal will render him conveniently other. The hope that discontinuity might provide a way to evade such personal, relational history is undermined similarly for Daniel.

When he turns up at Linda Mindish's home, Daniel thinks of himself as the valid historical refutation; he will coerce what new historical knowledge he needs from them by threatening them with the history he embodies: "I am potentially the public exposure of what neither of them right now wants exposed" (273). In his final encounter with the senile Mindish, Daniel seems to set himself for conflict, noting in the old man the traits of an adversary: "there was still in him the remnant of rude strength I remembered" (292). In this light, his opening line, "Hello Mr Mindish. I'm Daniel Isaacson. I'm Paul and Rochelle's son. Danny?" (292) seems like it should be read in a sarcastic, parodic

¹⁰ It might in fact be said that she is thinking this *as* Daniel, rather than like him. The previous scene, a tally of historical record, ends with Daniel saying "I give this all to her" (202), and the implication is that a certain amount of his own perplexity as to where next to seek insight has been transposed into his mother's narrative, as has his perspective into the narrative voice he gives her.

manner, challenging the old man to remember his own misdemeanours in the spaces evoked by the names. Yet these are the last words Daniel speaks in the scene, and instead the authoritative energy transfers to Mindish: “For one moment of recognition he was restored to life” (293). The kiss Mindish bestows relinquishes this imbued power of revelation, as he relapses into senility, but it has confirmed the continuity in the pair’s relationship. It also echoes Daniel’s grandmother giving a similar top-of-the-head kiss earlier in the novel (67). For all that it is a moment of ritual and gesture, though, Mindish’s kiss, its allusive recapitulation, and its intimations of connection are entirely free from parody. They don’t enter Daniel’s store of parodiabale material, since Mindish is never narrated again. The effect instead is to widen the call to recognition back to Daniel’s travestied grandmother.

The novel then moves, via a series of anecdotes about bodies rejecting transplanted hearts, to a memory of the Isaacsons’ circle struggling and failing to accommodate Daniel and Susan after the trial. The implication seems to be that, just as the encounter with Mindish is resistant to parody and instrumentality, so is the core situation of Daniel and Susan. Their hermetic relationship embodies a kind of historical unassimilability to others, even as its own internal dynamic is of constant rejection and renewed dependence. As Mindish is the counter-narrative that won’t quite fit into a coherent story for any Isaacson, the unpredictable heart of the trial-narrative, and the falsification of any paradigm about it, so Daniel and Susan’s shared history generates an inscrutable bond that leaves them unassimilable to anyone but each other, and hardly then.

Daniel’s relationships to Mindish and his sister resonate throughout the novel. When Daniel first sees Susan in the asylum after her suicide attempt, he tells us in a surprisingly unironic tone that his “heart leaps”, and particularly how relieved he is to see that she is “still her” (8). This interest in continuity connects Susan to Rochelle’s surprise at Mindish still being Mindish: continuity rather than rupture is at the heart of the novel’s process of unease-generating recognition. As Mindish-in-the-flesh promised both Daniel and Rochelle revelation through presence, we find Daniel early on at the

scene of Susan's suicide attempt "trying to see what there was about a Howard Johnson's that would make Susan want to die here" (25). This hope for empathetic experience rooted in presence stands out against the travestic mode of the rest of the novel's first hundred pages. Daniel does subsequently try to bring Susan into the realm of discourse, of the narratable, and hence for him of the parodiable, but she is one thing that he can't narratively forestall, however he tries.

When he breaks into her room at the care home, Daniel's ambivalence in Susan's presence can be gauged by the degree to which his voice varies within single paragraphs, from the repeated clause of "to be objective" (208) opposed to "My involvement with Susan has to do with rage" (208), which moves from historical to self-psychologising, or from quoting *Ulysses* on death and food to "I'll want a Hamburger with everything on it" (208). These opening paragraphs of the encounter depict Daniel straining to find a parodic heuristic that will make it intelligible, but finally, in Susan's unresponsive presence, expressing something like the real relationship in voices that do not feel entirely his own.

This becomes clearest in a paragraph which Daniel begins by addressing Susan in a manner that could be understood as address to the reader:

"You know I'm not shittin' you, man, I can live with anyone's death except my own... You don't talk, you don't reinforce their sense of you... how can I expect them to remember your voice. You can't write out voices... I cannot perceive the world except with your voice framing the edges of my vision" (209).

This echoes the last fight the two had before her suicide attempt, after which he speculates in parodically clinical language that "he is 'written' out of mind... there is some evidence that she was driven finally to eradicate him from her consciousness by the radical means of eradicating her consciousness" (82). The various echoes and ambiguities in the passage establish Susan's centrality to Daniel's project; in attempting to assure himself that he can live without her, he comes across the idea of what can't be represented, a voice that can't be imitated, assimilated and, in Hite's terms,

deontologised. “They” here might initially seem to refer to the psychiatrists or even—recalling Artie Sternlicht’s plan for disregarding the court process—the judicial system, but it soon becomes apparent that “they” refers to the readers who should, for a sentence or two, initially have felt that they were addressed. This dissociates the reader from Daniel’s experience in much the same way as Susan’s is currently inaccessible to him; her voice cannot be “written out” of the scene, precisely because it is impossible for Daniel just to write it out, in the sense of flatly present it, as he does so many other voices in either of his parodic modes. The reader thus does feel written out, in the sense of discursively excluded from the repetitive intimations of readerly solidarity and complicity that they have come to expect from Daniel. The unparodiable, the language of this scene suggests, is both the unrelatable and that which escapes control.

The paragraph ends by making the problem of presence explicit and removing Susan to the land of the iconic: “It is the feminine voice that passes solidly through ontological mirrors... We understand St Joan. You want to fuck her but if you do you miss the point” (209). Daniel, fitting his sister into a discourse, slips back into his usual mode: “we” and “you” here are unambiguous readerly address, rather than the precarious “they” and “you” that began the paragraph. Daniel regains his narrative mastery of the moment, but only by abandoning the address to his present sister, turning away from her to a martyr from a past distant enough to be mythic. Susan, like Mindish, embodies the novel’s sense that certain presences, old relationships that have changed but whose continuity demands self-reassessment, offer historical novelty when the guard of parody is let down. Unassimilable presence is the novel’s refutation of the parodic historical mode it consistently presents as ex-centric historicism’s default mode. And while Daniel can’t quite stick with it, his brief relent makes a case for cultivating openness to historically existing objects and people as shifting, evolving, *continuous* phenomena.

Benjamin Schreier, making the case for cynicism’s productive value, attributes to Henry Adams the insight that “thought needs to be responsible to its occasion rather than to established habits and prejudices whose virtue is recognized legitimacy... that

responsibility to the unrecognizable is the central axis of historiography” (59). Elias and Berlatsky, similarly, suggest that history is of ethical and affective relevance in postmodern fiction only when it embodies the ineffable, or in Elias’ terms, “the unknowable and unrepresentable in discourse; it is the space of the chaotic, and hence to rational beings, the terrifying, past” (42). Doctorow’s central sense of recognition, on the other hand, requires the historical existence of possibility to have been knowable and recognisable enough that we can be faulted for acting in such a way as to deny ourselves access to it. He repudiates the cynical mode that Schreier sees as sufficient to grant us access to what can’t be recognised, and the insistence that the past is an undifferentiable sublime. In doing so, he stresses continuity over chaos, even as he makes the unrecognized-recognisable the source of all the novel’s posited possibility. Mindish and Susan both take on this aura of possibility because of Daniel’s uncertainty about whether to expect continuity or rupture from his encounter with them. It is the residual recognisability in these figures whose shared history has been lost to discourse that gives Daniel a sense of what possible connections unratifiably exist in their now-aphasiac presences. In this sense, Schreier’s emphasis on the unrecognizable, which seems to forestall a deliberative effort to recognise better, might be replaced with a duty to the latent yet-unrecognised. This duty, Doctorow suggests, is the framework through which Zerilli’s possible new deliberation-organizing criteria have to be sought.

Getting the Picture and Communicating Potential

For all that Daniel’s language in the scene finally reverts back to parody, it also contains his most significant outward gesture. He sellotapes a poster that he has made of himself to Susan’s ceiling. The entire scene echoes Daniel’s hunt for Susan’s presence at the ice-cream shop where she had slit her wrists, a scene in which the rolled up Isaacson poster in her car is all that is left of her. “You get the picture,” says her note, and this gift raises the novel’s usual angst about inheriting a picture that even Susan has become ambivalent about preserving; she can no longer bear its weight, but could still not face giving it over to Artie Sternlicht’s poster-wall of undifferentiated images, that

Jamesonian graveyard of historical reference. In the same scene, Daniel is briefly convinced that a waitress has given the peace sign, and he uses the phrase “to be just” in order to both excuse himself and explain his historical actions (21). When we get to the room-invasion scene, Daniel himself is the peace-sign giver, he oscillates between an imperative “to be objective” and addressing Susan about her death “to be truthful” (208). The scene thus, in its echoes, posits itself as the resolution of the get-the-picture issue.

This might be summarised as the problem of what Hutcheon, developing another author’s words into a literary trope of her own, labels “emblem fatigue” (*Poetics* 7). The constant reduction of oneself to a symbol for a group or cause is at the heart of the novel’s concern with inheritance, from the early scene in which Daniel and Susan, presented to a crowd of Isaacson supporters simply as “the children” (20), look down from the stage where they are made a spectacle at blown-up posters of their parents, to Sternlicht’s spiel about the image and its potential overwhelmingness, to Daniel’s sense of the aesthetic composition of the trial. Getting the picture is a duty, not an achievement, and by the time Daniel makes the poster of himself for Susan, the imperative to alter the picture in question is clear.

These concerns define Daniel’s gift; we know how much it cost to blow up, it is “posed,” we see that it contains “a Daniel” rather than anything appropriate to his self-conception, it doesn’t lay to bed the ghost of emblem-fatigue, since later Daniel ends a description of the young he and Susan together with “That is a famous news picture” (253). And yet the gift seems meaningful and sincere. Although it takes place within a whole novel of discourse about the appropriability of the narratives ‘pictures’ encode, it is a significantly private moment. That it figures Daniel in the guise of a young revolutionary of the sort Susan tried and failed to be in her last grasp for an identity before the suicide attempt *could* be a cruel taunt, but the whole process of its giving is described only with tenderness.

On this basis, it seems like a successful gesture that works outside the realm of parody. Rather than extending his ironic appropriative mode, the Daniel she has always loved and resented, into Susan’s unresponsive presence, Daniel offers her a version of

himself and his own presence that is entirely discontinuous with their prior understanding of each other. Just as the scene provides a central encounter with unassimilable history for the novel, so his picture, private, unassimilable by the various discourses from which both he and Susan are in retreat, works as a gesture towards her. Since he himself never returns to her room, or to narrating her in the present tense, it also renounces his attempts to comprehend her presence in language, and so represents a rejection of parodic engagement. It is Daniel's major achievement of communication, even as it enacts a ritual of farewell.

As a gesture outward to someone who may not ever recognise it as such, the poster seems structurally similar to Daniel's summary of the political logic behind Susan's withdrawal: "A certain portion of the energy must be used for the regeneration of energy. That way you don't just die like a bird falling, like a rock sinking, you die on a parabolic curve. You die in a course of attack. Susan knows this" (210). Daniel, though, having just had a fight with Susan's supervising psychiatrist, relinquishes the idea of attack. Just as in the encounter with Mindish the force of recognition dispelled his intent to parodic attack, Daniel here has premeditated a gesture that works on that failing 'parabolic curve,' aimable equally at an undefeatable adversary or at an unassimilable presence lost to deliberative communication. Those are the two realms in which the attack of parody is shown not to work, and from which his ventriloquistic parody cannot finally keep Daniel.

Little changes for Daniel after this encounter. Nor does the later encounter with Mindish result in a permanent shift of approach. What both scenes do posit, though, is a sense in which getting, or giving, the picture does not have to mean reduction to a world of undifferentiated image, one in which problem-seeking rather than parody, communication rather than attack or aversion, are viable historiographical conduct. In the end, the novel offers the unassimilable rather than the undefeatable as the first object of a sensible parabolic curve. If potential change can be located, then it's in personal rather than public history. It's in the relinquishing of parody in encounter, rather than its wielding in attack.

Irom, grounding a diagnosis of the novel's politics on Hutcheon and Rorty's antifoundational model of narrative politics, suggests "that further attending [than Hutcheon] to the operations of irony in *The Book of Daniel* will reveal how fiction, in a process of recuperating its traditional function, gestures toward breaking through the antimony between retreat and praxis" (65). What Irom proposes for irony, I propose for parody; Hutcheon is absolutely right to say that the novel's ideas on praxis proceed from its treatment of parody, and building on this insight better reveals these ideas than can those avowedly Political critics who treat Hutcheon's focus on literary style and genre as a distraction. Against what Bewes called the "perverse creed" of total political faith in irony and parody, though, and in line with Kim's call to distinguish the specific political practices argued for by specific anti-mimetic forms, I've attempted to better describe the book's actual rhetoric by refuting the parts of Hutcheon's genre-wide argument that least correspond to the text itself. The building I propose involves a shift from treating *The Book of Daniel* as a parodic novel in which Daniel's assemblage of styles and Doctorow's are one to treating it as a novel about the historical effectuality of parody by whose overall prescriptions we're rhetorically required to see that its narrator's appropriations of discourse come up short.

If Berlatsky and Elias figure historical experience as a clearly-located but unreachable—because totally sublime—source of rupture, Doctorow figures it as locatable by an orientation toward continuity: if Daniel weren't so patly, postmodernly averse to continuities, or to surprise in general, Doctorow suggests that the possibility-resources of the past might become graspable for him. Doctorow believes in the existence of possibility, and hence the existence of moral imperatives that connect recognition with correspondence. His commitment to the notion that there is a something that underlies experience and in conformity to which discourses must be judged for their effectuality invites the challenge of refutation: it grants the axioms of productive deliberation. Being as historically postmodern and stylistically anti-mimetic as Hutcheon's model, Doctorow's might thus help provisionalise an account of the

relationship between parody and politics in postmodern fiction that has become as naturalised as any of the villainous discourses against which literary theory sets itself.

Chapter 4 - A Coda

“The World (This One)”: Pynchon’s Deliberative Ontologies

In the previous chapters I’ve examined single postmodern novels at length to establish how they defend rational practical deliberation against various forms of rationalization. I’ve disputed existing readings of the era’s fiction that presume it takes all forms of reason as a single adversary. I’ll end with a broader, briefer examination of a postmodern author who, unlike the others I address, explicitly critiques the legacy of Enlightenment Reason. Nevertheless, I’ll show, the commitments Thomas Pynchon expresses through his antimimetic formal arguments about that history insist on the moral and metaphysical necessity of deliberation, and give us a kind of degree-zero definition of deliberative historical agency. Pynchon’s multi-layered ontologies finally ask: How could we, in the world and timeline we share with Pynchon and his texts, recuperate the lost or cynically destroyed possibilities of the past such that they can become *present* again, and operate to improve that world? His novels are a call to identify preferable states of affairs and to work out how to overcome seemingly impossible barriers to bringing them about. This, finally, is a call to deliberate in the face of doubt.

Post-Enlightenment Narrowing, and the Inadequacy of Ontological Proliferation

In *Mason & Dixon* (1997), Pynchon’s embedded narrator, Reverend Cherrycoke, quotes one of his own tracts on “Christ and History.” From a backward-facing vantage, he describes history as “a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong, vanishing into the Mnemonick Deep, with only their Destination in common” (349). If we turn 180 degrees, though, these lines, each representing a “life” and the

possibilities attached to it, narrow toward another destination. A few pages earlier, Cherrycoke describes the Mason-Dixon line's metaphysical work:

changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments,—winning away from the realm of the Sacred, its Borderlands one by one, and assuming them unto the bare mortal World that is our home, and our Despair (345).

Possibilities narrow as “our” world goes on, and must finally converge on the state to which the world tends: a “Destination” defined by the “Despair” that, in its literal sense, means simply the exhaustion of the possibility that hope requires. In “the bare mortal World,” the possibility-bandwidth of irreversible time must always narrow. In “History of Christ,” Cherrycoke insists that without the active work of memory, the “Mnemonic Deep” is “a Past we risk losing our forebears in forever” (349). Maintaining a plurality and breadth of “lines” thus requires the active memorial work of keeping the dead in mind. These central pages of Pynchon’s most overtly historiographical novel, then, set up the inevitability of a historical narrowing associated with the political “ends of Governments.” The political alternative is figured in terms of a perceptual widening that would keep the past accessible to the present. As long as we can still orient ourselves to see the prior possibilities from our present vantage, we do some work against their vanishing. The novel makes clear, though, that one of these is metaphysically inevitable history, and the other is hard work dependent on human exertion that can only forestall the inevitable for so long. Even if we can keep those possibilities in sight, they still, in terms of practical presence, remain “something lost and already unclaimable” (98). This, then, is the basic historical problem in all Pynchon’s work: how to keep past possibilities presently viable when the “Destination” we’re tending toward seems politically suboptimal.

Pynchon’s fiction consistently looks back to the turning points when a valuable possibility was closed off. His most recent novel, *Bleeding Edge* (2013) examines the corporatization of the internet, *Vineland* (1991) the betrayal of 60s utopianism, and so on. Above, all, he has focused on the difference between the promise and reality of America. In perhaps the most widely cited passages of *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and

Gravity's Rainbow (1973) respectively, our central characters seek “another set of possibilities to replace those that had conditioned the land... how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity” (125), and lament “the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from” (556). Sam Thomas, in *Pynchon and the Political*, reads Pynchon’s novels in chronological order not of publication, but of setting, showing how each one addresses just such a wrong historical turning and the subsequent vanishing of another round of possibility. The originary narrowing is in *Mason & Dixon*, as the titular geo-political straight line promulgates abstract Enlightenment rigidity over an open land. What this means for individuals in his world is clear from the view that the dimension-crossing boy’s-book adventure heroes the Chums of Chance get as they fly their balloon up through the US toward the Chicago World’s fair at the beginning of *Against the Day* (2006). They get a top-down view of the plains where “on adventures past, [they] had often witnessed the vast herds of cattle adrift in ever-changing cloudlike patterns” but this time “saw that unshaped freedom being rationalized into movement only in straight lines and right angles and a progressive reduction of choices, until the final turn through the final gate that led to the killing-floor” (10). Enlightenment rationalization means the “reduction of choices” associated with an approach to capitalist spectacle. Pynchon’s recent world-historical novels, then, offer us unsubtle avatars of the ongoing attack on “Worlds alternative to this one” (359).

Yet if initially it seems like Pynchon’s plural ontologies exist to impel us to any world except the present, some of his most overtly optimistic writing points in almost the opposite direction. In the years between his first three novels and his subsequent five, one of the few things Pynchon published was a review of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’ *100 Years of Solitude*, in which he focuses on the restoration of lost past possibilities:

This novel is also revolutionary in daring to suggest that vows of love made under a presumption of immortality—youthful idiocy, to some—may yet be honoured, much later in life when we ought to know better, in the face of the undeniable. This is, effectively, to assert the resurrection of the body, today as throughout

history an unavoidably revolutionary idea. Through the ever-subversive medium of fiction, Garcia-Marquez shows us how it could all plausibly come about, even—wild hope—for somebody out here, outside a book, even as inevitably beaten at, bought and resold as we must have become if only through years of simple residence in the injuring and corruptive world... (review).

This little-known review is, I'll suggest, something of a key to the moral metaphysics of Pynchon's recent fiction, which in turn casts light on what he has been doing with the trope of "world" throughout his career. The kind of resurrection that Pynchon identifies with in Marquez is not a first-person escape from this world and re-emergence in another, but the restoration of possibilities that were lost to this world back into this same world. The emphasis is on "revolution," or changes within the present sphere. Resurrection, especially in the very literal guise of ghosts and revenants, is a constant preoccupation in both *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day* and is always resurrection *into* that same central world. When Cherrycoke's narration tells us that "Men of Reason will define a Ghost as nothing more otherworldly than a wrong unrighted, which like an uneasy spirit cannot move on,—needing help we cannot usually give" (68), he establishes the tension at the heart of the novel's complex ontologies and proliferating supernatural encounters. The America Mason and Dixon move through is full of genuine overlaps between their secular world and other ontologies, which their Line truly threatens to eliminate. But as that elimination makes the Line itself a wrong, it comes to accumulate spectral ontologies around itself, which require help from within "our" world to either "move on" into the "Mnemonic Deep" or to re-enter our world and restore their wronged possibility across an ontological divide. Righting wrongs, this construction makes clear, is a genuinely "otherworldly" project. And although his emphasis here is on the capacities of fiction to, ontologically and stylistically, represent things that are impossible in our world, the emphasis is once again, as in Cherrycoke's tract, on making them "plausible" for readers in "*the* injuring and corruptive world," the bare mortal one in which Pynchon and his readers both live. It's this stress on resurrecting possibilities within the *non-fictional* world—changing our world, not just

getting out of it—that I’ll suggest is central to Pynchon’s fundamentally deliberative arguments against rationalization.

Pynchon’s emphasis on what seems like “idiocy” in the face of “the undeniable” shows that he’s aware that the project he describes here is, in our current metaphysics, entirely impossible. And yet, as I’ll show, the more his fiction insists that we are stuck in our ever-narrowing world, the more it insists that the only alternative is a miraculous restoration of what was once possible back into the present. This double emphasis gives the recent fiction a very distinctive affect, but as I’ll show, the increasing explicitness of this particular metaphysical concern in the recent fiction actually renders it legible as a career-long preoccupation which defies some of the most canonical accounts of Pynchon’s formal rhetoric, particularly those that equate his rejection of rationalization with a rejection of first-person agency questions. An early excerpt from *Lot 49* was published under the title “The World (This One), The Flesh (Mrs Oedipa Maas), and the Testament of Pierce Inverarity.” Criticism of postmodern fiction usually seeks to transcend “The World (This One).” Pynchon critics have paid plenty of attention to his representations of these “subjunctive” other worlds and their political stakes, but not enough to the importance of their literal “junctures” with our own “bare mortal World”. Such attention reveals the degree to which—in Pynchon’s universe—resistance to the narrowing set in motion by enlightenment “Reason” actually depends on the logic of practical rationality, rather than supra-rational proliferations.

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Like Hutcheon’s reading of Doctorow, though, our most canonical account of Pynchon’s ontological constructions—and the one of the 1980s Big Three accounts of postmodern form most directly founded on readings of Pynchon—insists on proliferation as a self-sufficient good. Brian McHale describes the difference between modernist and postmodernist fiction in terms of a change of “dominant” from epistemology to ontology. Drawing on categories established by Dick Higgins, McHale suggests that if modernists created forms that helped readers ask, “how can I interpret this world of which I am part, and what am I in it?” then postmodernism makes the

questioning more fundamental: “which world is this, what is to be done in it, which of my selves is to do it?” (CP 146). Fiction like Pynchon’s, which plays with the ontological conventions of narrative, thus contributes to “the loss of a world that could be accepted, willy-nilly, as a given of experience” (PF 26). As Hutcheon puts political faith in the proliferating narratives, so McHale sees in Pynchon a proliferation of worlds that reduces the dubiously naturalized authority of the world that our dominant culture insists is not only an experiential but a political given. Proliferation draws authority away from that centre, and that’s all the political we can hope for in a postfoundational world.

This limits formal rhetoric: don’t make your counter-narrative better, more persuasive, more valid, it suggests: just crank out more of them. If ontological profusion is hegemonic determinacy’s kryptonite, just keep adding worlds. McHale’s descriptive analyses of world-crossing passages in Pynchon are illuminating in their detail and fidelity, but fizzle out at the point of rhetorical accounting. After one passage, “once again, we are faced with potential for confusion” (99). After another, “possibilities multiply, to no definite conclusion” (101). The implications of specific world-crossing, world-bending sentences and ambiguities can’t be distinguished outside of a conglomerate effect. After the detail of the description, the account of rhetoric that such an approach can generate for a novelist as historically-specific and politically overt as Pynchon is anaemic, a problem exacerbated when McHale then makes Pynchon his model for every other postmodernist novel he examines. *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* final effect, for McHale, is “the salutary one of disrupting the conditioned responses of the modernist reader” (81). This is a literary-generic deconditioning, with no obvious bearing on the political world in which Pynchon, his reader, and his material book all exist. If this were indeed the limit of Pynchon’s rhetoric then each novel’s different historical setting would be rhetorically irrelevant. McHale’s exhaustive centralising of play with worlds goes no further, rhetorically, than play with literary genres. It gets us little further, therefore, than does the earliest work on Pynchon in terms of *Worlds: a 1975* essay by James Rother that concludes from scrutiny of the “adjacent worlds”

constructed by Pynchon, Nabokov and Barth that their profusions just highlight “the final pointlessness” of all human endeavor (36).

Thomas writes his *Pynchon and the Political* against the idea, dominant until the new millennium, that “to talk of coherent (let alone *legitimate*) forms or ideas [in Pynchon’s work] is to ‘trespass’ on it, to become barbarians stomping through the splendour of Roma. If there is a consensus to be had about Pynchon then this is it: all hail the high priest of uncertainty” (10). Yet a decade on, mainstream criticism of Pynchon has become politically focused, historical and context-driven to the extent that the antimimetic elements of his text are treated as incidental to the guiding worldview. Where these elements remain of interest, descriptions of them have become correspondingly isolated from accounts of the rhetoric: Jeeshan Gazi, for example, explicitly renounces any interest in the *significance* of Pynchon’s ontologies in his article on the world-intersectional logic of *Against the Day*. As the centrality of Cherrycoke’s life-line model to *Mason & Dixon*’s ideas about the meaning of America suggests, though, this isn’t a viable division. As I’ll show, Pynchon’s world-models, evolving from novel to novel in attempts to viably answer that question about how we could plausibly resurrect lost possibility within our bare mortal world, are constitutively rhetorical. Gazi’s disinterest in their *function* leads him to merely recapitulate McHale’s account of Pynchon’s earlier novels—the “unnaturally shaky quality of his reality, his present that flickers between worlds” (92)—rather than identifying any *outputs* distinct to *Against the Day*.

These limitations finally cohere around McHale’s typically postmodern conflation, in his account of Pynchon’s evolution between *V.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, of “freely exploit[ing] the artistic possibilities of the plurality of worlds...” and “the unconstrained projection of worlds in the plural” (*PF* 25). Artistic possibilities are fulfilled in proportion to the loss of hierarchical precedence for any one world, including—or particularly—our own. Defining postmodern art in terms of unconstrained proliferation generates similar problems for McHale on Pynchon as it did for Hutcheon on Doctorow. In particular, McHale misses the structural centrality of our

“bare mortal World” to Pynchon’s various ontologies. Gazi and Nina Engelhardt both show how world-crossings in *Against the Day* model themselves on the quaternion mathematics practiced by some of the novel’s central characters: a stable coordinate around which three other dimensions can be rotated: travel through the fourth dimension allows these rotations to move and change their objects in the central world’s timeline. As Engelhardt summarizes it, “The unreal worlds are set perpendicular to the ‘real’ world, connected by [what *Against the Day* calls] a ‘spine of reality...’” (226). As one of the novel’s adepts in such ontology tells us nearer the end of the novel, this means that “Travel to other worlds is therefore travel to alternate versions of the same earth” (1020). By *Against the Day*, then, Pynchon makes rootedness in our own world the *condition* of movement into, through, and back from others. Yet as I’ll show, Pynchon’s novels have been interested in world-crossing from the beginning, and each one’s precisely-organised ontological constellation addresses some version of this question.

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If it takes the later novels *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day* for Pynchon to have his characters talk explicitly about the metaphysics of history and world-crossing that the novels rely on, “our bare mortal World” is the structurally indispensable one throughout his career.

In *V.*, which McHale treats as pre-postmodern and hence ontologically uninteresting, the trope of “world” establishes a dominant one with subordinate shadow, mirror, or conceptual counterparts. Inertial pseudo-hero Benny Profane drifts in *The Street*, while in its counterpart the sewer he takes a job hunting alligators and a priest tries to convert rats before judgment day; first world war pilot Evan Godolphin escapes the trenches of the Western Front to fight in a sky-world free from “the taint of gas and comrades’ decay” (98); on Malta, the “real” world gets bombed while afterward, in the wreckage, children replicate bombers and dogfights in imaginative but grounded play. Occasionally, such world-divisions—like college girl Rachel Owlglass’s longing after Profane’s “boy’s road” of “Places I won’t know” (20)—flaunt their epistemological grounds, but there are binary world-boundaries in *V.* that have little to do with

perspective. At the plastic surgeon to have her nose corrected, for example, Rachel wonders

did real time plus mirror time equal zero and thus serve some half-understood moral purpose... or was it only the mirror-world that counted; only a promise [...]that the inward bow of a nose-bridge [...] meant reversal of ill-fortune such that the world of the altered would thenceforth run on mirror-time (46).

Here, it is alteration in the physical world that determines fortune, time, and first-person experience, not thought that delineates the world. The moral stakes are specifically “half-understood,” establishing a dual world, knowledge of only half of which is accessible at a time, while full understanding would require an ontologically strange straddling. The two realms match, but there remains a subordination: one is originary, one derivative. They are, though, in Rother’s term, definingly “adjacent.”

Occasionally, such worlds do get to overlap and co-exist, most often through the ostensibly mythical land of Vheissu, from which old spy Hugh Godolphin claims to have returned, and which may be at the heart of the political machinations about which the father of our other pseudo-hero Herbert Stencil left unclear messages before dying. On top of its own debatable reality, Vheissu is located both inside and outside the known world: while Godolphin wants to locate it outside the political and historical world in which he works—he calls it “a dream, of what the Antarctic in this world is closest to” (217)—it is on other occasions merely an extremity of intensity *within* our world, where “dreams are not, not closer to the waking world, but somehow, I think, they do seem more real” (171). Vheissu’s oscillating world-location and definition in relation to the differing world-categories of dream, politics, and so on, may depend on Godolphin’s oscillating psychology, but they establish it as the sort of object McHale had found new to *Gravity’s Rainbow* and whose terms almost all subsequent examination of Pynchon’s ontology has maintained: “elements whose ontological status is unstable, flickering, indeterminable” (CP 70). Yet the terms in which Godolphin himself describes Vheissu’s persistent incursions on his mind—“the bad faith of dreams that send surprise skirmish-parties across a frontier which ought to be stable” (335)—establish that its relation to the novel’s core world is not simply to de-hierarchize ontological levels as McHale finds

them in *Gravity's Rainbow*, but to figure subordinate realms crossing into the solid dominant world.

V.'s ontological flickerings all involve eruptions of past into present, or resurrections. In Florence in the 1920s, Victoria Wren, the mysterious woman who may be the V. Stencil seeks and who first crossed paths with Godolphin when she was travelling and he was spying in Egypt at the end of the 19th century, meets him again, and has an intimation of the past: "the halo of a second and more virile self flickering about old Godolphin" (210); she herself becomes such a double-presence to old Stencil during the epilogue. He remembers her describing herself as a "girl" as he took off her shoe twenty years before: "Girl? She was nearly forty," he thinks in the present tense, judging her old talk and her present self as issue of the same moment. A paragraph later, Godolphin's son says to Stencil in the narrative present "We both have an interest in her... I am her servant" - "I too" replies old Stencil, which could apply equally to his son, who may or may not be writing and Stencilizing these words, this scene, himself ten years on. By the epilogue—itsself of indeterminate authorship and ontological status within the novel's framework—the existential levels of narrative past and narrative present begin to fully coincide.

While such incorporations of past within present have a positive political valence in the later novels, they spur V.'s characters for the most part to "retreat." Hermetic world-shoring is their natural mode, as with Fausto Maijstral, writing letters to his just-born daughter during the bombing of Malta, requiring "a room, sealed against the present, before we can make any attempt to deal with the past" (305). The aversion to other worlds is actively pathologized in many of the characters, as in the chapter that follows atmospheric scientist Kurt Mondaugen in Namibia as he holes up with colonial staff during a rebellion. The hothouse logic of the siege-party builds up to a scene where the revellers gather on the roof to watch some of the native fighting in the distance: "such was their elevation that they could see everything spread out in panorama, as if for their amusement" (275). "Everything" here suggests the full visibility of a self-contained world from a position outside it, and the scene is bookended by visitations from the

atmospheric signals Mondaugen has started to randomly pick up on his equipment, the second of which brings the code-broken message that “Die Welt Ist Alles, das der fall ist.” This has been the animating assumption of the party: if you isolate yourself from *the* world to making one of your own, and the world is all that the case is, then what’s beyond your case-world loses existential relevance. But as the briefly-framed world of the siege-spectacle makes clear, there are other worlds, and just as the isolated world of the party turns cruel and violent, so intersections between such hermetic worlds lead to global political violence.

Beneath these willfully hermetic world-constructions, the novel points us to a no less threatening material world: “This One.” Rachel, in a poetic moment, appeals to Profane to consider their situation among “Only this quarry, the dead rocks that were here before and will be here after us... Isn’t that the world?” (26). A passage listing disasters from an almanac breaks off to identify their harms with the “congruent world which simply doesn’t care” (309). Maijstral combines this attitude with his response to what he sees on Malta to justify his isolation “once the inadequacy of optimism is borne in on him by an inevitably hostile world, to retreat into abstractions” (310). What *V.*’s narrator calls the “inevitably hostile world” is the forerunner of “the bare mortal World” in *Mason & Dixon*, which was framed as “our Despair.” The difference is that *V.* is the one among Pynchon’s novels that frames this problem without offering solutions to it.

The flickerings of past, the late vindication of Vheissu’s existence, and so on, argue that there are things in the world beyond the uncaring, hostile, and inanimate. Pynchon’s debut novel works outward from a sense of necessary change, framed as necessary ontological supplement. And yet, its focus on characters who collaborate with the world’s entropic slide towards inanimacy means that such occasional world-overlaps exist only to ironize their passivity. The world’s death-orientation figures throughout as a product of people’s wilful inclination to restrict their ontological array. Pynchon show us that the world doesn’t have to make us so resigned, but he doesn’t give his characters any plausible way to achieve contact with the subjunctive that could alter their and our world. *V.* may argue against forms of rationalization, then, but it provides no viably

deliberative contingent alternative. It doesn't stress the recuperable nature of past possibility in ontological terms, but it does establish both the inescapable centrality of a particular historical world, and the dangerous stakes of narrowing the world-options around it. It thus sets out the problem to which the subsequent seven novels of Pynchon's career will offer deliberative imperatives in response.

Regretful Action and Deliberative Recuperation

Mason & Dixon and *Against the Day* respond to the basic problem V. poses, and do so with a more specific sense of past history as the ontological category that could expand the possibilities of "our" present world. *Against the Day* in particular offers at least four modes for access to other worlds: Iceland spar (a real variety of crystal) refracts light to give a double image, and within *Against the Day* that image is of adjacent worlds that run alongside our own but are usually inaccessible; the novel narrates the Tunguska event of 1908, a still unexplained explosion in the sky that, in the novel, opens up an ontological rupture at whose site crossings between dimensions become possible; the novel establishes the trans-dimensional implications of quaternionism; and finally, near the end of the novel, characters invent a device called the integroscope that can start history running again from the moment any photo was originally taken. Together, these offer two models for recuperating historical possibility; first, the access to the presents of parallel worlds whose own narrowing trajectory sheared off from our own at a past moment, and second, the recuperation of moments at which time was frozen, which might then take different directions second time round.

As Pynchon's novels start to invent antimimetic world-structures and sentence-grammars with which to convey hypothetical modes of restoring lost possibilities to our present, they also begin to change affectively. The pessimism of V. shifts to an emphasis on regret. From Mason and Dixon's growing awareness of the anti-subjunctive significance of their own work, to *Vineland's* focus on the retrospective experience of having been a betrayer, to the central plot-line in *Against the Day* by which four

children must work out how to sustain the legacy of their anarchist father (murdered by union-busters) regret becomes a persistently motivating force. It saturates the language of the latter novel, even for minor characters, as with one lamenting another death, this time of the artist Tancredi: “creation that would not happen now, the regret and horror at what she had almost been a part of... He was a virtuous kid, like all these fucking artists, too much so for the world, even the seen world they were trying to redeem one little rectangle of canvas at a time” (744). The connection between regret at one’s own actions and art’s effort to “redeem” our one “seen” world expresses the core connection between ontology and deliberation in Pynchon’s post-*V.* work.

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As those later novels devote their thinking to ontologically structuring available alternatives, regret becomes ontologically consequential. William James, in “The Dilemma of Determinism,” established regret as the necessary emotional condition of the indeterminate world. If we lament that a decision forecloses a particular event, we must believe in that event’s having been genuinely available for existence: “The question” says James, “relates solely to the existence of possibilities” (DoD 591). If we grant that existence, we live in “a world in which we constantly have to make... judgements of regret” (DoD 596). Regret—and the possibilities it entails—is of intrinsic value for James, because it makes living exciting: “What interest, zest or excitement can there be in achieving the right way, unless we are enabled to feel that the wrong way is also a possible and a natural way” (DoD 605). Even if we’re wrong to regret things, “the error of supposing that the past could have been different, justifies itself by its use. Its use is to quicken our sense of *what* the irretrievably lost is...” (DoD 599). So for James, regret is intrinsically valuable, precisely because it spurs us to action, and makes us care about those actions we do take.

In *Against the Day*, regret stores up motivation even before the fresh possibilities it could operate on are unleashed. *Against the Day*’s middle section of desolate wandering—after the murder of Webb Traverse, before the Tunguska event—for example, is characterised by the Monstrosity Museum “swept by generations of sighing,

which occasionally had reached wind force—a sadness, a wild exclusion”, which one of Webb’s sons walks through discussing fate’s triumph: he and his interlocutor “moved along in regret and reluctance” down “corridors commemorative of the persons they had once imagined themselves to be” (635). Similarly, as he ventures into Russia on a quest further and further away from his Colorado home, Kit Traverse sees the effects of the same capitalism that killed his father back there, the silk road populated by “dust-covered spectres” and the generally disenfranchised who “have nothing”, “Kit had begun to understand that this space the Gate had opened to them was less geographic than to be measured along axes of sorrow and loss” (771). Regret is at this point an unactivated principle indistinguishable from “Despair.”

Yet if at this stage both the past and the historical world-present of *Against the Day* are saturated with regret, the Tunguska event’s eruption into that world grants a sense of “overture and possibility” that restores those regretted imaginings to viability (805). In my chapter on John Barth I discussed the choice that James’ anti-determinism forces on us: between acting and engaging with the possibility of error and regret, or deferring action in an awareness of the risks you might run by doing so. In the ontology of *Against the Day* this dilemma doesn’t apply, since with world-crossing possibilities opened up, characters who leave the novel’s central world can leave the plot behind and avoid any of the complications of deliberative action. On McHale’s reading of Pynchon’s ontologies, the world-departures Pynchon discusses under the rubric of “transcendence” ought not to be given any particular moral valence: they should epitomise the kind of free play among ontologies that undermines modernist reading habits. But as I’ve argued at length elsewhere Pynchon’s later fiction is marked by the number of scenes in which central characters turn back from ontological access points at which they could go into transcendent realms and leave the agentic complexities of “our” world and its “Despair” behind.¹¹¹ They return instead to what *Against the Day* constantly refers to as “Work in the World,” the province of “The Compassionate” (749). This is work on behalf of precisely the disenfranchised figures who stimulated Kit’s regret.

¹¹¹ See Chetwynd, “Inherent Obligation.”

The Traverse sons are among those who, as the Tunguska event saturates the novel with possibility, have their political imaginings restored and turn, with varying degrees of dedication, back to the indicative world. One of their family friends, meanwhile, has a more concrete encounter with that ghostly sense of obligation that *Mason and Dixon* had made the paradigm of supernatural ontological influence: “Some dead striker, reaching back through the mortal curtain to try and find something of Earth to touch, anything, and that happened to be Frank. Maybe even Webb’s own hand. Webb and all that he had tried to make of his life, and all that had been taken, and all the paths his children had gone off on” (1016). The double sense of “taken”—suggesting both the specific injustices of expropriation that Webb wanted to avenge, and also the Jamesian agential regret of fork-in-road choices made and the paths that follow from them—frames the intent and value of the striker’s ghostly return in terms of its literal impact on the present world. Similarly, Webb’s voice returns to his sons not in order to bring them over to join him, but to spur their actions in the indicative world. On this logic, honouring his transcendently powerful voice is precisely a matter of changing the path, increasing the possibilities, of indicative history: the “bigger fight” that his world-crossing spurs expands one particular historical world, not an ontological array. Transcendence and mere ontological play is subordinated to its practical consequences for those who remain in the indicative world: the world of obligation, choice, and imminent error in which we his readers have to live.

Against the Day, then, prioritises our central historical world just as *V* does, but conjures fictive mechanisms by which existent possibilities can make their way into the fiction’s version of that world, and what political imperatives they communicate to those they “touch.” Those imperatives also carry out the project of historical recuperation at the verbal level. The verbs in which the work of possibility-seeking is figured before the Tunguska event makes lost possibilities present again almost all that begin with ‘re-’. Quaternionism’s dissolution and recomposition of bodies is described as “Translation of the body, sort of lateral resurrection if you like” (432), establishing the relationship between trans-dimensional crossing and the “revolutionary” work of

recuperating the lost past. Mystical isolationism gets rejected with a “What? Remain in the exile of the present tense and never get back in, to reclaim what was?” (759). Reclamation and redeeming are the work at stake for human agents in the novel’s most hopeless stretch, and similar verbs characterise the Tunguska event’s inhuman action. A character present at the site describes it, “as if something in the Transfinitum had chosen to re-enter the finite world, to reaffirm allegiance to its limits, including mortality... to become recognisably numerical again...” (783). The triple-‘re’ here is noteworthy: re-entering and reaffirming are arguably actions only available to transcendent powers, but “recognizably” puts the onus on the inhabitants of the re-entered world to re-cognise, deliberately change their thinking, to pave the way for any subsequent work of reclamation and redemption.

The emphasis on ‘re’-verbs establishes the major difference between Pynchon and James’ sense of the value of regret: for James the precise value of lost possibilities is in their lostness, in the future loss of possibilities now open: this is what makes us care; if they were recuperable, we might not. But while Pynchon’s ‘regret’ logic follows from the current practical-logically inaccessibility of the relevant options, it locates their value only in their plausible recuperation, not in their staying regrettably lost. This concept of “access” is crucial to *Against the Day*: as the borders between dimensions within its universe become increasingly crossable, many of its central figures have to *choose* between transcendence of our core world and remaining within working reach of its indicative realm. The Chums of Chance, for example, end by establishing a floating city that will set out on its own independent social history. They find themselves preemptively regretful, entirely unsure about how their own subjunctive achievements in this city could ever do useful work in the indicative world with which they about to close junctures: “For every wish to come true would mean that in the known Creation, good unsought and uncompensated would have evolved somehow, to become at least more accessible to us” (1085). Only with an evolution in ontologies will they be able to let regret go. Until then, it’s the defining condition of any attempt they can make to improve their or anybody else’s lot. The “us” here, though focalised through the Chums,

is a plausible address outward to the reader who remains in the world the Chums are about to sever duties to. This establishes which world such access to goodness is meant to ramify within, and how much it depends, there and elsewhere, on a willingness to make difficult decisions.

Deliberative Metaphysics

“Accessible” is the crucial word: it holds open the question of what junctures within our Creation can make what we know to be good graspable. It also has a technical meaning in the logic of possible worlds, as a measure of Pre-existing possibility, what Ruth Ronen calls “sub-systems of worlds of various degrees of possibility (accessibility) relative to the world actually obtaining” (25). Pynchon in this passage refigures the term into an open agential question, central to the rhetorical, imperative dimensions of his fiction. Addressing an “us” who shares “our” world with Pynchon, the novels, rather than neutrally operating within an accessibility-structure, confront us with the imperative of working out how, in our world, denied the science-fictional metaphysics of Pynchon’s worlds, we can still go about recovering a present activity for lost possibilities or achievements that are currently trapped in logically and historically inaccessible worlds.

We can see this questioning imperative in Pynchon’s increasing use of the term “subjunctive” to define the possibility-worlds his novels suggest would be worth recovering. As the etymology of juncture suggests, the subjunctive tense is supervenient on the indicative, contingent on it through a kind of ontological hinge. Remove the junctures, and you remove the hinge through which the two realms may interact. Pynchon’s novels posit an array of hinge-types and universe-structures, all figuring worlds that already have some hinge by which they can interact with our own. Even the transcendent ontological exception of the Tunguska event—which opens a geographical hinge but is logically isolated from any other aspect of the novel’s parallel worlds—has its defining consequences in the indicative world with which it has now become sub-

junctive. These models may differ—from the trope of religious revelation in *The Crying of Lot 49* to that of cyclical return in *Gravity's Rainbow* to the living dead in *Vineland*—but they all operate in answer to that vocabulary of regret and imperative re-verbs. The basic question in each case remains the same. What recuperative work can we do in our world that could match the metaphysical possibilities open to fiction? And this, finally, is a pro-deliberative question insofar as it asks us

Although they disagree on the relation between existent possibility, regret, and present action, Pynchon has since *V.* shared James' commitment to the present world, a commitment his ontological experiments intensify, not diffuse. His imperatives to resurrection, reclamation, redemption, reject the option—hardly available to his historical readers—of a simple transcendent hop out of our own unsatisfying world. The normative and practical relationship he establishes between regret, history, possibility, and ontology is more complex and specific than the postmodern rhetoric of mere proliferation will allow for, and it does its political work by an almost inverse structure. Rather than advancing a McHale or Hutcheon-style proliferation of openings and loosened constraints that draw legitimacy away from the world that we already share with him—the world that, in Ronen's term, "obtains"—Pynchon's ontological rhetoric is All about strengthening and improving that world, our world, by working out what it would take to replenish it with past possibility, and thus scour it of "Despair."

Each Pynchon novel investigates the metaphysical means necessary to ground any project in which we—stuck forever in our one "bare" "mortal" "injuring" "corruptive" world—can rationally deliberate, and pursue, and perhaps somehow recuperate and accommodate within it, the "betterness" of particular worlds alternative to our own. The ingredients of such a process look simple: first, we need to judge what states of affairs we find preferable to our own; second, we need to work out what means are most likely to bring them about; third, we need to do that "Work in the World." These three steps add up to a minimal description of deliberation.

Even an author committed to the idea that Enlightenment Reason originated the rationalizing, possibility-narrowing course on which a world of "Despair" currently finds

itself, then, uses antimimetic forms—world-constellations so unlike our world that they may seem like “youthful idiocy”—to pursue the doubt-driven project of recuperating deliberation through antimimetic prose fiction. His emphasis on the miraculous in the face of “the undeniable” matches the apparent joint impossibilities engaged with by each author of postmodern project fiction: how to change real-world beliefs through the medium of fiction, and how to warrant action in a postfoundational world.

APPENDIX A – A History of the Consistent Premises of Criticism on Postmodernism and Antimimetic Fiction

For the present, establishing the archive of the postmodern project novel challenges a variety of accounts of the era's experimental fiction that rest on the same basic axiom of anti-mimetic fiction's intrinsically negative formal rhetoric. In particular, we can identify four tendencies: A) "positive" readings of postmodern fiction that limit its rhetoric to the undermining of literary conventions, the undermining of hegemonic discourses, or the construction and revelling in of indeterminacies (these are the readings through which postmodern fiction was institutionalized as worthy of study); B) "negative" literary genealogies which accept "A" in less celebratory fashion, in order to frame postmodern fiction as a problem-generating dead end to which a succeeding trend had to offer solutions: call "B1" accounts in which white male postmodernism's unworldly gameplaying gives way to the work of authors from marginalized communities whose work, whether conventional or experimental, is presumed to be intrinsically more connected to urgent real-world questions, call "B2" accounts in which postmodernism's smug unworldly gameplaying gives way to David Foster Wallace and his heroic "New Sincerity," which connects formal experiment to the real world by embodying real-world angsting about the otherworldly limitations of formal experiment; call C) the rare rereadings of the era's experimental fiction that *are* driven by form, but which nevertheless find only non-cognitive or prediscursive upshots in the fiction; and, finally, call D) rereadings of the "postmodern" generation that find interest only in their relation to historical events or ideas. Such work takes existing models of their formal rhetoric—as essentially de-centring, deconstructive, and paralyzingly sceptical—as givens to be explained in extra-literary terms, rather than distinctively literary modes susceptible to literary, prose-formal rhetorical rereading.

Headings A and B cohere around the oft-remarked fact that postmodern fiction, once it was given that name, was both advocated and repudiated for the same putative qualities. Writers like Ronald Sukenick and Raymond Federman, who came onto the scene slightly later than Barth, Gass or McElroy and—initially—self-identified as postmodernists, pitch their manifestoes in the vocabulary of deconstruction. For Federman,

Masterpieces of literature were now void of meaning, or, what comes to the same thing, filled with an excess of meaning, their language indeterminate, contradictory, without any foundation, their organization, structures, grammar, logic, and rhetoric, mere verbal performances. Whatever meaning these masterpieces may have had was simply provisional and conferred on them by the reader... (118).

Sukenick clarifies that meaning, logic, rhetoric would be superseded by correspondence with a fallen world: “In freeing the processes of thought from any particular purpose, the random consciousness makes contact with the vagrant world, itself disengaged from utilitarian ends, and wins insight into the nature of mind and reality” (xvii/xviii). The disconnection of “insight” from “logic” and “rhetoric” generates an account of literature’s capacities based on a reformulation of standard accounts of *experience*: Federman explains that “Reduced to non-sense, non-signification, non-knowledge, the world is no longer to be known or to be explained, it is to be experienced as it is now recreated in the New Fiction...” (16). An antimimetic fiction might not immerse us in an alternative world of imagined experiences, but would give us experiences of disconnection and discombubulation in our own world that match that world’s true incoherence.

Sukenick and Federman soon coined the name “surfiction” for their kind of centrifugal writing, but it remained tied to the philosophy called postmodern thanks to the critics who promoted both. Jerome Klinkowitz, as Barry Chabot notes, essentially took on Sukenick’s terms wholesale in his critical advocacy of this “New Fiction”: “a lack of a priori structures can show the world in its own madness...” such fiction is “honest, organic to the materials of... study, and reveals the ultimate truth of what’s *really* going on” (26). Klinkowitz’ title *Literary Disruptions* foregrounds his preference for negative rhetorics: he explicitly prefers the surfictionists to writers like Barth or Pynchon who he

faults for retaining constructive philosophical interests. Yet even Larry McCaffery, anti-mimetic fiction's other mid-70s booster-critic, and more sympathetic to Barth or Gass, shares Klinkowitz's vocabulary when it comes to identifying what such fiction is good for: fictions with "reflexive methods" necessarily "abandon the attempt to deal with the world outside of literature" (263), and hence have a rhetoric entirely "radical and disruptive" (18).

Gerald Graff, the earliest book-length sceptic of such approaches, rightly notes that anything that disavows interest in "the world outside literature" will have trouble "disrupting" anything very specific. He gives a persuasive historical explanation for why this schtick might appeal to institutionally comfortable professors who came of age in the civil rights era: "As the political radicalism of the sixties has waned, cultural radicalism has grown proportionately in influence... a style of thinking, a pattern of typical oppositions and identifications whose rationale is often unformulated" (63). Along similar lines, Thomas Schaub later argues, in terms of paralysis, that the retreat into artistic "disruption" served as a distraction from a pressing awareness of the paralyzed possibilities for political dissent in the post-60s era, treating that retreat as a logical truth about language: "The divorce between politics and literature appears here most forcefully as a divorce of idea and action, language and experience" (76). The disconnection that Klinkowitz or McCaffery had made the basis of radical action hence appears as rationalization: as Graff puts it, fiction with a Sukenick-style selfconception merely reflected that "we have begun to resign ourselves to this kind of world and to learn how to describe this resignation as a form of heroism" (62). This refutation of the early boosterism crucially maintains exactly the non-inevitable limitations of the heroism-narrative it attacks. Graff's solution to the hermetic, simplistically anti-rational justification the surfictionists give for any and all departures from realist expectation is a simple return to realism, an abandonment of anti-mimesis on the presumption that it necessarily forsakes the world and rejects the rational perspective necessary for worldly critique.

As the first wave of postmodern fiction and even the subsequent surfictionists stopped being so readily identifiable with “contemporary literature” or “the New Fiction,” Graff’s and Schaub’s combined skepticism of its capacities and motives established its role for criticism of the generations that succeeded it. In the narrative I’ve called *B1* above, the thoroughly white-male canon established by early promoters of anti-cosmic fiction reflects the willful disengagement from the world beyond fiction that those promoters had made the condition of its claims to radicalism. It was thus ripe for supercession by a literature that would engage with the world, a shift that critics understood in demographic terms. Patricia Waugh, for example, demonstrated that the anti-subjective tendency that 1980s postmodern theory celebrated in experimental fiction was a distinctly male privilege: women’s experimental fiction of the era dwelt less on dissolution, she suggested, since “Those excluded from or marginalized by the dominant culture... may *never* have experienced a sense of full subjectivity in the first place. They may never have identified with that stable presence mediated through the naturalizing conditions of fictional tradition” (2). Philip Brian Harper, meanwhile, used historical comparisons to show how the alienation effects prized as insight by early critics actually had their roots in fiction by marginalized-identity authors of earlier generations. Waugh and Harper both usefully suggest that anti-mimetic fiction didn’t *have* to be disconnected from pressing worldly questions. Indeed, Waugh’s descriptions of the workings of experimental texts by women can sound like my own understandings of authors like Barth and McElroy: “What they do *not* reject is the necessity for assuming a self-concept which recognizes the possibility of human agency, the need for personal history, self-reflexiveness, and the capacity for effective action in the world” (210). Yet for both, this capacity is granted only by, first, a move back toward *neocosmic* versions of anti-mimesis, and secondly, by authorial identity. These two crucial contextualizations of the limitations of the postmodern canon thus had less influence on accounts of how anti-mimesis could be constructive than on the subsequently development of what Sue J Kim calls “Otherness Postmodernism”: the idea that identical departures from realist convention have constructive or merely negative capacities

based entirely on the identity of the author, so that “experimental texts by minority and/or female writers [necessarily] constitute political resistance by contravening realist narrative forms” (4). When Kim has to ask, “why, in one essay and book after another, does just the fact of recognizing this basic nonfoundationalism become a means toward liberation? And why does the reverse... immediately become politically reactionary?” (8), she suggests that identity differences don’t *explain* rhetorical capacities, and reveals just how little progress Graff, Waugh, or Harper have helped us achieve in overall accounts of what *specific* arguments specific anti-mimetic forms can generate, and how.

Tendency *B2*, meanwhile, conflates the Barth-McElroy and Sukenick-Federman versions of antimimetic fiction to set them up as a point of departure by which more recent fiction can take credit for ethical engagement. This tendency, based almost exclusively on what one might call David Foster Wallace’s autohagiography, is most clearly expressed in the interest in what Adam Kelly calls “The New Sincerity” in post-Wallace fiction. The necessary part of the old insincerity is played by first-generation postmodernists, in the guise assigned them by Wallace’s mid-career manifesto essay on the relationship between then-contemporary fiction and mid-90s TV, which he found “about ironic self-reference like no previous species of postmodern art could have dreamed of” (159). On this model, self-reference was an end in itself, one that Wallace’s predecessors, on his account, put in the service of a negative rhetoric of pure irony and negation: “Burroughs’ icky explorations of American narcotics exploded hypocrisy; Gaddis’ exposure of abstract capital as dehumanizing exploded hypocrisy; Coover’s repulsive political farces exploded hypocrisy” (183). Postmodernism, on this account, promoted “a transition from art’s being a creative instantiation of real values to art’s being a creative instantiation of deviance from bogus values” (178). Wallace then recycles Graff’s basic criticism of the blanket valuation of deviance: “irony, entertaining as it is, serves an exclusively negative function. It’s critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony’s singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks”

(183). Wallace's "surely" lets him ground his own exaggeratedly tentative departure from the certainties of now-mainstream cynicism:

The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of 'anti-rebels,' born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. (192-3).

The conflation of "self-consciousness" and unproductive, cynical "fatigue" somewhat belies the route that Wallace himself took in attempting to move beyond the *détente* he had identified. The "Sincerity" that critics like Kelly credit Wallace with single-handedly restoring to experimental US fiction takes the form, in Wallaces' own fiction, of a kind of meta-metafiction whose hesitant rhythms and contrite self-reflexivity embody the author's own uncertainty about how a fiction aware of its own post-postmodernity can "treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions" without downplaying that awareness. New Sincerity readers like Mary Holland see in this a formal rehearsal of authorial straining for connection with individual readers that creates an unprecedentedly direct ethical relationship. The text becomes less a communication than an occasion: "we can come together in ways that build relationship and community rather than the alienation and solipsism of antihumanistic postmodern literature" (6).

This is useful insofar as it suggests explicitly that anti-mimesis doesn't have to be the blanket negativity Wallace defined himself against. But the criticism shares Wallace's own limits. It relies on an equation of postmodernism and poststructuralism as jointly superceded modes—for Holland, pre-Wallace postmodernism's gestures at uncynical action are doomed by coming "from within poststructuralism itself" (3); it ignores the centuries-long prehistory of anti-mimetic fiction to build a reverse-lapsarian narrative of thirty years; it relies as heavily on Wallace's own self-descriptions as Klinkowitz had on Sukenick's; and it treats "solutions" to postmodernism's antihumanist problems as available only through Wallace-enlightened meta-metafiction rather than within the terms of anti-mimesis *per se*. Strangely, though, this criticism immediately departs from Wallace's practice by framing recent fiction's enlightened engagement

with worldly matters in terms of moves back toward mimesis. Nicoline Timmer sees post-Wallace fiction re-engaging with questions of engagement and shared feeling by working out new ways to present characters as real human peers of their readers; for Irmtraud Huber, the major lesson postmodern antimimesis taught us is that “If all narrative acts are contingent, the choice of mimetic realism at the end of the day is just as valid as any anti-illusionist metafictional disruption: it’s just a different kind of game to play” (26); while Josh Toth, one of contemporary-literature-study’s rare poststructuralist true-believers, offers an ingenious account of why returns to realist form bring poststructuralism back into critical relevance. Postmodern fiction and poststructuralism were too straightforwardly identical, Toth suggests, so that it takes the shift back to realism, with a permanent awareness of its un-naturalness, to bring the urgent questions and affects of poststructuralist thought back into literary relevance: “the shift away from postmodern metafiction is marked by a pronounced realization that faith in, or a gamble on, the possibility of absolute certainty must necessarily haunt any claims or narrative act, even the claim that such faith is a dangerous ideological illusion” (106). In all these accounts, then, anti-mimesis takes on a dual role, as the dead end from which literature has happily escaped, but also as the permanently hovering mark of having been there which gives literature its newly dashing glow.

There’s little place in this narrative for any Wallace-type doubling down into meta-metafiction, beyond his own, and even less for straight anti-mimesis having unexplored resources. This suggests that his project of establishing a viably constructive anti-mimesis on a repudiation of metafiction as intrinsically cynical leaves his approach supervenient on the original and hence itself constrained to a single blanket rhetoric. “New Sincerity,” then, despite taking all its cues from an author obsessed with turning anti-mimesis into constructive rhetoric, perpetuates the axiom of mono-rhetorical anti-mimesis as thoroughly as Otherness Postmodernism.

A very small group of texts make up tendency C, which deliberately take up rereadings of the era’s fiction from a formal perspective. These texts all have something to contribute to anyone interested in my own project, but they nevertheless tend,

almost exclusively, to argue that the upshots of the formal tendencies they identify are discombobulating, pre-discursive, and comprehensible more in the old terms of “disruption” than of precise “argument.” The exception to the latter tendency is Richard Walsh’s explicit stipulation that the era’s fiction “does not abandon the conventions of realist representation out of adolescent posturing, glib nihilism or sheer frivolity, but the better to pursue something else: an *argument*” (42). As he stresses “the capacity for innovative fiction to offer formally sophisticated means of confronting substantial social, political and cultural themes” (24), Walsh is probably my most direct forerunner, but in practice, his readings tend to suggest that the novels in question firstly hew to arguments that equate real life with fiction, and secondly that merely articulate problems rather than starting from them and moving toward a solution. Those familiar of postmodern criticism and theory don’t need to know what novel Walsh is talking about to be able to mouth along with his paraphrase of its upshot as “problematiz[ing a] distinction... turning the reader’s affective implicative in the narrative to unsettling effect” (109). Affect is currently literary study’s ruling anti-discursive commitment, and the core category of Alex Houen’s account of the specifically political implications of experimental US fiction and poetry since 1960. I agree that the era makes a great case that “literary works can... whether at the level of style or content... extend the range of a person’s capacities for thinking and feeling” (12), but his readings make literary “thinking” entirely supervenient on “feeling”: experimental fictions are valuable insofar as they can “generate novel compounds of feeling” (252). These, he suggests, can “potentiality bear[] on one’s other interactions in the world, as when planning or improvising a course of action requires imagination in weighing up various possibilities of comportment, affect, and outcome” (254). But again, the terms of “imagination” and “thinking” are never argued for, presumed to follow from “feeling,” which remains figured in terms of surprise, shock, and disruption rather than anything more specific to individual constructions.

Most recently, Christopher Breu takes another non-discursive approach, attempting to separate postmodernism whose concerns are limited to metafictional

navel-gazing from that which forms “the late-capitalist literature of materiality (25-6), a tradition he identifies with the legacy of William Burroughs, whose models of language as runaway virus and self-consuming tissue require self-conscious experiments with form to think about what kinds of material vectors they create. Yet from his neatly articulated wish to trace how “text continuously shifts from the language of realism to the antirealistic language of the real” (42), Breu leads us to a familiar anti-cognitivism: “fragmentation is valued over coherence and the rhetorical effect of obscenity and hyperbole on readers’ or listeners’ bodies over any commitment to representational or conceptual truth” (43). The goal, as ever, is “to disrupt narrative meaning” (44) with the limited extra-textual upshot of “ideological demystification” (45). Breu usefully shows how often the authors of the era figure this in terms of analogy between language structures and the uncontrolled proliferation of flesh, but positive articulations are linked only to proliferation and the exceeding of cognitive categories. Form-driven re-readings of postmodern fiction’s rhetoric, then, remain tied to the equation between the anti-mimetic and the anti-rational.

Finally, tendency *D*, the non-formal re-readings. I’ve already discussed above how Michael LeMahieu’s archivally-driven rereading of the era’s fiction in terms of deleted passages about logical positivism still ends up leaving antimimetic fiction to the post-structuralist equation, but most rereadings have been less interested in recovering compositional process than sociological context. Amy Hungerford, writing about the consequences of the final division between her mid-2000s contemporary era and the texts through which “contemporary literature” was established as a viable object of study, notes that approaches to those earlier texts have taken a cultural-explanatory approach so pervasive that historicism is now just “the water we swim in” (“EFKAC” 416). The last decade of re-readings of the novels I focus on in this project has consequently been less interested in challenging hoary accounts of their formal centrifuge and deconstructive rhetoric than in explaining these through new historical lenses. In the most persuasive of these accounts, Daniel Grausam shows that the preponderance of metafictional novels in this period that have open, multiple, or

unnarrated endings can be understood in the light of the era's worries about nuclear apocalypse. After all, Grausam points out, if no-one would survive the bomb, who would be left to narrate its happening? He explains a pattern of formal features in a specific group of texts, and, most usefully, he makes that explanation consistent not only with that pattern but with the metafictional impulse underlying the novels: they have to pay attention to logically impossible forms of narration, and so "a sustained attempt to answer the representational challenge posed by thermonuclear war, especially in the missile age, would have to take a metafictional form" (16). By demonstrating this connection between acknowledged form and acknowledged history, he even manages to make a fresh case for the non-hermetic world-relation of the era's metafiction. Yet what he doesn't do, at any stage of the investigation, is tell us something new about the novels' form and rhetoric themselves. Open-endedness, self-reflexivity, indeterminacy, balanced ambiguities: Grausam takes his first-page cues from Derrida on nuclear endings, and painstakingly explains how an inherited pseudo-Derridean account of metafiction's internal workings can be explained in terms of certain historical events. The current historicist-water dynamics of rereading postmodern fiction, then, are unlikely to help us understand how a novel like *PLUS* puts its antimimesis in the service of a constructive argument about how to build an agentive consciousness and recuperate deliberation.

APPENDIX B – Definitions and Vocabulary Choices About Context

Much of the terminology I rely on throughout this project, particularly in terms of grouping and contextualizing texts, is controversial, specialized, or overdetermined. Take *postmodern*, for example. Exhaustive debates over what it actually meant occupied much of the 80s and 90s without settling on a very clear answer; as I've already discussed, it refers to a generation of fiction-writers and to a generation of literary theory that I want to distinguish from each other; within the merely literary sphere it still leads to confusions over whether it's a description of formal qualities or contextual origins; those 80s and 90s debates were so grindingly unproductive that the very term prompts an anticipatory sigh of tedium from many people. So why not coin a new term for the authors I address in order to save their study from that disinterest and the thousand confusions the term is heir to for both specialists and outsiders? There are two basic reasons. The first is that these novels *are* the product of a conscious move beyond modernism: they proceed from the "exhaustion" of the melioratively-realist attempt to come closer and closer to representing, and immersing readers in, the real structures of mental experience through linear sentences. They're also, for better or worse, *known* and canonized as "postmodernism." This underlies my second reason for using the term, which, ironically enough, is as a merely disruptive or exploding gesture. I aim to disallow two putative entailments: that there's an equation between the two categories we currently call postmodern fiction and postmodern theory, and that "postmodern fiction" is a mere symptom of the cultural era of "postmodernity." Referring to the fiction by another name would leave these entailments untouched for anyone trained to think "oh yes, postmodernism" when they heard the names Barth or Gaddis (and vice versa). Insofar as people still know what groupings "postmodern fiction" or "postmodern theory" refer to, what's left to attack are the logical operators, the "=" or "->" signs that express the equation or the entailment. These I can best de-establish by precise descriptions of the fiction that was once used to establish them. This, I hope, will re-animate a term that has become both diffuse and sclerotic, allowing future critics to

grant the relationship between the fiction's range of forms and ideas and the cultural and philosophical contexts of its time without suggesting that the latter logically determines the former.

Critics and philosophers like James Battersby, Charles Altieri, Alan Singer, or Paisley Livingston insist on the essential *rationality* of literary artworks as communicative artefacts of composition, and their isomorphic relationship to matters of *rational* worldly action. My account of the postmodern project novels' concern with viable agency, and their defiance of poststructuralist attacks on that viability under the umbrella of broader attacks on the category of *reason*, require clear definitions of a whole set of related terms: *rationality*, *reason*, *rationalization*, and *rationalism*, as well as of my central term *deliberation*, which I'll often collocate with practicality and rationality.

To begin with *deliberation*, it's relevant to the novels I examine in its *phronetic* guise, insofar as it identifies the weighing up of options towards a practical choice. I examine this mainly regarding mental processes, though there are connections between this and the more public, vocal contestation and negotiation of commitments and plans of action that preoccupy social-scientific investigations of deliberation. The crux of this definition is that deliberation as it interests the novelists in question is inextricable from the intent to act. This sets it against what Derrida's later work makes of the concept: his account of the role played by the undecidable in any act of decision first disconnects deliberation from true decision as contaminated by the presumptions of commensurability that he says make any calculated decision the mere operation of a rule, and then, having disconnected it, he finds a value for it separable from decision, as the enjoyment of weighing considerations from many angles without having to reduce them to commensurables. Deliberation as I refer to it, by contrast, will be entirely under the rubric of making practical choices.

When I talk about *rational* deliberation, it might seem like I run the risk of redundancy, since both terms involve the attribution and comparison of values. The particular structure I have in mind is this: *rational* covers the initial process of allocating

relative value to comparable entities or ends. *Deliberation* then covers the process by which those values are weighed against each other in relation to plans of action, in situations marked by the passing of time, which should eventuate in an action susceptible to at least partial judgments of responsibility. *Rational* then takes on a secondary relevance in the question of whether the deliberation actually hewed to the established values, ends, intentions, and criteria by which the deliberator took themselves to be planning and acting; the counterpart would be the classical concept of *akrasia*, or failure to act according to your own judgment.¹¹² It should be clear from this that practical first-person deliberation in these terms makes no claim to the sanctions of a reason beyond the deliberator's immediate investments. Derrida's association of it with rule-guaranteed calculation, though, shows how thinkers and literary critics in the postmodern-theory vein have tended to conflate all terms associated with the commensuration of values into their attack on *rationalism*. Rationalism, I'm happy to agree with them, refers to any philosophy that operates on the conviction that by accurate enough value-assignment and logical deduction we could understand the world and act infallibly within it. It presumes that at heart all elements of the universe can be reconciled according to a single value system. Practical deliberation, though, is a matter of constrained timelines, imperfect information, and subjective valuation. There's a contrast, in my understanding of the value-system animating the generation of novelists in question, between *reason* and *rationality* on the one hand, and *rationalism* and *rationalization* on the other. They advance articulations of the former as solutions to problems posed to and caused by the latter. In this sense, *rationalization* can refer to *rationalism's* harmful social practices: its attempts to *make* the world comprehensible by manipulating its rough edges and incommensurabilities out of existence. In related, mental terms, it's the bad-faith process of bending understandings of prior events and actions to a desirable pattern. Against this, when I talk of *rationality*, I'm talking about

¹¹² *Akrasia* was a live issue in US philosophy of the postmodern era, and among the challenges posed to deliberative agency that the authors I address responded to directly or indirectly. Like many of those challenges, it was thoroughly engaged in the novels of the US *fin de siècle*: see Wharton's *House of Mirth* in particular. For the central texts of *akrasia's* revival as a philosophical concern during the postmodern period, see Davidson.

the present-tense capacities of judging better or worse ends and better or worse means to pursue them, and when I talk of *reason*, I'm talking about the faculties and standards that have to undergird those capacities.

Beyond the critical-theoretical lineage that treats all of these terms as equally obnoxious because of their shared commitment to commensuration, there's a further problem in using *rational* or *reason* to talk about literature, which is that they already have more specialized uses in much of the criticism I'm trying to dispute. Defences of literature's rationality against an irrationalist foe have tended, first and most consistently, to motivate a return to naïve realism and a disinterest in literary self-consciousness that maintains the equation between rational and mimetic, anti-mimetic and anti-rational that I'm writing against, and second, to treat good rational literature as entailing a particular set of political commitments. In the first case, see the comprehensive though tendentious genealogy of anti-rationalist thought that Lukács establishes as grounds for associating the rise of experimental fiction with the rise of fascism in *Destruction of Reason*, or concerning postmodernism in particular the way that Graff's convincing excoriation of the post-structural identification of literature with unreason, and that unreason with necessarily effectual radicalism, then fails to imagine any version of literature that could be both rational and non-mimetic. In the second case, the defence of literary reason has been put in the service of arguments about historical inevitabilities, from Ben Agger's Marxist utopianism, to Lukács' more specific assertion that the Reason experimental literature has deluded everyone away from is the potential of 1950s Stalinism to bring about a perfect world, to Richard Wolin's very different conclusions at the end of his own genealogy of contemporary unreason, which suggests that its worst legacy is widespread anti-Americanism in European intellectual circles. None of these defences of reason and literary rationality express much interest in contingent deliberative rationality at either the practical-individual or public-agon levels. Graff's, Agger's, Lukács's, Wolin's, are not the versions of *reason* or *rationality* that the postmodern project novel propounds, and I use the terms throughout according to the priorities of the fiction rather than other critics.

Finally, as my title suggests, I'm arguing that these novels *recuperate* deliberation. By this I just mean that they acknowledge rather than denying the various challenges that their preceding century had posed to the kind of rational deliberative agency I've described, and then go about establishing warrants for living and acting in that challenged world. As the distinctions I've made above should convey, I see them interested in rational agency at the practical decision-warranting level, from a contingent, deliberative perspective, but having no interest in either rehabilitating *rationalization* (private or public/infrastructural) from its pejorative connotations, nor in restoring faith in grand-narrative *reason*. They acknowledge the challenges of a world in which anti-foundationalist ideas have become uncontroversial givens, and they work within those terms. This philosophical structure is isomorphic with their stylistic innovations, which usually work out a new way to epitomise those challenges, and then use modulations of style within the new format to convey the salvage of agentive warrants.

APPENDIX C – Relevant Antifoundational Philosophies

Since the majority of the authors I examine had already begun publishing before poststructuralism arrived in the US with Derrida's presentation of "Structure, Sign, and Play" at Johns Hopkins in 1966, and since their recuperative orientation was in almost every case apparent within their first two novels, the most relevant antifoundationalisms are existentialism and pragmatism. While the latter may have been the native tradition, the former was the more pervasive in the intellectual atmosphere in which these authors wrote. As George Cotkin and Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen have demonstrated, there had been significant waves of interest in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in the US since the end of the first world war, the former in particular exerting, through theological circles, major influence on national politics. The end of the second world war gave rise to a similar boom in interest in French existentialism, with the added boon of the celebrity philosophers' willingness to visit the US and promote themselves. Ideas about the ungroundedness of all decision, the incoherence of selves without action, the leap of faith that constitutes self-determination, were briefly omnipresent. William Barrett's introductory survey of existential thought, *Irrational Man* (1958) sold more than a million copies, while the existential influence is obvious in successful literary novels that end with the hero resolving to be their own man by beginning a directionless leaping or running: the two most widely known today are probably Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) and John Updike's *Rabbit Run* (1960). Yet these novels' male, middle-class settings reflect both the swift domestication of the ideas, and the fact that existentialism's starting-point pessimism and dramatic tendencies made it a strange fit for a country increasingly characterized by widespread affluence and cultural homogeneity.¹³ Existentialism lost its distinctive glamour and its philosophical singularity as its contentions became givens.

¹³ Abigail Cheever and Andrew Hoberek trace how US literature and culture of the era soon diffused worries about existential categories like authenticity and autonomy respectively into other realms and other idioms, becoming the terms that undergirded discussions of clothes and career-paths.

It's in this atmosphere that postmodern authors came to write: EL Doctorow recalls how in 1955, "When I went to college, the existentialists were very current and important in college halls" (Bevilacqua 129), but clarifies how unusual he was in remaining interested in the ideas four years later. William Gaddis' notes towards stories in the 1940s and 50s stipulate "(existential)" whenever they mention the topics of choice or decision, but by the 70s his notes on the same topic never mention the word. Barth's *The End of the Road* engages with Camus and Sartre at length, though their ideas are mouthed by a quack doctor whose attempts to rouse the philosophically literate narrator from deliberative paralysis only lead him to do harm. The *postmodern project novels* move beyond existentialism's answer to the how-to-act-without foundations question in a number of ways. They depart from Sartre's insistence that literature should be straightforwardly mimetic: his unwillingness to interrogate the foundations of literary rhetoric. Their preoccupation with agency in terms of long-duration projects sets them against the idea that agency and self-creating action can be located in directionless one-offs like the leaping and running at the end of *Henderson* or *Rabbit*: Sartre's idea of the "project" as the context in which men could find a source of self-generating action had explicitly framed that action in terms of momentary commitment. And they reject, most fundamentally, the category in which existentialism had found something like a foundational value to aspire to: authenticity. *The End of the Road's* narrator sees himself first and foremost as a self without a stable character. Pynchon's unpublished late-50s operetta *Minstrel Island* had featured a band of artists defining their purity against the colonizing force of IBM: within five years, V. was arguing for the irrecoverability of an era when humans had grounds to think of themselves as more real than robots.

The postmodern project novelists examine the problems of acting in service of a project, whereas existentialism and its literature had prioritized the escape from such constraints, seeking ways to be *free* and *authentic* in isolation from longterm goals. These failings of existentialism—its literary conservatism, its contentment with pseudo-foundations, and its disinterest in long-duration modes of being—were givens to this

generation of authors: insofar as the failings were failings *at establishing viable agency-conditions*, the fiction should be understood as an attempt at greater adequacy to the challenges of its time.

As various critics have argued, poststructuralism too was a post-existential movement devoted to undermining two of the same problems: existentialism's unsophisticated literalism about the instrumentality of language, and its tendentious way of making the emptiness of the subject a path to reliable authenticity. The shared concerns about the limitations of a preceding antifoundationalism and the temporal overlap make the frequent equation of postmodern fiction and poststructuralist theory understandable. But neither in terms of language nor of subjectivity, and even less so of the accounts of literary mechanics and agency-conditions that arise from these concerns, are they at all compatible.

When literary critics first linked poststructuralism and postmodern fiction, the former referred almost exclusively to Derrida's work, with an occasional nod to Barthes' work on literary conventionality and "The Death of the Author." Since Barthes had no interest in connecting his literary linguistics to claims about practical agency, that connection rests almost entirely on Derrida's generalization of the structural concept of *différance* into the realm of practical reason. In structural terms, *différance* is a "deferral" in the sense that insofar as the structures of social concepts are linguistic structures, they have no transcendent guarantees of stable meaning, and so are subject to infinite substitutions of parts:

the nature of the field--that is language, and a finite language--excludes totalisation. This field is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a centre which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions. (289).

Insofar as "reason" (or "authenticity") is one such social concept, Derrida suggests, this possibility of deferral arises whenever we might attempt to use "reason" as an arresting centre, as in matters of decision. Consequently, what is true in terms of resolving

structural contradictions is true in terms of practical agency: “I do not believe that today there is any question of *choosing*... we are in a region (let us say, provisionally, a region of historicity) where the category of choice seems particularly trivial” (293). Choices defer themselves to the extent that they rely on any stipulation of reason: the necessity of choice generates deliberative paralysis. Unlike a Wittgensteinian or Peircean approach which would only let the hesitations of doubt arise within contexts in which other assumptions are stable enough to “arrest and ground” the doubt’s local, practical significance, Derrida suggests that any ungrounding of reason relinquishes from agentive channeling: his conception of viable human action thus rests not on directed choices, but on “the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. *This affirmation then determines the noncenter otherwise than as loss of the center*” (292). This, then, is the heart of the account of postmodern fiction that makes a virtue of deliberative paralysis by embodying a directionless realm of excessive profusions of meaning that subordinate subjectivity to choiceless systemic drift, thus undermining the “realist” categories of sovereign reason.

There’s a missing step in all this, which is any demonstration that in the absence of a stably grounded endpoint to reason’s definitional regress we can’t nevertheless work with provisional definitions or make provisional choices. In debate with Derrida, John Searle made precisely this point, avoiding the more obvious examples of philosophical investigation of acting under conditions of uncertainty to suggest that the same possibilities hold in terms of concept-structures. To his claim that philosophers and linguists have shown that “many, perhaps most, concepts do not have sharp boundaries” (103), and that pragmatic communication nevertheless goes on, Derrida responds with categorical refusal, “it is impossible or illegitimate to form a *philosophical concept* outside the logic of all or nothing” (qtd Searle 103). In this respect, deconstruction operates on a conventionally rationalistic metaphysics, lacking only the rationalist’s faith in its practical viability. John Ellis has suggested that deconstruction’s claim to

dissolve the dubious binaries on which rationalist thinking proceeds “often seems to break down,” in practice, into “a strong tilt toward the polar opposite of the naïve belief from which the argument begins” (139). Within the framework of “philosophical concepts,” Derrida’s own binary “all or nothing” presumes the rationalist all, and *différance* leads us to require a “nothing.” Rationalism’s operating binary continues to dictate. Unable to transcend this central binary, deconstruction, even in its affirmative guise, remains an antifoundationalism rather than a postfoundationalism. In the generalization of *différance* from conceptual to practical, the imperfectability of theoretical reason has to rule out practical reason. It’s this that I suggest the postmodern project novels dispute. So what antifoundational heritage *can* they lay claim to in their interest in constructive contingent agency?

Derrida’s affirmative version of unfounded living sells its appeal in terms of getting to live “without fault.” Tobin Siebers’ historical explanation for the popularity of sceptical orthodoxies in literary-theoretical circles notes that, growing out of cold war worries about credulity in the face of power and charisma, critics adopted sceptical philosophies like deconstruction because “Believing in nothing is thought to be more ethical than believing in something because belief, according to coldwar sceptics, usually leads directly to confrontation on the battlefield” (82). Siebers’ language echoes that of William James’ disagreement with WK Clifford’s idea that “it is wrong, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (WTB 227). James anticipatorily vindicates Siebers’ argument in turn by his insistence that scepticism is a matter of will and convenience: “Do not decide, but leave the question open,’ is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and its attended with the same risk of losing the truth” (WTB 229). The anti-deconstructive terms of critics like Graff, Siebers, Searle, and Ellis, stem from awareness of logical paralysis’ potential affective rewards, the short path it offers to revelling in exculpation from urgent worldly commitments, or from the possibility of error or fault in action. In this worry, they constantly echo early US pragmatism, from James’ implications of Clifford’s logic-blinded epistemic cowardice—“Scepticism, then, is not avoidance of option; it is option

of a certain particular kind of risk” (WTB 241)—to Charles Peirce’s mockery of the aversion to correction: “Let all possible causes of a change of mind be removed from men’s apprehensions” (FOB 117). As I’ll show, the authors of postmodern project fictions share this distaste for using programmatic skepticism as a pre-emptive ward against discomfort.

What, then, do the novels have in common with US pragmatism that they don’t with poststructuralism, apart from an anticipatory hostility to poststructuralism’s blanket celebration of deliberative paralysis? Pragmatism may be the oldest of these antifoundationalisms, but it is the one whose negative gestures are most tightly bound into the attempt to generate defensible new warrants. The central difference in every sphere from agency to practical politics is that pragmatism takes impetus from the absence of certainty where for deconstruction it is necessarily paralyzing. For Peirce, doubt “stimulates us to action until it is destroyed” (FOB 114): like Kierkegaard, the early pragmatists keep and cultivate doubt precisely as the ground of the possibility of action. For James, the feeling of contingency and the possibility of regret are desirable in and of themselves, and can only be accessed through making live practical decisions. Doubt that precedes the context of such action can only be part of a programmatic, commitment-averse scepticism: “a mere self-deception... A person may, it is true, in the course of his studies, find reason to doubt what he began by believing; but in that case he doubts because he has a positive reason for it, and not on account of the Cartesian maxim. Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts” (SOME CON 71). Federman justifies his fiction in those programmatic terms: “Doubt is indeed the term that best explains and defines postmodern fiction. Founded on doubt and perpetuating itself with doubt, the fiction written in the 1960s and 1970s not only doubted itself, but it also doubted the historical and cultural conditions in which it was created” (117). The distinction between the Federman-Sukenick and the project-novel versions of postmodern fiction, then, is a distinction of openness to uncertainty, and of attitudes to whether doubt can establish a path toward better knowledge.

It was Peirce's fallibilism—his dual commitment to the ineliminable possibility of error and the viability of holding truth-claims for the purposes of action—that Richard Rorty jettisoned in his “neo-pragmatist” reconciliation of pragmatism with Derrida. While Peirce might have agreed that “For the pragmatists, the pattern of all inquiry—scientific as well as moral—is deliberation concerning the relative attractions of various concrete alternatives” (PRI 640), Rorty evades Peirce's commitment to identifying ways to resolve deliberation: like Derrida, he suggests that any such determination would be a culpable capitulation to “rule”, “the common urge to escape the vocabulary and practice of one's own time and find something ahistorical and necessary to cling onto” (642). This, however, ignores the potential-failure part of fallibilism, and that potential's active affective attraction for Peirce and James. Postmodern project fiction's *recuperative* inclinations also lack this escapist inclination, precisely because they don't deny the postfoundational givens of their culture, but work within their terms. This can only be reconciled with the long-term, sequential actions that add up to a project if we believe that each action gives us information with which we can judge whether we have approached or diverged from our ends. Another aspect of pragmatism's construtiveness, therefore, is its intrinsically long-term and directional orientation.

Against versions of scepticism that claim to know in advance that the outcome of investigation will be unjustifiable, and hence exempt themselves from the possibility of “fault” or error, and anticipating the later Rortian hostility to “method,” James suggests that “No particular results, then, so far, but only an attitude of orientation, is what the pragmatic method means” (WPM 295). “Orientation” has two valences here: the first in terms merely of the fallibilistic *attitude* with which we begin our actions and inquiries, but the second, stemming from fallibilism's intrinsically long-term epistemology, from the idea that each action or experiment will give us information with which to direct the next. This is one of the ideas animating Peirce's definition of truth as the eventual destination to which all investigations will converge: the definition of truth depends upon, rather than preceding, a psychology in which “thought is what it is, only by virtue of its addressing a future thought which is in its value as thought identical with it,

though more developed” (Some Con 103). By the same token, “In every case, the subsequent thought denotes what was thought in the previous thought” (Some Con 84). Thought, to the degree that it is ever singular and separable, thus contains a presumption of its future development in the processes of decision and action. As James puts it, “when as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself. We still pin our faith on its existence and still believe that we gain an ever better position towards it by systematically continuing to roll up experiences and think” (WTB 233-4). This orientating presumption of development makes contingent estimation an *antidote* to rationalism’s commitment to the pre-decision certainty of “particular results.” Each choice made provides in its outcomes further information with which to re-orientate oneself in relation to goals. Accounts of foundationless action *not* oriented to this sense of development—like Derrida’s famous (though tendentious) paraphrase of Kierkegaard “the instant of decision is madness,” or Rorty’s identification of “Pragmatism and Anti-Authoritarianism” more committed to removing “rule” than to progress toward “truth”—thus tend to prioritize undirected “free play” or delegitimation. Siebers notes how this logic underpinned literary-theoretical claims to radicalism in the cold war period—for him, fashionable scepticism “makes a virtue of thinking otherwise without thinking about the directions in which it may lead” (28)—and it underpins the uniformity of the anti-mimesis=anti-rational conflation: the only direction that matters for removing power from hegemonic reason and narratives is “away,” and all antimimetic forms thus, for practical purposes, tend in an identical direction.

The novels I examine downplay these single destabilizing moments, not least because the Derridean focus on the “instant” and the Rortian sense that antifoundationalism makes permanent, anti-authoritative reallocations of power lack any explanation of how we get from one to the other. What Lisi Schoenbach has suggested of pragmatism’s significance to many modernist authors is true too of the sympathies I see between it and postmodern fiction:

Without the recontextualizing component of social change, the energies of shock disperse, leaving mindless habits of thought essentially intact. The gradualist politics of pragmatism, seen in this light, appear less like accommodationist capitulations to existing power structures and more like a refusal to take empty, radical posturing as a substitute for meaningful political change (8/9).

This notion of direction's preferability to one-off radical shock, of the value of a targeted reorganisation that gets rid of what doesn't work in a given context and replaces it with what might, is crucial to the longterm project-orientation of the novels I examine. They're not just attempting to blow minds and uncover myths, but to actually warrant coherent restructurings of the way we deliberate, and ground our deliberations, in daily life. This orienting establishment of contingent values, and its intrinsic commitment to self-correction according to external standards, is a fundamental element of early pragmatism that has been almost entirely written out of the uses that postmodern literary theory has made of it. It's this that I aim to show that the novels in this project most emphasize in their engagement with the philosophical lineage of antifoundationalism.

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