POSTMODERN PIRATES: METAPHORIC EXPERIMENTS IN THE NOVELS OF DONALD BARTHHELME, THOMAS PYNCHON, AND KATHY ACKER

by

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ABSTRACT

The main thesis is that the often-noted resistance to interpretation by the experimental novels of Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, and Kathy Acker has to do with the radical functioning of metaphor in the texts. These are metaphoric narratives that employ strategies of piracy to eschew narrative closure. In the first chapter, I link the sub-genre of metaphoric fiction to the Romance tradition in American literature, and I discuss contemporary debates about metaphor and narrative. My starting point for thinking about experimental fiction in the ensuing chapters is to be Donald Davidson's post-structuralist notion of metaphor, with its explicit rejection of the reigning cognitivist model. The second chapter, drawing on further theoretical materials, places Donald Barthelme's novels in the literary contexts of modernism and postmodernism, as represented respectively by Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges. Moreover, through textual interpretation, I show that Barthelme's work is best understood in the light of Borges' metaphoric labyrinth. The third chapter examines the novels of Thomas Pynchon, on the
basis of my extended development of the concept of "piracy." I propose that this particular term will shed light on the nature of the intertexts created by all three experimental writers. In the fourth chapter, on the work of Kathy Acker, I take a close look at one particular strategy of piracy: literary plagiarism. I conclude my argument by situating the metaphoric narrative in relation to what I see as the two main competing paradigms of postmodernist fiction.
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For John
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CHAPTER ONE

FROM AMERICAN ROMANCE TO THE METAPHORIC NARRATIVE

Snow White continues to cast chrysanthemums on Paul's grave, although there is nothing in it for her, that grave. I think she realizes that. But she was fond of his blood, while he was alive. She was fond not of him but of the abstract notion that, to her, meant "him." I am not sure that this is the best idea. *(Snow White 180)*

No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into. *(Gravity's Rainbow 3)*

I've just been pretending I'm a pirate and mean and an Arab terrorist and have no morals. Actually, I ain't none of these. *(Empire of the Senseless 175)*

The novels by Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, and Kathy Acker that I discuss in the thesis have three things in common, apart from the obvious but significant fact that they are written by Americans. First, their foregrounded experiments with narrative conventions render them notoriously resistant to interpretation. Second, their deep structure is a number of metaphors, which set in motion colliding and conflicting sets of implications which are never resolved into one stable meaning; for this reason, I call them *metaphoric*
narratives. Third, the conception of piracy, which I introduce at the end of this chapter, and elaborate throughout the thesis, especially at the beginning of the third chapter, sheds light on their narrative strategies.

In this introductory chapter, I situate Barthelme, Pynchon, and Acker in the tradition of American romance, before moving into an elucidation of the theoretical premises for the primarily interpretive work in the following chapters. In particular, I explain the term "metaphoric narrative," which relies on a post-structuralist understanding of metaphor. Finally, in a brief overview of the narrative strategies shared by the texts that are the focus of the ensuing chapters, I explicate the term, "piracy."

**Romance and Realism in the Nineteenth Century American Novel**

Contemporary discussions of mimesis in the novel have a long history, one significant chapter of which is the "novel versus romance" debate that, until this mid-century, dominated much of the critical reception of eighteenth and nineteenth century American fiction. Richard Chase, who tries to delineate differences between American novels and their English counterparts, is just one of the voices in this tradition. I introduce it here, not as part of an exhaustive rehearsal of the history of these categories, but strategically, to provide for Barthelme, Pynchon, and Acker, whose texts can be related so easily to the phenomenon of
international literary postmodernism, an additional, and specifically American, context.

There is agreement in much literary criticism of nineteenth century fiction that, primarily as a result of the creation of a particularly American psychology and imagination out of the two sets of symbolic structures embodied in Puritan thought and the pastoral myth of the American Adam, the American novel is a highly symbolic rather than social literature, which falls therefore into the genre of romance.² This distinction is premised, of course, on a definition of the novel as the recognizably social avatar of the genre produced by nineteenth century British writers, in which there seems to be a direct connection between the world of the text and the world outside it; while romance is defined as symbolic or allegorical literature, which has a more psychological relationship to the real world.³ As Walter Benn Michaels puts it:

The distinction . . . between the novel and the romance, between a fundamentally mimetic use of language and one that questions the primacy of reference, has . . . become canonical in American literary criticism even though (or perhaps just because) its meaning remains so uncertain (Michaels 156).

Although these ideas are used primarily in the context of discussions of nineteenth century fiction, I think it useful to address the "novel vs. romance" issue, albeit briefly and
schematically, in terms of both the canon and the metafictional texts produced by American modernism and postmodernism.

In *The American Novel and its Tradition*, Richard Chase argues that the history of the American novel, from the works of Charles Brockden Brown to those of William Faulkner, is one that reveals a "freer, more daring, more brilliant fiction that contrasts with the solid moral inclusiveness and massive equability of the English novel" (viii). Writers such as Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, Henry James, and Nathaniel Hawthorne assume, in Chase's view, "freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development and continuity" (ix), not as a naive escapism from the "real world," but because they wish to explore "complex truths unavailable to realism" (xi). This division is not meant as a rigid barrier between different kinds of fiction. It is, rather, a device Chase uses to suggest that the American novel, with its "passion for extremes" (x), is always a hybrid form. Even when there are overtly realist or naturalist aspects, it always deploys romance as a way of examining ideas. This romance/novel distinction is, like any dualism, potentially reductive, but it is useful to the extent that its foregrounding of the issue of mimesis highlights some motifs characteristic to novels in the American canon.

Some of the earliest works in American fiction, such as Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*,
and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, can be said to demonstrate Chase's point. *Wieland* and *Pym* fall clearly into the category of Gothic romance, but the first takes the form of a domestic drama, while the second pretends to be a true story of geographical exploration. At one level, *Wieland* presents itself as a novel of manners in the tradition of Samuel Richardson and Jane Austen. Like the former, it has an epistolary structure reminiscent of *Clarissa*, and much of the action revolves around the theme of the heroine's chastity. Like the latter's *Pride and Prejudice*, there is an overt moral message to the effect that early impressions can be misleading. Certainly one possibility sustained throughout *Wieland* is that all mysteries will resolve into common sense and everyday morality, as they are, for example, in Austen's wonderful spoof of gothic romance, *Northanger Abbey*; and the fact that Carwin's tricks account for several misunderstandings between Henry Pleyel and Clara Wieland encourage us to expect that all potential horror is only the work of dream and imagination. *Wieland* is primarily structured, however, by an exploration of desire and madness that is often revealed in dreams. Drawing on realist traditions, *Wieland* subverts realist conventions. It constitutes, therefore, an excellent example of what Chase thinks of as the peculiar American hybrid, in which traditionally realist forms are woven into the structures of romance.

In *Pym* and *Mohicans*, there are far fewer "realist"
elements than in Wieland. Despite its alibi, the former is an exploration of the darker side of human psychology embodied in such horrors as entombment, cannibalism, and madness. As for the latter, Cooper uses the adventure story, itself a romance form, not only to tell a good tale, but also to examine American history through the eyes of a dying race. There is a moral surface to this novel, and the problems of tribal life (or, rather, extinction) are clearly laid at the door of "the white man," but Cooper's work never leaves the arena of romance. He relies on the myth of "the noble savage" in his descriptions of Chingachcook and Uncas, just as he draws on the romance of the frontiersman in his delineation of Hawkeye.

The myth of the frontier, and its related romance of freedom (the American Dream that the individual can make anything of her/himself without the constraints of a centuries-old societal structure of norms, values, classes, and possibilities), becomes a continuous feature, if not a requirement, in the history of American fiction right up to the present. It is worth thinking here about The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, especially in the light of Twain's much-renowned break with the romance form. It is certainly the case that Huck Finn uses realistic and mimetic "spoken American," and that it is pervaded not only by satire in the form of "local colour" descriptions of social structures, but also by irony about romance: after all, it turns out that Huck and
Jim are journeying in the wrong direction; and Tom Sawyer's romantic notions about the proper way to break Jim out of jail are clearly ludicrous fabrications derived from romance adventures. At the same time, the Edenic world of raft and river, Huck's belief he can escape being "sivilized" if he can "light out for the territories," and the democratic possibilities implied by Huck's relationship with Jim, the slave he decides to help free: these aspects of *Huck Finn* enact precisely the romance of the frontier, and the related notion of the (democratic) American Adam. Very different from *Wieland*, *Huck Finn* can also be placed into the category of hybrid novel *Chase* argues is so peculiar to the American canon, in which realism services romance.

The two novels that are central to discussions of early American romance are Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* and Melville's *Moby Dick*, because they so obviously invite allegorical and symbolist readings. In *Scarlet Letter*, the A becomes a polysemous site of interpretation, and the triangle between Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth, and Hester Prynne can be assimilated into Puritan allegory. In *Moby Dick*, it is impossible to keep track of all the symbolic meanings Ishmael hyperbolically weaves into the text. *Chase* explicitly disputes Yvor Winters' claim that *Scarlet Letter* is "pure allegory" (Chase 81), and he calls the whale in *Moby Dick* a "poetic symbol" rather than an allegorical creation. On his reading, these novels have what he calls, in the context of a
discussion of *Scarlet Letter*, "beautifully assimilated allegorical elements" (75).

*Scarlet Letter*, like *Wieland* before it, is a deeply psychological novel, but it lends itself to narrowly allegorical readings because of its symbolic foregrounding of moral and spiritual conflict. Chase asserts, however, that these allegorical elements constitute just one level of the text; and I would say that, although the novel is highly symbolic, and immersed in the rigid dualisms of Puritan thought, the text makes very damning comment on the way in which society treats Hester Prynne. Hester’s isolation allows her a special view of her community, and she ends up thinking a great deal about her punishment, as well as about its context. Looking around, she fancies that she sees, in others, natures as sinful as her own. There are passages in the novel in which she plays with radical ideas about social and sexual morality, and her decision to run away with Dimmesdale reveals that she rejects the condemnation of her society. In a crucial scene, which takes place, significantly, in the forest, she lets her hair down, suddenly transforming herself from a drawn, straight-laced woman into a vital and sexual being, though only for a short moment. She is, the rest of the time, in disguise, presumably until the next century.

All this is not meant to imply that *Scarlet Letter* is realist: on the contrary, the point is to look at the
complexity of the romance/realism distinction as we describe and categorize texts. Social criticism is usually thought to fall into the "realist" camp, but as we have seen, the satirist text of *Huck Finn* is far from free of romance features; and *Scarlet Letter*, quite clearly symbolist, has in it an engagement with the rules of society that we associate with English novelists such as Hardy and Eliot. What the term romance points to is the idea that, in American fiction, the symbolic structures the mimetic, and reference becomes itself an issue.

*Moby Dick* provides the best example of a novel in which, to paraphrase Chase, the action encounters little resistance from reality (13). Ahab, the man who would "strike the sun if it insulted me," journeys into the face of what most attracts, challenges, and terrifies him: the whiteness of the whale, into which he is, in the end, incorporated. His quest, at one level a good adventure story, becomes, at another, an unresolved philosophical inquiry into the nature of good and evil. In this text, overt romance elements are complemented by echoes of more realist traditions, but these other levels of the text are always woven back into the symbolic puzzle.

To be specific, there are exhaustive descriptions in *Moby Dick* of the practice of whaling, along with many catalogues of the uses to which different parts of the animal are put. These details delineate day-to-day reality on the Pequod, and they also reveal the extent to which civilization depends for
its survival on the whale hunt. This aspect of the text is over-shadowed, however, by more symbolic levels: constant allusions to literary and mythical whales; ironic echoes of more traditional whaling narratives; deeply sensuous linguistic evocations of unconscious desire. Similarly, the issue of racism that pervades the narrative, and which finds its most overt form in that odd coupling of Ishmael and Queequeg, never takes on the voice of detailed social analysis. Instead, it becomes a comical foil to the tragedy of Ahab's vendetta against Moby Dick.

If Hawthorne and Melville are the exemplars of the romance tradition, Henry James is usually categorized into the "realist" camp, although the oft-used but confusing qualifier, "psychological," reveals that his work signals a new kind of writing. Chase includes James in the category of American hybrid.

In James' fictions, we find coherent plot-lines and detailed social descriptions reminiscent of Jane Austen, especially in early texts like Daisy Miller, in which Daisy's brash American innocence brings into sharp relief the arbitrary but nevertheless rigid rules of the sophisticated but staid European society she visits. There, the very appearance of impropriety itself implies a corruption of her virtue, symbolically rendered as the illness that kills her. In his later work, and as Turn of the Screw most clearly reveals, the question of reference becomes itself increasingly
foregrounded as an issue in his work. The fact that James' last three novels, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl* are said to have "carried American realism to its greatest height" (Holman 322) raises very interesting questions about terminology. *The Ambassadors*, for example, is, arguably, an early version of what later develops into the "stream-of-consciousness" or "interior monologue" technique in modernist writing, which is not usually considered realist. That is, when James Joyce and Virginia Woolf write stream-of-consciousness novels, they are not writing realist novels, even though they try to approximate, in a realistic way, the workings of the mind. In fact, their work constitutes a significant break from the nineteenth century novels of Hardy and Eliot, which follow certain kinds of narrative conventions about the portrayal of social reality, the passage of time, and so on. In *The Ambassadors*, James follows the chronological style found in much realist writing, but he plays throughout with the issue of reliability of information.

Specifically, *The Ambassadors* is another of James' "Americans in Europe" stories. Lambert Strether has been given a mission, which is to rescue Chad Newsome from the seductions and corruptions of Paris and bring him back to Woollet, Massachusetts, to marry Mamie Pocock. If he is successful, Strether will probably "win the hand" of the widowed Mrs. Newsome herself. In the course of the novel, Strether finds himself less and less willing or able to carry
out his mission, because he discovers in European life so much more promise, so much more romance, than in small-town life in Massachusetts. *The Ambassadors* performs a symbolic reversal, here, of the differences between Old and New Worlds in *Daisy Miller*, where Europe represents constraint, and America the possibility of freedom.

Chad Newsome does not follow Strether’s *carpe diem* advice to stay in Europe; and, in fact, we never know whether we can trust Strether’s instincts or perceptions on this or any other issue. From the beginning, he is looking for something that is missing from his own life; and he is too easily seduced by the romance of Europe, especially as it is embodied in the glamorous Marie de Vionnet. The novel is not actually about what happens to Chad Newsome, then, but is, rather, about Strether’s psychological reality. In this regard, the novel is, for a modern reader in particular, strikingly realistic, but it undermines the traditions of realist mimetic writing.

What does this have to say to the distinction between realism and romance? First, James re-deploys the romance of the frontier, transplanting it, at one level, back into Europe, and at another, into the mind itself. Second, while *Ambassadors* does not invite strictly allegorical readings like those more readily applicable to *Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick*, it nevertheless "questions the primacy of reference" (Michaels 256), and undermines the sense of a knowable external social structure inevitably impinging on the individual; what James
calls, in his Preface to The American, "the things we cannot possibly not know, sooner or later, in one way or another."

In other words, The Ambassadors participates in romance because it is about "the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and desire" (James, "Preface," The American).

The issue James raises here is, of course, that of "the real," a concept much problematized in this century. In what I have said so far, the term realism has been used narrowly, to designate features of texts that refer, relatively unproblematically though through formal narrative conventions, to an outside of the text, to an ineluctable and objective social reality. Romance, on the other hand, has been broadly conceived to describe the symbolic and allegorical features that dominate, and often structure, the novels I have been discussing, and that make them more resistant to interpretation. This has been a deliberate strategy to present, in the American canon of the nineteenth century as it is currently conceived, an ongoing imaginary engagement with the question of reference.

From American Modernism to Contemporary Metafiction

It is a standard argument in English Literature courses that the British social novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth century was developed for a growing readership of middle-class women and men—in that order. We often read these novels as
documents of the rapid social changes taking place at the
time, such as industrialization, urbanization, social
mobility, secularization, democratization of suffrage and
education, and "the woman question," as experienced by
individuals caught inside the social net. This definition,
developed in retrospect and with hindsight, excludes some of
the writers who were popular at the time of publication, and
includes others who may only have been "discovered" after
their death. This is an obvious point, but not a trivial one:
the history of the novel is a history of experiments, of nov-
elties, and we can trace many different traditions, depending
on our definition and disciplinary viewpoint. When we speak
of the American novel, we are performing similar inclusions
and exclusions: the novels which interest us are those that
reflect our sense of the American imaginary, as we have learnt
to conceive it.¹⁴

One of the ironies of these definition games is that both
British and American histories claim Henry James' work, which
is defined as realist, as their own. The hybrid novel
produced by the American James becomes the culmination of
British realism? Indeed, the novels produced by James Joyce
and Virginia Woolf, in which social reality is filtered
through the processes, perceptions, desires, and symbolic
associations of the mind, would appear to inherit, besides the
influence of French Symbolism, more from what we understand to
be an American tradition, as exemplified by Hawthorne,
Melville, and James than from the (official) British one. Conversely, the American Modernists, Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, appear to be far more "realist" than even Henry James, never mind James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

If the romance/realism dichotomy is of little use after Henry James for describing novels as specifically American, it is partly because there are so many cross-cultural influences in our century. The American modernist writer presents us with the figure of the exile, or at least the expatriate: Hemingway and Fitzgerald, among others, follow James across the Atlantic. At the same time as these writers participate in an international phenomenon, or express an extra-national Zeitgeist, however, there are still particularly American motifs and preoccupations, as well as narrative strategies, in their works. I demonstrate this point in what follows, by examining, quite briefly, three versions of canonical American modernism embodied in novels by Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and William Faulkner.

In The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald gives us a character whose rags-to-riches story appears to embody the American Dream that one can, by an act of sheer will and individual effort, free oneself from the chains of the past. Gatsby sheds his name, his suspicious history, his class, and his family, in order to follow "the green light." It turns out, however, that Daisy Buchanan, the prize of America, the woman whose voice sounds like money, symbolizes the corruption
rather than the consummation of the Dream. Nick's judgement that Gatsby, who may have made some highly questionable decisions in order to get his pink suit, is better than the careless Buchanans, is a rather strange endorsement of the idealism and purity, the authenticity, of Gatsby's impractical vision. In fact, rather like Huck "lighting out for the territories," Nick decides to go back to the mid-West, where he may still be able to shed the corruptions of the "civilized" East. Despite the fact that Gatsby's dream is undermined, the romance of the frontier is alive and well, as an overt theme, and as part of a recognizably American imagination, at the end of the novel.

The minimalism of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* contrasts sharply in style with Fitzgerald's rich and symbolic prose. An Americans-in-(post-war)-Europe story, one of its overt themes is "the lost generation"—the quotation from Stein is actually the epigraph to the novel. Jake Barnes' impotence, combined with the references to fishing, evoke T.S. Eliot's "Waste Land," and also connect to Fitzgerald's ash-heaps in *Great Gatsby*. This is a novel that purports to be cynical, especially about the kind of romantic idealism embodied by Robert Cohn. However, the images of redemptive Nature, for example, the fishing trips, that pervade Hemingway's work have a peculiarly American flavour, and they invoke the romance of the American Adam. Just as Twain's self-declared realism combines with the romance of the
frontier, so the failures of Hemingway’s characters are to be relieved by the purity and immediacy of the relationship between man and Nature.

This romance of the frontier is to be found, in many different forms, in much American fiction, not only as an overt theme, but also as a symbolic motif, and as a structuring device. It is revived, for example, by the Beats, especially in Kerouac’s *On the Road*, where the open road, especially that going west, signifies freedom. A decade later, in Updike’s *Rabbit, Run*, Rabbit Angstrom, trying to find this same open road, discovers that there is no frontier, that there is nowhere he can travel that has not already been named and occupied; and Barth’s *End of the Road* signals by its very title an explicit engagement with the notion of freedom embodied in the myth of the open road or unmapped territory.

If Hemingway has long been considered the representative of American modernism, and Fitzgerald’s work speaks for a generation, Faulkner’s work constitutes a third, highly influential direction in American modernist writing that has more in common, at least on the surface, with British modernist writing like that of Joyce and Woolf, than with the work of Fitzgerald and Hemingway. Rivalling Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* for the complexity of its opening pages, *The Sound and the Fury*, with its four different perspectives, experiments with and disrupts narrative conventions in an attempt to depict inner life. In *Absalom,*
Absalom, Quentin Compson reconstructs from unreliable documents and idiosyncratic memories the intertwined, and unmistakably American, stories of Ellen and Rosa Coldfield, the Sutpens, and Charles Bon. In both Sound and Fury and Absalom, Absalom, there are unfolding stories, but we are as aware of the telling, and of the process of reading, as we are of the plots: we can discern in these novels the seeds of contemporary metafiction.

The foregrounding of narrative itself, not just as a series of conventions, but also as a human propensity, is a feature of American experimental fictions, particularly in the last 50 years. In Pale Fire, for example, Vladimir Nabokov takes James’ "point of view" technique to an elaborate extreme: we never know the status of anything Charles Kinbote tells us, although we know that he sincerely believes his own story. Similarly, in Robert Coover’s Universal Baseball Association, J. Henry Waugh creates what he knows to be a fictional history; but then, at the end of the novel, finding it impossible to separate the real from the fictional, he starts to live inside his creation. It is possible that Kinbote and Waugh have lost their grip on reality, but, as Joseph Heller’s Catch 22 and Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest suggest, insanity can be the appropriate response to a world that does not make sense. Alternatively, as Hogo says, in Barthelme’s Snow White, "I can certainly improve on what is given" (Snow White 30). In my view,
Barthelme's constructivist notion of textuality, which has a spill-over effect into conceptions of reality, is one aspect of the demarcation between postmodernist and modernist fiction. Where Faulkner's textual experimentation with perception and convention still provides some textual closure, postmodernist fiction, employing many of the same strategies and motifs as its modernist forebears, does not usually allow us to "make sense," see the "big picture," or "put it all together."

I am not about to enter here into the definition games around postmodernism, which, as a term, has come to embody the perfect example of polysemy. For the moment, I use the term to refer to texts that are anti-realist in structure and content. Put differently, the novels normally designated postmodern are those texts written in the second half of this century that experiment with narrative conventions, usually self-consciously, and which resist interpretation, closure, or final meaning. To link this to previous discussions, postmodernist fiction explores "truths unavailable to realism" (Chase xi). One of the problems with the term postmodern is that it is sometimes used to refer to a period, and yet, realism is alive and well in American fiction. At the same time, when the term is used to refer to stylistic devices, we run into the problem that those particular devices can be found in literature of all periods. After all, perhaps the most famous case of metafiction is Laurence Sterne's Tristram
Shandy. I leave this problem unresolved for the moment.

**Metaphoric Narrative**

Contemporary debates about postmodernism revolve around two entirely different paradigms, one that deems that postmodernism marks a skepticism towards "meta-narratives" (see Lyotard, whose ideas can be easily related to those of Derrida and other deconstructionists) and another that claims that postmodernism is simply the current and inevitable stage in the history (meta-narrative?) of capitalism (see Jameson). While the first paradigm rests on the assumption that all forms of knowledge are constructions that arise out of our own capacity to narrate, the second assumes a material and objective reality that can be discerned and described with accuracy. These two models appear to be irreconcilably different, the first eschewing and the second embracing a knowable external reality reflected in texts; and yet they are constantly conflated. (Romance/realism resurfaces?) As I have already said, I am not going to sort this out here. My concern in the body of the thesis is to develop interpretive strategies for the experimental metaphoric narratives of Barthelme, Pynchon, and Acker, who represent three different but related postmodernist poetics. To explain the term metaphoric narrative, I now turn away, briefly, from the literature to a more theoretical discussion of emerging conceptions of narrative and metaphor as they relate to
Narrativity

In 1990, Brian McHale and Ruth Ronen co-edited two special issues of Poetics Today entitled "Narratology Revisited," in which they invited many of the past contributors to the journal to discuss the apparent decline of narratology proper; that is, the scientistic, sometimes even mathematical-formulaic attempts to describe the objective structures of texts that were so popular in the late 1970s and early 1980s, just after the publication of Genette's influential Narrative Discourse, and coincident with the growth of semiotic models of meaning and generative grammars, the inception of Poetics Today itself, and so on. The general consensus among contributors could be summed up as follows: although the "science" of narratology seems to have disappeared, questions concerning narrative have in fact become ubiquitous throughout the humanities and social science disciplines. In fact, Genette himself comments that, whereas narratology has in the past been devoted to the study of fictional narratives, it has now become more interesting from the perspective of other disciplines (755). Two related questions come to mind here: what is it about narratology that appeals to other disciplines; and why has narratology apparently lost ground inside literary studies, where it began?
Christine Brooke-Rose argues that the original attraction of narratology was its promise of scientific objectivity and universality; and that its decline was precipitated once the realization set in that literary texts could not be organized into either logical or linguistic formulae (283). Furthermore, she suggests that narratology "got swallowed into story," by which she means that the complex quality of language itself undermined attempts to schematize it linguistically, and narratologists found themselves returning to more traditional critical conventions, such as thematics, interpretation, and evaluation (287).

While Brooke-Rose makes the progression from interpretation to narratological science and then back to interpretation sound almost natural, Thomas Pavel accounts for it in more specifically political terms. In his view, once psychoanalytical, deconstructionist, reader-oriented, and Marxist critics had successfully challenged the formalist view, narratology found it more difficult to legitimate its existence (351).

This statement requires some investigation because, although it seems straightforward on the surface, the conflation of "psychoanalytical, deconstructionist, reader-oriented, and Marxist critics" into what is then described as an anti-formalist grouping is quite misleading, even if Pavel's point turns out to be true in a general way.

Specifically, it is not necessarily the formalism of
narratology that led to its being marginalized by the literary academy: after all, it could be argued that psychoanalysis and deconstructionism perform "formalist" (as opposed to materialist) readings, and reader-response criticism explicitly focuses on conventional and formal aspects of communication. It is the stasis of narratology that is contested by post-structuralist theories; while it is its withdrawal from ideology, from context, from conventional sociological interests, and from material reality that offends ideological critics, whether Marxist or Feminist. In any case, what Pavel is getting at is that, as Mieke Bal puts it, "more important issues, mainly historical and ideological ones, have taken priority" over strictly narratological concerns in literary criticism, even while narratology is branching out and flourishing in other areas of the academy, especially anthropology and history (729).

The new interest in narrative theory in the extra-literary academy constitutes, or at least reflects, what Wallace Martin, in Recent Theories of Narrative, calls a paradigm change in the humanities and social sciences, which can best be described as a new awareness of the nature of disciplinary discourse. In fact, the concern with "narrativity" is intrinsically related to, perhaps even a version of, "discourse analysis." In other words, narrative, a term once relegated to designate fictional texts, has now come to refer to the manner in which we make sense of
experience. As Ann Rigney points out, "narrative is seen as a discourse through which a coherent sequence of events (i.e. a story) is represented" (265). Furthermore, narrative, so ubiquitous in culture, is often thought to be a central cognitive function we employ every time we turn a sequence of events into a story, by "cutting out" a coherent sequence (Rigney 263).

Nowhere is this newly emerging notion of narrative examined in such depth as in debates about historical discourse by such theorists as Hayden White and Louis O. Mink. In these debates, the notion of the blurred line between history and fiction that is so central a feature of theories of postmodernism does not necessarily shed light on anything but what White refers to as the conventional "association of historical representations with narrative modes of discourse" ("Historical Pluralism" 491). In other words, there may well be "nothing in historical events themselves to require that accounts of them be cast in a narrativist mode" ("Historical Pluralism" 491).

White suggests that:
this value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary. ("Value of Narrativity" 27)

In White's view, then, the narrativization of historiography
is born of a desire for coherence and meanings which random historical events conceived in isolation from each other quite clearly do not support. He suggests as well that a change in historiography from narrative to chronicle might lead to a new and better, more scientific, though less "organic" kind of history:

the dominant view among historians nowadays is to regard the narrative mode of representation as an impediment to history's transformation into a science, rather than as the "natural" way of representing historical phenomena (491).

Mink criticizes this view, mainly because, narrativization seems to me primary, not, as White would have it, derivative--so primary, in fact, that the real wonder is that the historians were so late in discovering it (783).

This disagreement between White and Mink is, of course, simultaneously about history, knowledge, and cognition itself. Mink's claim that narrative has what White calls "cognitive authority" rests on a thoroughly structuralist paradigm, in which the world is structured through language; while White rejects this view in favour of a less "emplotted" history when he argues that the primary value of narrative is "aesthetic satisfaction" ("Narrativization of Real Events" 795).²⁰

The "new paradigm" Wallace Martin refers to, that has led to the awareness and foregrounding of narrativity in non-
literary disciplines, is the conflation of two paradigms. These can be analogically related to the conflicting paradigms subsumed under the term postmodernism, which I outlined earlier in this chapter. Bal’s claim that narratology does useful work in anthropology and other disciplines is motivated by ideological, and not cognitive, considerations. In her view, the introduction of the notion of narrative is the first step in reversing the power relations of received history (or his story), in a material reality which is graspable and knowable. In other words, in this paradigm, discourse-analysis leads to the (ideological) problematizing of the apparent unity and coherence of the disciplinary narrative, in the light of who and what have been excluded from it. In the other paradigm, the focus on narrative by such thinkers as Jonathan Culler, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, and Nelson Goodman, is an investigation into a genuinely non-objectivist reality in which everything can perhaps be construed as narrative, or story.

Metaphor

As early as 1936, I.A. Richards suggested that an adequate study of metaphor must raise deep metaphysical and epistemological issues about reality and its relationship with language. However, it is only with the work of Max Black and Monroe Beardsley, almost thirty years later, that this study is properly launched. In The Rule of Metaphor, an exhaustive
study of western conceptions of metaphor since Aristotle, Paul Ricoeur suggests that Black and Beardsley pioneered what he calls an "interactive" or "tensive" understanding of the relationship between the tenor and the vehicle in a metaphor, 22 which is premised on a semantic (as opposed to a semiotic) conception of language (66). For Ricoeur, metaphor is a process that creates cognitive, and not purely linguistic relationships between apparently disparate things (events, objects, ideas), and thereby restructures our conceptions of the real. 23

This "tensive" concept of the relationships between metaphor, language, and the real is debated throughout the 1980s by a growing number of studies of the deeply metaphoric nature of language itself. 24 In Lakoff and Johnson's Metaphors We Live By, for example, the authors investigate the "mistaken" conception that there is some kind of language that is not metaphoric: they argue that our normal, everyday, non-literary speech is, as etymological studies will attest, riddled with what we might now call "dead" metaphors; or metaphors whose metaphoric roots we no longer recognize. 25 Recently, however, metaphor is often thought of as a central conceptual process, particularly in the growing field of psycholinguistics:

the conviction goes that metaphor is deeply ingrained in cognitive processes, social acts and verbal usage, that metaphor is in fact a constitutive factor of all mental
That is, in this new model, metaphor is not simply a feature or product of language. Rather, it plays a role in any kind of attempt at classification, hypothesis, or communication. As with narrative, there are still lively discussions in the literary academy about metaphor; but it has also become central as a way of discussing cognitive process in other disciplines. What accounts for this exporting of literary concepts and materials is presumably related to the influence of structuralism on the academy, with its special emphasis on language and linguistic structures, discourse, and the relationship between perception and phenomenon. It is not surprising, therefore, that the linguistic model and its ramifications should be appropriated by other disciplines when they are in the process of disciplinary self-diagnosis. A cursory analysis of non-literary discussions about metaphor and narrative--as in the quotation from Paprotta and Dirven above--reveals that these two terms are, in theory, becoming almost inter-changeable: they are conceived of as cognitive processes, central to the construction of reality.

The cognitive model of metaphor (and that of narrative) is, as might be expected, very influential in literary studies, especially for interpretations of non-mimetic literatures. There is still an active debate, not only about the linguistic function of metaphors and how they are
interpreted and understood by readers, but also about metaphor meaning itself, as it applies in both literary and non-literary contexts.

Donald Davidson's work on metaphor in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, is enlightening in this context, because he sets himself against not only dualistic understandings of the structure of metaphor, but also the emerging (structural) cognitive model. For Davidson:

> what distinguishes metaphor is not meaning but use--in this it is like assertion, hinting, lying, promising, or criticizing. And the special use to which we put language in metaphor is not--cannot be--to 'say something' special, no matter how indirectly. For a metaphor says only what shows on its face--usually a patent falsehood or an absurd truth. And this plain truth or falsehood needs no paraphrase--its meaning is given in the literal meaning of the words. (Truth 259)

In Davidson's view, metaphor, which he calls "the dreamwork of language" (245), should be understood in terms of function rather than structure. When he says that "there is nothing there to paraphrase" (247) in metaphor, because it is already "literal," he means that the paraphrase cannot give us the insight(s) of the metaphor: "there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention" (263). Tomas Kulka comments, in "How Metaphor Makes Its Wonders," that, for Davidson, "metaphors are not propositional in nature" (796). Davidson
rejects, then, the dominant cognitivist model in favour of an open model, in which he wants to look at the insights produced by the "special use to which we put language" in metaphor production.

I have outlined a progression in theories of metaphor from a narrow dualism, in which meaning is to be interpreted by way of literal paraphrase, to the "tensive" model described by Ricoeur, and on to its heir, the cognitivist approach so common today, in which a mental act of metaphor is central to all conceptualization, because it connects different domains through series of analogies. Metaphor has come a long way, it seems, from a rhetorical figure to the arbiter of reality. The problem is that the cognitive model still has in it the original narrow dualism of the "literal falsity" model, but it has simply ruled that both sides of the equation are figurative in the first place. In other words, the cognitive model allows one to explain the metaphoric process as though it were some kind of hypothesis or proposition; as if it were a completely rationalist, intentional, and contained phenomenon, perhaps even accessible to empirical study.\(^2\)

Donald Davidson rejects much of the history of metaphor theory when he says that a metaphor's "meaning is given in the literal meaning of the words" (Truth 259). If, as Davidson suggests, metaphor is a "special use of language" which generates limitless insights, then it cannot be adequately accounted for by the structuralism of the cognitive model. My
own view is that there are many different kinds and uses of metaphor; but that Davidson's description can be useful in discussions of the structuring principles of postmodernist fiction.

Like metaphor, narrative has also been absorbed into a cross-disciplinary structuralist cognitivism, in which the "rules" of narrative precede any particular example. I would argue that, although studies of narrativity can yield interesting insights, there is no Ur-narrative which acts as a prescriptive paradigm. In fact, just as metaphor can generate limitless insights, narrative is open to limitless appropriations.

Taking this correspondence between narrative and metaphor one step further, I suggest that postmodernist fictions, and especially the novels I discuss in this thesis, are metaphoric narratives. Radically non-mimetic, the metaphoric narrative is structured in such a way as to place in play limitless possibilities that cannot be resolved or absorbed into day-to-day extra-textual reality. The metaphors that play through these texts cannot be understood dualistically, rationalistically, or allegorically; rather, they set in motion multiplying resonances. This is not to say that postmodernist novels are irrational or meaningless in terms of the real world. On the contrary, they have much to say about history, knowledge, narrative, science, and many other productions of the human imagination; but their complexities
cannot be resolved into a particular political or ideological project.

Postmodern Pirates and Strategies of Appropriation

In the following chapters, I will argue that Barthelme, Pynchon, and Acker deploy similar narrative strategies of piracy—that they belong to the same family of postmodernist American experimentalism—even though the metaphoric narratives they produce offer three entirely different reading experiences. Barthelme creates a textual surface that distances readers from the ironic, abstract, comical, and highly self-conscious attempts of his characters to live inside ready-made, and often all-too-familiar stories. Even psychological material that in another writer's hands might be horrific or at the very least dramatic is undermined both by the constant play with words, and by the ironic distance set up between experience and language. For example, in the passage "we dreamed we burned Snow White. Burned is not the right word, cooked is the right word... She was spitted on a spit (large iron bar)" (109) the pedantic play with language which culminates in the parenthetical "large iron bar" eradicates the potential impact of what is, after all, a fantasy of violent murder.

The typical Pynchon sentence, far from distancing the reader, entangles her: "to Profane, alone in the street, it would always seem maybe he was looking for something too to
make the fact of his own disassembly plausible as that of any machine" (V. 30); "she is the deepest innocence in spaces of bough and hay before wishes were given a separate name to warn that they might not come true" (Gravity's Rainbow 65). What is disruptive about Pynchon's texts, and especially about Gravity's Rainbow, is that as soon as we think we know what is going on, the ground shifts again: in The Crying of Lot 49, Oedipa's Tristero flickers in and out of existence; the main character in Gravity's Rainbow disappears. This destabilization is achieved, not through the kind of irony that in Barthelme's metafictions keeps the reader essentially uninvolved, but rather by an interactional process that invites the reader into a labyrinth that turns out to be almost impossibly complex to negotiate.

Acker's repeated and crude use of sexually explicit language that speaks "precisely that which the codes forbid" (Empire of the Senseless 134), placed alongside such things as Marxist tracts, and often inside either canonical or avant-garde ready-made narrative structures makes for alienated readers who find, even more than in their reading experiences of Barthelme and Pynchon, not only that they cannot predict what will come next, but that they might not always care. Put differently, where Barthelme is playful and charming, and where Pynchon engages some of the most complicated and difficult issues of our century, the "in your face" surface of Acker's text seems destructive and violent, even "senseless."
Nevertheless, Acker’s work is intelligent and arresting, especially in what I will call her strategy of psycho-sexual explicitation (see chapter four): at her best, Acker does not deconstruct, so much as explore the texts of western culture.

If the experiences of reading Barthelme, Pynchon, and Acker are quite distinct, their metaphoric narratives have nevertheless a number of features and techniques in common. In my view, the starting point for interpretation is, in each case, that these novels feature radical unpredictability and uncertainty at the level of form as well as that of content. I do not use the term "radical" loosely. These texts do not play with the theme of uncertainty; rather, at their very roots, at their deepest organizational structure, there is no stable meaning, no ground, just a series of colliding, often conflicting metaphors. It is for this reason that I refer throughout the thesis to the radical functioning of metaphor in most of the novels I examine. Below, I discuss, for introductory purposes, the family resemblances—the features and techniques just mentioned—in the three sets of texts.

Just as the proverbial six blind men investigating its different parts will not apprehend the elephant as a whole animal, no list of narrative strategies can, by itself, describe the nature of any particular novel. At the same time, this kind of investigation reveals, here, the shared poetics of Barthelme, Pynchon, and Acker, whose texts are so singularly and significantly different from each other. What
I am trying to show here is how these three writers construct their metaphoric narratives using strategies of appropriation. There has been much talk recently of appropriation of voice, which engages the question of who can or should speak for whom. In the metaphoric narratives I discuss in this thesis, respect for authenticity is simply not the name of the game. Barthelme, Pynchon, and Acker unabashedly appropriate whatever is available to them for their own purposes, without any regard for origins. The literary-critical search for the authentic voice that lies beyond or behind the panoply of voices, like the attempt to render this kind of writing politically responsible, or, at the very least, mimetic, is, in my view, quite mistaken. I will return to this point at the end of the thesis.

Ready-mades and Metafiction

One of the points we often make about metafiction is that it reveals the extent to which texts are about other texts, and not about anything outside of text: "il n'y a pas d'hors texte." It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Barthelme, metafictionist par excellence, should foreground the frames of familiar fairytales or legends--Snow White, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table--in his creatively anachronistic novels. These are placed in juxtaposition to other kinds of discourses, in Snow White, various tracts about "the horsewife," theoretical discussions of waiting, and so
on; in The King, the discourse of modern warfare; in The Dead Father, a dizzying array of narrative structures, including Jason and the Golden Fleece and a tract about patricide. Barthelme's characters, though conscious that they are living inside ready-made scripts that are not working, and maybe never did work very well, are nevertheless trapped.

When Pynchon uses the familiar, ready-made story, it is not only for such explicitly metafictional purposes. To be sure, Oedipa is identified with both Oedipus and Rapunzel in the first chapter of The Crying of Lot 49, and her quest leads her into an intertextual labyrinth of documents, stamps, stories, theories, and memories which she must shape into a single narrative: her drive to make sense of things by tracing the history of the Tristero makes, of course, a metafictional point about the demands and seductions of narrative itself. In addition, however, the use of the ready-made story is for Pynchon always a short-cut way of making other than metafictional points. The Hansel and Gretel fairytale is invoked throughout Gravity's Rainbow, for example, to metaphorically connect diverse story-lines, as well as to provide several series of familiar images--"children alone in the forest" (Gravity's Rainbow 176), the wicked witch, the oven--that already have resonance with readers. The emotions these passages can evoke in us are themselves "ready-made," and Pynchon simply exploits them.

In her early work, particularly Great Expectations and
Don Quixote, Acker also signals her intention to use "ready-mades." However, while both Barthelme and Pynchon undermine the happy endings of familiar fairy-tales meant for children, Acker chooses, in the first place, "serious" canonical texts of western culture that, at least in the case of Dickens' text, already refuse the romance or fairytale ending—which would require in the original Great Expectations that Pip marry a reformed and loving Estella. Until Empire of the Senseless, Acker's texts are built explicitly around "other texts," which provide familiar stories the protagonist can use to construct her own life-story, and also her identity. This particular technique is to be distinguished, however, from the strategy of plagiarism proper.

Plagiarism and Reconfiguration

When Barthelme uses the Snow White fairytale for his novel, he does not plagiarize from it: the original, which provides names and themes for his text, is entirely visible at all times. Even when he apparently uses other, unidentified texts, Barthelme's novels stay in the realms of parody, irony, and perhaps borrowing, because the texts he uses always remain visible as sources. Both Pynchon and Acker weave together material from other texts, without always signalling to us what they are, where they come from, or even that they are lifted out of another text. This is precisely what we call plagiarism, not only in the case of scholarship but also in
the case of art or literature. Their use of other texts cannot be simply relegated to the category of casual quotation, or necessary intertextuality; both writers deliberately appropriate something from one place and use it for their own ends.

Acker follows her literary source texts very closely, often using the same names, and duplicating particularly familiar scenes. Her plagiarism is therefore very obvious; and the scatological and sexually explicit idioms, which often strike readers as scandalous, imply that she is simply making pornography of canonical texts. As I have already argued, this is neither her aim nor her achievement; nevertheless, it makes Acker’s plagiarism into a literary-critical issue. Pynchon, on the other hand, often lifts his materials from obscure, or at least non-canonical texts for his novels, and then uses them obliquely; his plagiarism is not as foregrounded, then, as Acker’s.

Piracy

The term piracy applies to both plagiarism and to the use of ready-mades, as well as to other strategies of appropriation, such as the use of material from popular culture. Barthelme is, as one might expect, relatively minimalist in this regard: there is actually very little reference in his novels to particular movies, books, songs, subcultures, or magazines. Pynchon’s novels abound with these
kinds of references, and his use of them contributes to the evocation of particular periods and particular places he writes about. At the same time, and as my analysis of the life-is-a-movie metaphor shows (see chapter three), these references do not necessarily stabilize the text. Acker’s sampling of popular culture stresses subculture: tattoo parlours, sex clubs, pirate ships, terrorist groups. Placed alongside, or inside the great books of western culture, these references create metaphoric connections between normally quite separate worlds: Caddy Compson, whose virtue is of such importance to all the men in her family in The Sound and the Fury, is brought into vivid relief in In Memoriam to Identity, where she is treated as a nymphomaniac who speaks her sexuality in the explicit and crude language of hard pornography. When she appropriates the Faulkner text and puts it alongside pornographic discourse, Acker pirates both texts for her own ends. What she produces is neither pornography nor any other kind of stable narrative, but, rather, a labyrinth of resonating discourses; a web of interconnected pirated texts; a metaphoric narrative.

"Catch me if you can": Process and the Metaphoric Narrative

One reason for using piracy to co-ordinate a number of the issues I raise in the thesis, is that the elusive character of the chase for meaning that Barthelme, Pynchon, and Acker send us on is like trying to find a pirate on the
high seas: in literature, anyway, the pirate has no home, and so we have no starting place but the place that has just been robbed. Just as we cannot find the original source, or the original meaning of the nightmare that opens Gravity's Rainbow, we cannot find stable ground in the metaphoric narrative. It is the counter-examples, those works that stand out in the oeuvres of these three writers that are not metaphoric narratives, that can help us see what makes the rest of the texts radically metaphoric, so piratic. In Pynchon's Vineland and Acker's Great Expectations, the raw materials are indeed present for the metaphoric narrative, but they are not sufficiently processed. What I mean by this is that, in Acker's mature work, and in Pynchon's first three novels, as well as in Barthelme's Snow White and The Dead Father, there is a great deal of distance between the original materials and the end result. One gets the sense that the prose has been worked and re-worked in order to extract from it the spontaneity and authenticity that might somehow cling to the original, or to any other type of writing. The moment that we think we have arrived at something solid, we are reminded that this is not the case.

In Barthelme's The Dead Father, people make their confessions right inside the machine-body of the dead father. These confessions:

are taped, scrambled, recomposed, dramatized, and then appear in the city's theaters, a new feature-length film
every Friday. One can recognize moments of one's own, sometimes. (4)

The confession, traditionally considered the most authentic and heart-felt of utterances, whispered in the privacy of the confessional into the ear of someone empowered to bestow forgiveness, has now been processed into montage. "Moments of one's own" become fragments inside a polyphonic narrative, pirated from their original context to become mass entertainment. This describes, to some extent, the processing necessary to the metaphoric narrative. Examples of this processing abound in Gravity's Rainbow, but it is also to be found in the "Stenciling" process that all material undergoes in V.: Stencil takes each story he hears and refocusses it so that it suits his ongoing narrative. Acker opens Empire of the Senseless with Thivai telling Abhor's family history, which culminates in her being raped by her father. Later, Abhor tells a story that is similar in almost every particular, but this time, it is her stepfather who wants to have sex with her, and he is stopped by her mother. When she finishes this story with "I sexually desired my adopted father" (67), we do not know what, if anything at all, actually happened to Abhor. Furthermore, the similarity between the names Acker and Abhor implies that there is something of the autobiographical in this repeated story.

In Vineland, by contrast, Pynchon does not distance his materials from their context in Reaganite America. The
reference points are too specific, the politics too open, and the objects of plagiarism too immaturity processed for the novel to constitute a metaphoric narrative. The storyline is too straightforward, the family drama too shallow, the cultural reference points too bald, and human motivation too transparent for this to rival any of the metaphoric narratives I discuss in the next three chapters.
CHAPTER TWO

NOT WAITING FOR GODOT IN AMERICA: DONALD BARTHELME

Head on hands half hoping that he would not reappear again and half fearing that he would not. Or merely wondering, Or merely waiting. Waiting to see if he would or would not. Leave him or not alone again waiting for nothing again. (Samuel Beckett, *Stirrings*, 29)

the effort is not to write like Beckett (Donald Barthelme, in LeClair and McCaffery 142)

How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly planet? It is useless to answer that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but in accordance with divine laws--I translate: inhuman laws--which we never quite grasp. Tlön is surely a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth devised by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men. (Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius")

In *Snow White*, *The Dead Father*, and *The King,*¹ textual worlds collide with each other, setting in play limitless resonances. Pirating characters, languages, texts, and story-
lines from the cultural repertoire, these minimalist metafictions do more than foreground issues of narrativity and intertextuality: in Barthelme's novels, there is no background, no outside, no ground. These texts, in which "the primacy of reference" is so obviously in question, have forebears in the American canon, as I have already argued in the first chapter, but they must also be understood and interpreted in the light of more international developments in literature since the turn of the century. It is partly to that end that I situate Barthelme's work in two literary contexts: the brand of European Modernism expressed in Beckett's work; and International Postmodernism, as exemplified in Jorge Luis Borges' stories. The main point of this apparent detour away from Barthelme, however, is to provide a working definition of the difference between literary modernism and postmodernism that is neither periodic (Beckett and Borges both wrote throughout most of the century, and they died at around the same time) nor purely stylistic; I argue that it has to do with the functioning of postmodernist texts as metaphoric narratives.

The Beckett Signature

After Beckett's death in 1990, Patrick Parrinder made an interesting comment about his work:

Now that Beckett's endgame is at last played out we can look back and note the profound changes which have taken
place in his literary reception. He is currently read as a postmodernist rather than as an existentialist.

(Parrinder 25)

The operative term here is, of course, reception: what is at issue here is whether Beckett's work actually changed over the course of his career, or if the definition of his work has been altered as a result of being re-read and re-evaluated in the light of each succeeding avant-garde literary-critical fashion—absurdism, existentialism, modernism, surrealism, post-modernism. If Beckett has recently been subsumed under the banner of postmodernism, this is partly because many of Beckett's most characteristic stylistic devices find their way into postmodernist writing, and partly because his work appears to reject what Jacques Derrida calls "the metaphysics of presence." I suggest, however, that Beckett simply substitutes "absence" for "presence" as the essential, objective, originary, and catastrophic truth of humanity; and that the tragic "authenticity," or what Normand Berlin calls the "higher realism" (48) of Beckett's vision is at odds with the indeterminacies of postmodernist writing.

I will argue that, in the case of Barthelme, there are motifs in his novels that borrow from, or at the very least echo, aspects typical of Beckett's films, novels, and plays: repeated, often nonsensical, often very funny, physical and verbal gestures, an overt dread of any loss of equanimity, minimal character development, and minimal action. If
Barthelme has to make an effort not to write like Beckett, it is because these motifs function differently, and must, therefore, be read and interpreted differently, in the two sets of texts.

To be more specific about Beckett: there is a strong argument to be made that the signature of Beckett has remained essentially the same over the last fifty years, and that his artistic importance lies in the ingenious methods he has employed to examine the abysmal, unexaminnable depths of modernist despair. Beckett's aesthetic of failure is one side of the High Modernist coin: if "heads" is the view that art can itself redeem the terrible world, "tails" is Beckett's refusal to allow that epiphanic moment of redemption. He does not go, however, beyond the modernist moment into the iconoclastic experimentation and playfulness which has come to be called postmodernism, even though Beckett is very playful.

In my view, the Zeitgeist expressed in Beckett's work has far more in common with the work of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust than is discernible at first glance, and it is rooted in what we now casually refer to as "the death of God."

For Joyce, the role of the artist takes on enormous significance when one's world-view is substantially one of religious disenchantment; the artist becomes the creator who discovers the artistic moments of epiphany. For Beckett, however, who apprenticed as Joyce's secretary, there is no
redemption in art or any kind of creation. The absence of God, the turn from God to man, is for Beckett both tragedy and banal reality; for him, heaven and hell are re-placed and re-inscribed in man's head, presumably where they belonged all along. Ruby Cohn has this to say about the difference between Joyce and Beckett:

Beckett's erudition compares with that of Joyce. Although they work differently, they both strive for maximum inclusiveness in their fiction. Joyce's reach is encyclopedic; he finds a syllable or symbol to suggest everything, from the most trivially accidental to the most mythically universal. Omniscient and omnipotent, detached and smiling, he creates a universe of unparalleled linguistic wealth. Beckett, in contrast (and perhaps in direct reaction), seeks ignorance, impotence, nakedness. He comes as close to them as literature can, but he cannot achieve them. (Cohn, Gamut 289)

While Joyce, even in a secular world, uses language in order to examine the infinite and the immanent, then, Beckett distrusts language itself for its capacity to imply a ground of meaning when there is none. As Ruby Cohn puts it, language is, for Beckett, a "veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or Nothingness) behind it" (Disjecta 11).

In Watt, one of his almost unreadable novels, Beckett plays with both the conventional and the modernist-
experimental forms of fictional literature, making explicit the microcosmic nature of any novel's world and characters. The main character is an anti-hero to whom nothing much happens in the course of the book, except a couple of train-rides, some conversations, and some thoughts. His ostensible "quest" is to find out who and what is his employer, Mr. Knott (an early avatar of Godot), but he never discovers anything definite. In terms of heroic novels, Watt is a pathetic, bathetic and perhaps Kafkaesque hero; in comparison with novels that describe a social panorama, we learn very little about the external features of Watt's world; and in relation to more personal or experimental novels, there is comparatively little psychological material.

Like many of Beckett's characters, as also many of Barthelme's, Watt has certain habits that keep him functional: one is to follow through, in his mind, the list of logical possible combinations of any given situation to its finite end:

... these voices, sometimes they sang only, and sometimes they cried only, and sometimes they stated only, and sometimes they murmured only, and sometimes they sang and cried, and sometimes they sang and stated, and sometimes they sang and murmured, and sometimes they cried and stated, and sometimes they cried and murmured, and sometimes they stated and murmured, and sometimes they sang and cried and stated, and sometimes they sang
and cried and murmured, and sometimes they cried and
stated and murmured, and sometimes they sang and cried
and stated and murmured, all together, at the same time.

(29)

Watt's ritualistic exploration of possibilities, like the
absurd and repeated physical gestures--the constant donning
and doffing of hats, putting on and taking off of boots--of
the characters in Waiting for Godot, is one means of making
time pass in a world in which nothing is meaningful, and every
action becomes purely idiosyncratic behaviour. At the level
of form, this becomes more complicated, because Watt not only
undermines reader-expectation for the conventional novel, but
also inverts the characteristics of what we think of as the
Modernist experimental novel of writers such as Proust, Joyce,
and Virginia Woolf. For these writers, though in different
ways, the human psyche proves to be a fascinating and
illuminating subject for the novel. 6 Watt hangs on to a
fragile sense of order and reality by using his lists to avoid
the painful complications of identity, 7 memory, and feeling,
even of joy and pleasure, because these latter are so
ephemeral and, without God, utterly meaningless.

Put differently, for Beckett, the fact that there is no
God, no truth, no ultimate referent or transcendental
signified, renders this world meaningless. Once the religious
framework--in which death is only the beginning of a new kind
of life, and in which death, ironically, makes life
meaningful—has been dismembered, human life on this planet becomes simply a question of getting through each moment with as little pain as possible. There can be no doubt that Beckett rejects the humanistic side of existentialism, often highly religious in flavour, in which each individual is constantly in the process of becoming. This does not mean, however, that he goes beyond the angst/nostalgia for presence. On the contrary, absence itself functions in his work as the ground, even the foundation, of meaning, or rather, meaningfulness.

Although the worlds created by Beckett are apparently empty of significance, there is, as Alain Robbe-Grillet points out, a very narrow margin for misunderstanding in Beckett's work (Esslin 110). Discussing the pleasures, as well as the frustrations of watching Waiting for Godot, a play in which, after all, nothing happens twice, Normand Berlin comments that "the life of the play seemed fully present to my senses," and, moreover, that, "Beckett permitted nothing to come between me and the stage" (Berlin 48). If the word "nothing" comes up again and again in Beckett's own writing, and in the criticism of his work, it is because, throughout his career, Nothing is Beckett's theme, Beckett’s message. What he offers his audiences is an essential and definitive, if existentialist, truth about humanity, an authentic poetry of despair about the rootlessness of human life that is almost entirely dependent on a religious sensibility. In fact, I would suggest that
attendance at, or consumption (through reading) of Beckett constitutes a form of spiritual experience. Perhaps Beckett's writings allow his audiences a catharsis, a temporary sense of despair and suffering which puts into perspective what Ruby Cohn calls the "cluttered complexity" (Gamut 3) of our daily life, by supplying the opportunity for a moment of salutary asceticism. His comedy, which makes the work pleasurable, would be interpreted, from this perspective, as just one of Beckett's means of revealing the absurd nature of human existence.

There can be no doubt that Beckett's abyss makes an appearance in Barthelme's novels. It is for this reason that interpretations of texts by Barthelme and Beckett, especially when they focus on the "exhaustion" theory of language and literature, make them sound very similar. In Larry McCaffery's view, for example, Snow White "demonstrates the bankruptcy of language" ("Aesthetics of Trash" 149), something that could clearly also be said of Beckett's Watt; and Lois Gordon makes an explicit connection between the two writers, by invoking Beckett's Endgame in a discussion of The Dead Father: "here too is a world stripped down to its essentials" (Donald Barthelme 165, my italics). In my view, however, the function of Beckettian narrative strategies in Barthelme's novels can usefully be interpreted, read, in the light of Borges' labyrinth.
From the Abyss to the Labyrinth

In "Avatars of the Tortoise," Jorge Luis Borges concludes his analysis of Zeno's paradoxes of "infinity" with the following:

"The greatest magician (Novalis has memorably written) would be the one who would cast over himself a spell so complete that he would take his own phantasmagorias as autonomous appearances. Would this not be our case?" I conjecture that this is so. We (the undivided divinity operating within us) have dreamt the world. We have dreamt it as firm, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and durable in time; but in its architecture we have allowed tenuous and eternal crevices of unreason which tell us it is false. (Labyrinths 208)

It is in interpreting this last word, "false," that we can draw the connection between Beckett's modernism and Borges' postmodernism, and also show their difference.

For both Beckett and Borges, there is no Aristotelian "prime mover," no Christian God to speak the Word and to arbitrate the affairs of humanity, no Logos, no transcendental signified. There is just us, and an unknowable natural world which inspires, or at least requires, human invention and interpretation. In Beckett's work, this is the human tragedy; and all actions are attempts to suppress conscious awareness of the abyss that threatens to reveal itself as the very ground of Being. His characters live inside a series of
Aristotelian either/or choices: either there is a God, and life is meaningful, or there is no God, and life is utterly meaningless; there is something, or there is nothing; the external, objective, outside world is benign, or it is hostile, indifferent; the individual is saved, or the individual is damned; something is true, or it is false. Present or absent, God functions in Beckett’s textual world as the origin, the limit, the essence, and the centre of meaning; however bleak it is inside this world, God, or rather God’s absence, provides stability and determinacy. Put differently, the abyss becomes Beckett’s truth, as well as the hallmark of his vision.

Borges, by contrast, eschews this kind of authenticity. When he says that our world is a dream, that it is false, this does not mean that he can point to truth; when he says that we are under the spell of our own phantasmagorias, this does not mean that we can strip them away to reveal some essential, or existential, human condition. In Borges’ work, the architecture of the (metaphysical, textual) world that we, "the undivided divinity," have created is a labyrinth. There may be an orderly planet outside of this labyrinth, but if so, it is organised by "inhuman laws" to which we have no access; while the reality we invent/inhabit is the creation "of chess masters, not of angels" (Tlön, Labyrinths 18).11 Borges' intellectual puzzles explore the human laws, the abiding metaphors, and the texts that make up the labyrinth.
Each of the seven stories I discuss here engages with one or more of the central concepts of western metaphysics: time, eternity, death, birth, Aristotelian logic, identity, origin, God, Being, history, reality. Using a scholarly apparatus, and drawing on both existing and imagined literary, philosophical, and scientific sources, Borges invents alternative realities, or possible worlds, which have metaphysical premises different from our own. In each case, it turns out that any particular concept is inextricably connected with all the others: for instance, a culture organised around a conception of time other than the western notion of a continuum must also conceive of identity, history, and death quite differently. Furthermore, even death—surely a physical irrevocability—is shown to have, in Borges's work, a metaphysical component, to the extent that its cultural meaning is to be discovered in the architecture of the language, myths, and metaphors we use to describe it.

If Beckett inverts the metaphysics of presence to a metaphysics of absence in which God remains the origin, albeit absent, of meaning, Borges' stories engage with, and deconstruct—reveal the "eternal crevices of unreason" of—the metaphysics of presence itself. In "The Circular Ruins," for example, Borges effects a remarkable critique of the nostalgia for the origin. The twist to this story about a magician who wants to "dream a man . . . dream him in minute integrity and insert him into reality" (Labyrinths 46) is that he comes to
realize that he too has been created, dreamed, by another: ". . . his condition was that of a mere image. Not to be a man, to be the projection of another man's dream, what a feeling of humiliation, of vertigo" (Labyrinths 50). Far from performing an act of original creation, the magician is simply a phantom in a cyclical chain in which each act of dreaming completes one circle and begins another in an infinite repetition, with no beginning, no end. The magician's creation is, like himself, not simply "the projection of another man's dream," then, but a projection of a projection of a projection, ad infinitum; infinite regress, eternal return. "We have dreamt the world," we are dreaming the world, we are ourselves dreamt, we dream of a first dreamer.

The concept of the infinite is one that occurs again and again in Borges' stories, but it always takes different forms. In "The Library of Babel," he explores the metaphor of the universe as an infinite and perfect library that has no centre, no edge: "the universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries" (Labyrinths 51); there is one human librarian in each gallery. This library contains all possible books. Everything expressible, in every language, has been already written, and is to be found on its shelves. Perhaps infinite, certainly complete and perfect, the library requires no writers, no speakers, only librarians to sort, catalogue, organize, shelve, and perhaps read. One alternative activity
is to search for the book that is "the formula and compendium of all the rest" (Labyrinths 56), the catalogue of catalogues, the key to the universe; the problem, of course, is that there is no way to be sure which is the right volume. In Babel, reality is an intricate web of competing linguistic constructions; to use Derrida's formulation, "il n'y a pas hors du texte," there is no outside of text.

The infinite makes its appearance again in "The Garden of Forking Paths" and "The Lottery of Babylon." In both these stories, time is conceived as a web, rather than as a linear, cause-effect continuum, but there is a crucial logical difference between them: whereas in "Garden," time is infinitely divisible, in "Lottery," it is infinitely sub-divisible. More specifically, The Garden of Forking Paths is a riddle written in the form of a novel in which "time forks perpetually towards innumerable futures" (Labyrinths 28). Time is, from this perspective, an infinite labyrinth of possibilities, all of which always come to pass. As one of the characters in Borges' story says to another:

We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist and not I; in others, I, and not you; in others both of us. In this present one . . . you have arrived at my house; in another . . . you found me dead; in still another, I utter these same words, but I am a mistake, a ghost. (Labyrinths 28)

Needless to say, the novel, with its "dizzying net of
divergent, convergent, and parallel times" (Labyrinths 28), is incomprehensible to a reader for whom there can only be one history, the recording of the series of irrevocable events leading up to the inevitable present, which will, in turn, determine the one and only future.

In "Lottery," Borges introduces us to an imaginary society, "(whose) customs are saturated with chance," and "where the lottery is the basis of reality" (Labyrinths 30). In Babylon, the free, secret, and general lottery, which takes place every sixty nights, determines the (temporary) fate of every individual:

A fortunate play could bring about his promotion to the council of wise men or the imprisonment of an enemy (public or private) or finding, in the peaceful darkness of his room, the woman who begins to excite him and whom he never expected to see again. A bad play: mutilation, different kinds of infamy, death. (Labyrinths 32)

For each drawing that decides one's fate, there are hundreds of other drawings that work out the details:

In reality, the number of drawings is infinite. No decision is final, all branch into others. Ignorant people suppose that infinite drawings require an infinite time; actually it is sufficient for time to be infinitely subdivisible, as the famous parable of the contest with the tortoise teaches. (Labyrinths 34)

In Babylon, identity is fragile, and uncertainty pervades all
life: "I have known what the Greeks do not know, incertitude" (Labyrinths 30). At the same time, the fact that every action, every event, is attributed to a secret lottery run by an invisible "Company" means that the uncertainty has at least a name, if not a face. In fact, if there is an origin, Babylon's infinite game of chance may have a design, a functioning ground of meaning, after all.

There are many other details in "Garden" and "Lottery" besides those mentioned above, but the point I want to focus on here is that, when he delineates alternative notions of time, Borges reveals the inextricable inter-relationships of identity, history, and time. Put differently, the architecture of this world that we have dreamt as "firm, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and durable in time," has to be held in place: change one aspect and everything else crumbles. In "The Immortal," for example, Borges addresses the notion of infinity once more, this time in the guise of human immortality. Just as each Babylonian experiences in one normal life-span a myriad identities, the man who has been granted his wish of immortality also loses his individuality, because, "in an infinite period of time, all things happen to all men" (Labyrinths 114). In fact, the granting of immortality constitutes, not freedom from death, but a complete loss of meaning:

Death (or its allusion) makes men precious and pathetic.

They are moving because of their phantom condition; every
act they execute may be their last; there is not a face that is not on the verge of dissolving like a face in a dream. Everything among the mortals has the value of the irretrievable and the perilous. Among the immortals, on the other hand, every act (and every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, or the faithful presage of others that in the future will repeat it to a vertiginous degree. There is nothing that is not as if lost in a maze of indefatigable mirrors. Nothing can happen once, nothing is precariously precarious. (Labyrinths 116)

The organization of time into past, present, and future; the notion that the individual is unique; the logic of cause and effect; the originality and value of art objects; love relationships in which two people commit themselves to each other; the structuring of events into a single sequential and linear history: death, suggests Borges, is crucial to all our assumptions, practices, institutions, and values.

In "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," one more elaboration of the "life is but a dream" metaphor, Borges describes the insertion of a fabricated idealist universe into the texture of day-to-day reality: "reality yielded on more than one account. The truth is that it longed to yield" (Labyrinths 18). In Tlön, which is modelled on the ideas of such philosophers as Hume, Berkeley, and Spinoza, the world is conceived as "a heterogeneous series of independent acts,"
rather than "a concourse of objects in space" (*Labyrinths 8*): objects are not believed to be constant in time and space (11); the language, based on verbs and adjectives, resists materialist formulations; "metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature" (10); and all knowledge is a sub-discipline of psychology (9). This planet was created as a document, a fictional Encyclopedia:

It is conjectured that this brave new world is the work of a secret society of astronomers, biologists, engineers, metaphysicians, poets, chemists, algebraists, moralists, painters, geometers . . . directed by an obscure man of genius. . . . This plan is so vast that each writer's contribution is infinitesimal. (*Labyrinths 8*)

*TLÖN* has been written, created, invented, apparently in diametrical opposition to our own reality. As with all alternative worlds, however, this one may shed light on the extent to which the metaphysics of presence operates to structure and reinforce a non-idealist reality.

Like the other stories I have discussed, "*TLÖN*" is short; but, also like them, Borges sets in play many interconnecting, and often conflicting ideas. I restrict myself here to the description in "*TLÖN*" of what literary criticism looks like on an idealist planet:

It is uncommon for books to be signed. The concept of plagiarism does not exist: it has been established that
all works are the creation of one author, who is atemporal and anonymous. The critics often invent authors: they select two dissimilar works—the Tao Te Ching and the 1001 Nights, say—attribute them to the same writer and then determine most scrupulously the psychology of this interesting homme de lettres.

(Labyrinths 13)

This particular conceit, the invention of an author, makes explicit that interpretation requires boundaries or limitations; that the author is not so much a person as a function,\(^1\) whatever one’s critical approach.

The issue of the boundaries or limits of literary interpretation, just touched on in "Tlön," is addressed more directly in "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote." Borges’ Menard, a minor writer at the turn of this century, decides to re-write, word for word, Cervantes’ Don Quixote. The result, according to the critic/narrator of this story, is astounding. "Menard’s fragmentary Quixote is more subtle than Cervantes’" (Labyrinths 42), suggests Borges, who performs a tongue-in-cheek analysis of what he claims are two entirely different texts:

It is well known that Don Quixote . . . decided the debate against letters and in favor of arms. Cervantes was a former soldier: his verdict is understandable. But that Pierre Menard’s Don Quixote—a contemporary of La trahison des clercs and Bertrand Russell—should fall
prey to such nebulous sophistries! (Labyrinths 42)

Where the Tlönistas create one author for two hitherto unrelated texts, "Menard" gives us two authors for one and the same text. Borges speculates about the possibilities Menard’s Don Quixote opens up in literary criticism:

This technique, whose applications are infinite, prompts us to go through the Odyssey as if it were posterior to the Aeneid and the book Le jardin du Centaure of Madame Henri Bachelier as if it were by Madame Henri Bachelier. This technique fills the most placid works with adventure. To attribute the Imitatio Christi to Louis Ferdinand Céline or to James Joyce, is this not a sufficient renovation of its tenuous spiritual indications? (Labyrinths 44)

In Borges’s labyrinth, there is no essential difference between writing and reading: in each, there is a creative process driven by conventions.

Borges’ strategy in each of the stories discussed above is to introduce a particular metaphor as though it were a proposition about the universe--life is a dream; time is a garden of forking paths; God plays dice with the universe; immortality is bliss; the universe is a library--and then to ring its changes. The concretizing of the metaphor sets in motion an array of possible, sometimes conflicting, implications which are then subjected to new interpretations, new implications. The truth of the metaphor remains
undecidable, and its meaning, more than plural, could be said to be both limitless and intermetaphoric, by which I mean that, in Borges’ labyrinth, every fundamental belief, every proposition, and every possible world functions as a metaphor which generates meanings which rebound on all other metaphors. That reality becomes, for Borges, what Friedrich Nietzsche called "a mobile army of metaphors" ("On Truth and Falsity in the Extra-Moral Sense," Shibles 5) does not make human life less real or less significant. In fact, what Borges’ labyrinth makes clear is that the human capacity for creating significance does not require absolute, as opposed to functional, grounding.

Borges’ metaphysical puzzles are theoretical, intellectual, comical, speculative, metaphoric, and radically anti-foundational thought-experiments. They do not invite readers to an identification or to an experience. Rather, they distance the reader by their ironic and scholarly approach. The appeal of the Borges story lies neither in truth-telling nor in catharsis, but in its playfulness; and also in the implication that meaning and value do not require grounding either in a knowable external reality or in the presence of a prime mover. In other words, the possibility that "we have dreamt the world," that there are no absolutes, does not in itself necessarily render the world ephemeral; nor does it make human life insignificant, where that term means empty of value. Incertitude, or what Marshall McLuhan calls
"the suspended judgement" (Medium is the Massage 69), is simply the environment in which postmodernist fiction finds itself at home.

Barthelme's Narrative Poetics

The hallmarks of Beckett's work are its integrity, its clarity, its consistency, its absurd and often black humour, its pain, its directness, and its unmistakable meaning. I will argue in this section that when Barthelme pirates narrative strategies from Beckett into his novels, he does not create the same kind of textual world, and he does not invite the same kind of determinate reading as Beckett does. Where the death of God is the interpretative limit of Beckett's textual world, it is, in Barthelme's work, just one metaphor among the many that structure his texts. In more theoretical terms, and to go back to a Derridean point mentioned earlier, Beckett's work is thoroughly rooted in "the metaphysics of presence," while Barthelme's undermines those very metaphysical supports. It is for this reason that I think Borges' labyrinth provides a better vantage point than Beckett's abyss in interpreting Barthelme's novels. In what follows, I focus primarily on Snow White, but there are some features of The Dead Father and The King that help shed light on the nature of Barthelme's work.
In Barthelme’s first novel, there are clear echoes of Beckett in the close identification, sometimes interchangeability, of the seven men, the "we" who live with Snow White; in the novel’s minimal character development; and also in the deliberate effort by the men/dwarves throughout the novel to avert loss of equanimity: "heigh ho."

Furthermore, Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is invoked by the very structure of *Snow White*, where the protagonist "lives her own being as incomplete, pending the arrival of one who will ‘complete’ her" (70). Caught in a script which is organised in terms of the closure (the Aristotelian final cause) of "happy ever after," Snow White’s activities are constrained to those that will bring about her preordained fate.

At first, Snow White assumes that it can only be a matter of time until this happens, and that the only question is which particular prince will come for her. After all, she can list thirty one conceivably available princes herself:


For Snow White, a fictional character herself, these names, some referring to historical personages, others to literary figures, are ontologically equivalent. All that matters is that they share the attribute she seeks, that of princeliness, a characteristic she cannot find in any of the seven men she lives with, who add up to "about two real men, as we know them from the films and from our childhood" (42). Why does she stay with them? "I have not been able to imagine anything better" (59).

Snow White does try to find other means of fulfilment--psychology, poetry, Maoism, housework--but she is stuck, quite self-consciously, inside her fairytale narrative, even though it makes her miserable: as she says, waiting "as a mode of existence is, as Brack has noted, a darksome mode" (77). Eschewing passivity, Snow White decides to flush out "one plain hero of incredible size," by adopting another fairytale identity, that of Rapunzel:

Snow White let down her hair black as ebony from the window. It was Monday. The hair flew out of the window. "I could fly a kite with this hair it is so long. The wind would carry the kite up into the blue, and there would be the red of the kite against the blue of the blue, together with my hair black as ebony, floating there. That seems desirable. This motif, the long hair
streaming from the high window, is a very ancient one I believe, found in many cultures, in various forms. Now I recapitulate it, for the astonishment of the vulgar and the refreshment of my venereal life." (80)

Snow White transgresses the boundaries of her own script, but finds one that is at least analogically related by both category and motif. 18

This action on Snow White's part elicits various, mostly verbal reactions from strangers on the sidewalk and also from the seven men: Bill, the "leader," sees in it "multiple meanings" (93), although it is clear to him that Snow White seeks "a new lover" (92). Nobody does anything, however, with the exception of Fred, a musician who thinks that seeing the hair has changed his life (90). He sends Snow White a note suggesting an assignation; the note is intercepted by Herbert, and we never know whether or not he passes it on (108). Paul, the "prince-figure" (170), who is supposed to do something about it, cannot bring himself to it:

It has made me terribly nervous, that hair. It was beautiful, I admit it. Long black hair of such texture, fineness, is not easily come by. Hair black as ebony! Yet it has made me terribly nervous. Why some innocent person might come along, and see it, and conceive it his duty to climb up, and discern the reason it is being hung out of that window. There is probably some girl attached to it, at the top, and with her responsibilities of
various sorts . . . teeth . . . piano lessons. . . .

(13-14; reprised as a flashback, 94)

Just as Snow White is fully cognizant of the meaning of her actions, Paul knows that he is unable to fulfill the role he has been assigned in the ever-present original script.\(^9\) He has developed a scepticism about the story, even though he will turn out to be incapable—like Snow White herself—of abandoning it.

The happy ending she is looking for turns out to be merely a textual convention that has had its day, as Snow White acknowledges when she finally gives up her hair ploy at the end of Part Two:

There is something wrong with all those people standing there, gaping and gawking. And with all those who did not come and at least try to climb up. To fill the role. And with the very world itself, for not being able to supply a prince. For not being able to at least be civilized enough to supply the correct ending to the story. (132)

This does not mean that Snow White is now prepared to give up her quest for the right ending. In fact, even while she is considering her dilemma—"Either I have overestimated Paul, or I have overestimated history" (169)—she refuses to love the villain Hogo, despite the attraction his vileness holds for her:

You don't have the blood for this 'love,' Hogo. Your
blood is not fine enough. Oh I know that in this democratic era questions of blood are a little de trop, a little frowned-upon. People don't like to hear people talking about their blood, or about other people's blood. But I am not 'people,' Hogo. I am me. I must hold myself in reserve for a prince or prince-figure, someone like Paul. (170)

"I am not people" is perhaps the crucial phrase here. Acutely aware that she is a character inside a text, Snow White believes that the narrative demands she fulfill her role; that there is no other script available for her that will supply the right ending.

On the surface, Snow White's insistence that she will not give up on waiting echoes the existential despair and paralysis of the typical character in Beckett's work. The difference between Beckett and Barthelme, however, is that, for the former, the narrative of redemption appears to point towards a reality or a truth that goes beyond the language and the actions on the stage, whereas, for the latter, there is no imputed external reality, only more texts. Put differently, Barthelme's characters live in a Borgesian labyrinth—a plastic intertext, a world of words, a metaphoric narrative.

"Oh I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear!" (6), says Snow White, causing a panic among her room-mates: "we all began to say things, things that were more or less satisfactory, or at least
adequate, to serve the purpose, for the time being. The whole thing was papered over, for the time being" (6-7). For the seven men, novelty is a dangerous thing, devoted as they are to preserving equanimity. After all, in terms of the original narrative, they are doing better than expected, mostly because Paul, instead of fulfilling his role as prince, wants to "retract . . . the whole written world" (13). If Bill, Hubert, Henry, Kevin, Edward, Clem, and Dan prefer what they call dreck, blague, and the blanketing or "filler" aspects of language to words that have meaning, and feel threatened when Snow White writes a poem, it is because they know that her search for meaning may lead her away from them.

Snow White's desire for new words is echoed in Henry's frustration with the problems of communication:

"it is no wonder we are all going round the bend with this language dinning forever into our eyes and ears. . . ." "I am not going round the bed," Dan said, "not me." "Round the bend," Henry said, "the bend not the bed, how is it that I said 'bend' and you heard 'bed,' you see what I mean, it's inescapable." "You live in a world of your own Henry." "I can certainly improve on what was given," Henry said. (30)

What is "given" is that world that Paul wants to retract, that world about which Hogo says:

I didn't think up this picture that we are confronted with. The original brushwork was not mine. I absolutely
separate myself from this picture. I operate within the frame it is true, but the picture... (128)
The picture Hogo refers to is, of course, the fully textual world in which he finds himself, where everything has been already written, Borges' library of Babel; and of course he is wrong to say that he can absolutely separate himself from it. Even when the characters understand that they are following scripts, this does not mean they can escape to some outside of text; there is simply no place else to go, except to other texts, other constructions, other sources of meaning, other narratives.

This meta-level of Snow White is most explicit and direct in the now famous questionnaire at the end of the first section, in which the innocent question, "Do you like the story so far?" leads into questions of interpretation of the roles of different characters, to questions of language ("Is there too much blague in the narration?") and metaphysics, to what the reader would like to see in terms of the narrative, to obscure questions about copyright legislation, and finally to a question about humanity: "... should human beings have more shoulders?" (82-83) This last question blurs the distinction between textuality and reality, as it moves from questions about narrative structure to a question about human structure, implying that, in both cases, the creator/writer can give the reader whatever s/he wants. Desire creates reality: the world is Tlön.
Constructivism is reinforced in the constant play in the novel with the relationship, both in language and in action, between background and foreground. When Snow White is playing her Rapunzel role, for example, the men consider what they should do. One of the reasons the men cannot simply replace Snow White is that they do not know what is essential about her. They spend part of the book thinking about how to simply live without what Dan calls "the expensive effluvia that is Snow White." His proposed solution is to "cleave instead to the towel" (101), the most consistent and continuous aspect of their relationship with Snow White. For her part, she can barely be enticed into the bathroom to see the new shower curtain they buy in a ludicrous attempt to revitalize their relationship.

"Show us the stain," the men say to the proprietor of a restaurant who wants to charge them for the laundering of a table cloth on which they have spilled wine (and which they have consequently completely covered in wine) (172). When they are later scolded for wrinkling the table cloth, "we rose up and wrinkled the entire sidewalk cafe with our bare hands" (173). The tablecloth example is funny and unusual, but feasible in the world of the reader. The sidewalk café example, however, is an entirely different matter, because the idea that a café can be crumpled makes this world into paper, or at least into a very fragile and thinly constructed reality: "It was impossible to tell who was wrong, when we had
finished" (173). The crumpling of the café--apparently just a linguistic extension from tablecloth to café in a reasonable logical step, as long as one is in a text--violates the conventional pact between writer and the reader, in which the former sticks to what is in the realm of possibility outside the text, while the latter suspends disbelief as long as this disbelief is not stretched too far.

Throughout the novel, the men exhibit this ostensibly rational, but, in terms of any world outside their text, quite ludicrous logic in their attempts to control reality. For example, when the new shower curtain is installed, and before Snow White is invited to view it, a professor of esthetics is invited to the house to comment on it. When he claims that it is the best shower curtain in town, the men, with one mind, start to entertain fantasies about killing him. They want to kill him for what he has said but, ironically, the reason they do not kill him is because he has already said it:

Destruction of the esthetician, however attractive from a human point of view, would not also ensure destruction of his detritus, his remark. The remark would remain in memory, in our memories. We would then be forced to wipe ourselves out also, a step which we would hesitate to take waiting as we are for the Last Day and God's mercy.

(125)

The actual esthetician and the words he speaks have, in a written text, the same ontological status. The words, the
detritus, once written, cannot be retracted. When Paul wants to retract the whole written world, he is acknowledging his presence in a textual world that is itself the product of other texts: his reality, though dense, is entirely constructed by language.

Nowhere is this notion of reality as language or discourse made so clear as in the letters written by the wicked-stepmother-figure, Jane. She explains to the strangers to whom she writes that she has power over them because she can puncture their private lives, "their universes of discourse," their linguistic worlds, their scripts, their fundamental beliefs, simply by writing to them or phoning them:

The moment I inject discourse from my u. of d. into your u. of d. the yournness of yours is diluted. The more I inject, the more you dilute. Soon you will be presiding over an empty plenum, or rather, since that is a contradiction in terms, over a former plenum, in terms of yournness. You are, essentially, in my power. (46);

When Snow White wishes to hear new words, this does not mean she wants to hear what Jane has to say. Jane is dangerous, in the world of the text, because what she says cannot be "papered over" by the men, who want to ensure that their private (textual) reality is not punctured.

There is no doubt that Barthelme owes a debt to Beckett for several features of his novels, especially for the
comical, though palpably absurd nature of much of the dialogue. Whereas Beckett expresses absurdist (and modernist) despair, however, Barthelme's work eschews the nihilism of the Beckett position in favour of a metaphoric and non-mimetic play with the scripts we live by. One of the more compelling scripts is the romance of the American Dream, which inserts itself into Snow White in the form of the president, one of the most significant symbols of American democracy, who says:

I worry about Bill, Hubert, Henry, Kevin, Edward, Clem, Dan, and their lover, Snow White. I sense that all is not well with them. . . . I have many concerns to worry about, but I worry about Bill and the boys too. Because I am the President. Finally. The President of the whole fucking country. And they are American, Bill, Hubert, Henry, Kevin, Edward, Clem, Dan and Snow White. They are Americans. My Americans. (81)

Clem speculates that perhaps it is this romance, the "long democratic tradition" in America that accounts for the failure of the fairytale script:

I am worried by the fact that no one responded to Snow White's hair initiative. Even though I am at the same time relieved. But it suggests that Americans will not or cannot see themselves as princely. Even Paul, that most princely of our contemporaries, did not respond appropriately. Of course it may be that princely is not a good thing to be. And of course there is our long
democratic tradition which is anti-aristocratic.

Egalitarianism precludes princeliness. (146)

The ideal of the universal pursuit of happiness for everyone presents a script that is incompatible, perhaps, with the fairytale structure in which only designated individuals have access to the "happy ever after." The characters in Snow White, ostensibly modern men and women, are trying to act out anachronistic, and yet still inescapable, fairytale scripts. If they cannot imagine "something better," it is perhaps because they desire something that is as complete and hermetically sealed, and that can supply as much narrative coherence as the fairytale.

The textual surface of Snow White is an intertext of different fragments of theories, often parodied, and certainly pirated, from the realms of philosophy, psychology, history, sociology, and psychoanalysis as well as direct references to the originating fairytale, and less coherent pieces from newspapers and other media. These fragments, thrown into metaphorical juxtaposition with each other and with the unfolding stories of Snow White's search, Paul's eventual death by poison, Jane's malice, and Bill's hanging for "vatricide," do not signal, in my view, what McCaffery has called the "bankruptcy of language." They do, however, undermine the conventional relationship between text and reality that can be found even in Beckett. Furthermore, if the characters in this novel seem absurd, it is not because
they are tragic, and it is not because they uncover some existential truth about humanity. On the contrary, Snow White's refusal to give up waiting for her fairytale prince is absurd in the sense that it is foolish, even stupid, because, it turns out, there may actually be many other sources of meaning available to her, as she must have discovered in her studies.

Looked at in Borgesian terms, *Snow White* sets in motion a metaphor-proposition that the characters are living inside a particular fairy-tale script: if none of them can fulfill their roles, it is because the narrative structure is constantly undermined by the interpolation and subsequent interactive play of other discourses. The universe of discourse in which all actions resolve in a happy-ever-after for the major players, and oblivion for the rest, then, has been punctured by all the other universes of discourses that function to reveal the "eternal crevices of unreason" in its architecture. It is impossible for Snow White and Paul to live out the narrative innocently--as an earlier Snow White did in an earlier text--because they already know what the ending is meant to be. Lois Gordon suggests that in *Snow White* "Barthelme has created a world of people whose very identities are the texts, media, and myths they have absorbed" (*Donald Barthelme* 74). Put slightly differently, the characters in this novel are themselves intertexts.
The Dead Father

The most wordy as well as the most obscure of Barthelme’s experimental novels, *The Dead Father*, like *Snow White*, engages with the very possibility of narrative itself by pirating—taking quite out of original context, without regard for origins, and for his own purposes—stories, theoretical discourses, voices, and motifs from different places and hurling them against each other. What results is what I described in the first chapter as a metaphoric narrative. Eluding determinate readings, the text resonates with limitless meanings. Freud meets feminism meets Beckett meets Lewis Carroll meets the Bible meets Kafka meets Jason and the Golden Fleece, and so on.

At one level, *The Dead Father* is a reversal of *Waiting for Godot*. In Beckett’s play, Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot, a symbolic combination of an actual person and a God who will deliver them from their meaningless existence. In Barthelme’s novel, Thomas and the others are waiting to be delivered from the God-like figure who, even though dead, still exerts control. The absent God, so central and so paradoxically animating for Beckett’s work, here becomes dead weight, a nuisance, machinery.

Specifically, the dead father is an immensely heavy and powerful combination of organic and mechanical parts:

Overall length, 3,200 cubits. Half buried in the ground, half not. At work ceaselessly night and day through all
the hours for the good of all. He controls the hussars. Controls the rise, fall, and flutter of the market. Controls what Thomas is thinking, what Thomas has always thought, what Thomas will ever think, with exceptions.

(4)

The dead father functions as a primary source of meaning. He has a substantial measure of control over Thomas, because he is his foundation, he is the reality into which Thomas has been born. Put in the terms Borges uses in "The Circular Ruins," the dead father is the first dreamer, and Thomas is one of his phantoms. As for Thomas, he is simultaneously at least all of the following: the devoted son dutifully attending his dead father to his place of burial, the Freudian patricidal son leading his father to slaughter, the traitor-disciple, and Moses, this time leading his tribes away from the Promised Land.

The highly self-conscious and egotistical dead father is, naturally, obsessed by his death. Despite the fact that he is told by those around him that he is about to be buried, he insists that he is on the road in order to search for the Golden Fleece, which will give him new life, especially for sexual activities. In other words, this "dead father" just won't give up:

But I should have everything! Me! Myself! I am the Father! Mine! Always was and always will be! From whom all blessings flow! To whom all blessings flow! Forever
One reason it is so hard for him to accept his death is that his mechanical parts are still functioning. His huge body continues to act as a church and confessional; the confessions continue to be circulated. The system is in place. There may only be a ghost in the machine, but that is enough to keep it going. Put differently, God may be dead, but it is hard to get rid of the body.

As in Snow White, the sheer artifice of this novel precludes reader identification with the characters in The Dead Father. Even when he becomes enraged, usually as a result of frustration at his sexual impotence, the dead father's angry and violent outbursts are highly stylized. In any case, once his slaughter of "a grove of musicians" is undermined in its bloodiness by Julie's comment that it would be impressive "had they not been pure cardboard" (12), we cannot take him seriously. This is reminiscent of Alice's outburst in Alice in Wonderland: "you're nothing but a pack of cards." Like Borges' metaphysical puzzles, though not so overtly scholarly, and like Carroll's logical games, though not so charming or amusing, Barthelme's text is intellectual, abstract, indeterminate. Where Alice in Wonderland clearly indicates that Wonderland is a dream, and that there is still a concrete conscious reality that operates by different laws, The Dead Father never even hints at an outside to its
intertextual reality, a reality which includes, among many other things, the different comedies of Carroll and Beckett.

**The King**

In Barthelme's final novel, the primary structuring device is another juxtaposition of a familiar narrative of mythical romance and contemporary culture. In this case, the legendary King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table who are transplanted into Britain during World War II, with their medieval selves intact. In both *Snow White* and *The King*, the interfaces between ancient and modern shed light on the sets of values of both worlds; although I would say that the relationships are more complicated and metaphorical in the thoroughly experimental *Snow White*. An analysis of *The King* raises some interesting issues, nevertheless.

*The King* is a re-writing of the events of World War II. The protagonist Arthur is both military commander and active monarch, and the historical personalities, such as Churchill, Mussolini, and Hitler, are kept in the background, mentioned in conversations, never "on-stage." Lord Haw Haw's anti-monarchistic disinformation can be overheard as background to several of the scenes, as can Ezra Pound's anti-Semitic rants. The specificity of these references is different, then, from the "modern" references in *Snow White*. In the latter, the fairy-tale is updated into a textual reality that may or may not correspond to a world outside the text. The former shows
the collision of two kinds of texts, history and myth.  

There is no explicit anti-war rhetoric in this gentle and sweet book, which is not surprising, because Barthelme has never been didactic. It is clear, however, that these anachronistic and legendary heroes, with their ideals and values, are completely unable to deal with the realities of 20th century war-making. As Guinevere tells Launcelot: "you knights are forever mucking about in the woods banging each other to pieces. You have no sense of the long-range plan, no strategic sense" (46). Earlier on, Guinevere has already commented on the complexity of the current situation:

"This is not my favourite among our wars," Guinevere said. "Too many competing interests. Nothing clear about it. Except that we are on God's side, of course. The thing I have always admired about Arthur is that he always manages to be on the side of the right. But Jesu, the intrigue! Once upon a time the men went out and bashed each other over the head for a day and a half, and that was it. Now we have ambassadors hithering and thithering, secret agreements with still more secret codicils, betrayals, reversals, stabs in the back. . . ."

(4-5)

This idea that Arthur is on God's side is, of course, ironized in many ways. Whatever real changes have occurred on the battlefield, propaganda has been around a long time. Furthermore, Guinevere's comments reveal a certain naivety
about politics, which has always had its share of betrayals, secret agreements, and so on.

This is not to say that Barthelme is explicitly undermining the courtly ideals expressed throughout the novel by Arthur and his courtiers; but rather that we realise how thoroughly literary and ideal these characters are. Transplanted into a different context, they represent a nostalgia for a time that never really existed—a nostalgia for what Launcelot calls "shouldness":

Shouldness is perhaps self-explanatory, but I have never seen it adequately dealt with, either in print or in the lecture hall. When that huntress got me in the bum with an arrow, it was an offense to shouldness. It shouldn't have gone that way. . . . (106)

Quite apart from the comical aspect of Launcelot's hint that he has been going to lectures and bookstores in order to discover somebody fully aware of his aesthetic, what Barthelme does here is to reveal the function of myth, which is to introduce the should or the ideal into the quotidian. One of the interesting side-effects of "shouldness," however, is the obsession among these characters with their images and, more specifically, with their personal newspaper obituaries: "The newspapers. . . are our Les Invalides" (121). It is no coincidence that it is Launcelot, always the most famous of the knights, who takes time away from his busy schedule to "manage" the press, so that his obituary will be properly
written (20), his legend properly managed.

The only event that confirms Launcelot’s sense of "shouldness" is Arthur’s tearing-up of the formula for an atomic bomb, because "this false Grail is not a knightly weapon" (130). This departure from real-politik, which will have "grave consequences," is, in Launcelot’s opinion, a noble move:

"Why, Arthur!" exclaimed Launcelot. "That’s astonishing. Not doing a thing of this magnitude? I don’t think there’s been a king in the history of the world who’s not done something on this scale."

"It’s a skill I’ve been working on for a long time," Arthur said. "I call it negative capability."

"It quite restores my faith in shouldness," Launcelot said. (130)

This is an instance of what is introduced (through the character of Paul) into Snow White as retraction. With this one move, Arthur’s gesture retracts, though only symbolically, the bombing of Hiroshima and therefore the history of the 20th century. The sly use of Keats’ term "negative capability" implies that this is the poetically "just" move, reversing, as it does, the "bombing is pedagogy" motif that runs through the novel, along with the idea that a mathematical formula can emulate the holy grail (79). Sir Kay, the realist, tells Arthur that his enemies will most certainly use the formula when they get hold of it; which tells us that this idealistic
and romantic response to the demands of the times will wipe out Arthur and his band of knights. Retraction turns out to be impossible.

This novel is not as explicitly concerned with language as is Snow White; but it continues Barthelme's concern with the structures of myth, narrative, and romance, and the ways in which anachronistic details can be welded together, not only as satire, but also, in this book at least, as a meditation on our modern culture, on narrative, and on those aspects of history which seem so overdetermined as to be ineluctable.

**Barthelme's Metaphoric Narratives**

In the previous chapter, I suggested that the difference between modernist and postmodernist novels can be provisionally understood in the latter's resistance, not only to a reality outside the text, but also to textual closure. Further, I claimed that Donald Davidson's notion of metaphor, as a "special use of language" which generates limitless insights, provides a useful starting point for interpretation of the difficult experimental novels I examine in this thesis. Accordingly, I have argued in this chapter that Barthelme's novels, despite their use of narrative strategies taken from Beckett, should be interpreted in the light of the limitless play of metaphor in Borges' labyrinth. This is not to say that Borges and Barthelme offer identical texts. They do not.
Borges' short stories and essays engage in sustained, though inconclusive, philosophical inquiry, while Barthelme simply weaves together different discourses, without explanation, to create an intertext. The term "metaphoric narrative" does not describe all postmodernist fictions, but it can help establish family resemblances between the very different kinds of experimental, non-mimetic texts I look at in this and the next two chapters.
CHAPTER THREE

THESE ASYMMETRICAL FOUR: THOMAS PYNCHON

Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank, when the ordinary world came back (The Crying of Lot 49 69)

How can Mexico play, so at his ease, with these symbols of randomness and fright? Innocent as a child, perhaps unaware—perhaps—that in his play he wrecks the elegant rooms of history, threatens the idea of cause and effect itself. What if Mexico’s whole generation have turned out like this? Will Postwar be nothing but "events," newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is it the end of history? (Gravity’s Rainbow 56)

As we turn from the minimalist metafictions of Donald Barthelme to a second kind of experimentation in the postmodern American novel, the almost encyclopedic
metaphoric narratives of Thomas Pynchon, it is important to note that there are both family resemblances and crucial differences between these two writers. Barthelme and Pynchon write non-mimetic, or what Peter Cooper calls counter-realist (Signs and Symptoms 22), postmodernist fictions that explicitly foreground both a disruption of narrative conventions and a resistance to narrative closure. Despite the things they have in common, the two sets of texts offer distinctly different reading experiences. Where Barthelme remains, as he himself suggests, "a student of the surfaces" (McCaffery and LeClair 43), with his light, parodic touch, and his overtly metafictional practices, Pynchon’s fictions seem, despite their humour, deeper, heavier, more complex, more committed, more comprehensive.³

In what follows, I discuss the structural and thematic relationships between the four quite different novels Thomas Pynchon has produced over the last 30 years. I argue that V., The Crying of Lot 49 and Gravity’s Rainbow are metaphoric narratives, and that they adopt, especially in the case of Gravity’s Rainbow, strategies of piracy. The most recent novel, Vineland, in my view a failure in these terms, is nevertheless of interest here, precisely because its very limitations help to shed light on the radical functioning of metaphor in the other three texts. My strategy is not to divide the chapter into four discrete sections, one on each book; rather, the argument is organised around structuring
principles and thematic concerns found, to a greater or lesser degree, in all four novels: these include the logic of binary opposition; the metaphysics of paranoia; communication, technology, and mediation; and history, colonialism, and genocide.

**Piracy**

I introduced the term "piracy" in the first chapter, and then used it quite casually in my discussion of Barthelme. Here, I address it more directly, to explain where it comes from, and why it can be a useful term for thinking about the materials I deal with in the thesis. The genesis of this concept, which is not one that I have encountered in any literary criticism to date, is an interpretation of the role in *Gravity's Rainbow* of Pirate Prentice, whose nightmare opens the text. Despite his being the first character we encounter, Prentice's story turns out to be no more important than many others, and probably less important than those of Tyrone Slothrop, Roger Mexico, and Franz Pökler. The question that arises is: why does Pirate's nightmare open the novel? There may be several possible answers to this question, including one that says the choice of Prentice is arbitrary or random, no more than one more device in an extraordinarily disruptive text that confuses the reader. However, just as the story of Tyrone Slothrop will turn out to be particularly well-suited to function as one of the main structuring devices
for the novel, so it is appropriate that Gravity's Rainbow should open with piracy.

Specifically, Pirate Prentice is one of the many characters in Gravity's Rainbow who have supernatural powers: much of what the dossiers call Pirate Prentice is a strange talent for—well, for getting inside the fantasies of others: being able, actually, to take over the burden of managing them—at this time mentally healthy leaders and other historical figures are indispensable. What better way to bleed them of their excess anxiety than to get someone to take over the running of their exhausting little daydreams for them? (12)

He can pirate the unconscious of another person, then, without that person's knowledge; and sometimes even without his own knowledge. Once we recognise this, the question retroactively arises: "Whose nightmare is Prentice having at the beginning of Gravity's Rainbow?"

One of the difficulties in answering this question is that Prentice's nightmare can be attributed to almost any character in Gravity's Rainbow. This suggestion is supported by the presence of motifs, phrases, and images in the first two pages which resonate through the novel. For example, the preoccupation with darkness and light; the sense that "It's too late"; and the realization that "no one was ever going to take the trouble to save you" each ramifies through many of
the story lines in Gravity's Rainbow. Prentice's nightmare could belong to any of the characters, and, in a way, it belongs to all of them. After all, if Prentice manages the anxieties of important people, and if he has access to other people’s minds, he acts as a register of the anxiety level around him. In any case, the fact that this nightmare opens the novel and is immediately followed by the hilarity and bawdiness of the Banana Breakfast is significant because it sets the tone for the whole novel.¹

Prentice is one of the many characters in Gravity's Rainbow who become corrupted or co-opted by the Firm—the Establishment, whatever form it takes. He makes use of his extraordinary powers as a weapon in the arsenal of the war effort, and as a means of strict behavioral control. Though the Firm's theory is that, relieved of their fantasies and anxieties, important figures will be able to work more efficiently, the reality of it is that Prentice's activities threaten to deprive them of their humanity and turn them into robots. Like Katje Borgesius, who also works for the Firm, and who thinks of herself as "corruption and ashes" (94), Prentice feels irrevocably corrupted by his alliance with the Firm, by his need to belong, and by his lack of independence and will; he thinks of himself as a specialist in bad faith (540), because he has allowed his powers to be pirated by the Firm and used for despicable ends.

Prentice's ability to enter into the largely unconscious
realms of other people's realities, to "apprentice" himself to someone else's anxieties, implies that the traditional conception of the sovereign ego is a fiction. In line with this, although Prentice can manage some specific sets of anxieties, he cannot be in complete control of his own unconscious fears and desires. His initial dream of evacuation may or may not originally have been his; but, once he has had it, it becomes his. In fact, there is an implication that, although Prentice remains integrated at a conscious level—he remembers who he is, and he presents a continuous identity in public—his mind is, like Gravity's Rainbow itself, a palimpsest, or an intertext of realities.

There are many instances of what can be called piracy in Gravity's Rainbow, but the Pirate Prentice story line lends itself to much more than merely thematic treatment: it can elucidate the macro-structure of the text. The metaphoric narrative of Gravity's Rainbow is best understood as composed of elements pirated from their original context in the cultural repertoire, and metaphorically reconfigured. Like Borges, Pynchon explores the multiple and conflicting implications of any particular metaphor when it is taken as an absolute, or even as a meaningful proposition about the world. Where Borges proceeds in a quasi-philosophical and logical manner, however, Pynchon disrupts linear sequencing, logical clarity, and determinate meaning by creating an extremely complicated intertext in which it is very difficult to follow
the course of even one implication of one metaphor. Put differently, what is confusing about reading Pynchon is that he is like a juggler who has so many balls in the air at the same time that we cannot tell them apart. The choice we have as critics is either to find interpretive approaches to Gravity's Rainbow that take seriously Pynchon's irreverence towards the origins of the materials he uses, or to ascribe doctrinal meanings that delimit the infinite deferral of closure.  

Put differently, either we examine the patterns created by the interplay of all the different balls, or we try to identify which one he is really playing with.

Following this latter strategy, critics have often found it useful to place Pynchon in terms of mentors and/or influences. For example, there are discussions of McLuhan's influence on Pynchon, which imply that Pynchon has studied the works of McLuhan and then structured Gravity's Rainbow around his ideas. (See Mark Siegel's Creative Paranoia.) This kind of search for influence imputes to Pynchon a deep and detailed knowledge of, and also a loyalty to the ideas to which he makes reference. The attraction of this strategy is partly that it helps clarify the complicated concepts to be found in Gravity's Rainbow, and partly that it legitimizes Gravity's Rainbow by attributing to it a serious purpose and credible antecedents. I would argue, however, that Gravity's Rainbow resists these attempts at domestication: its performance of its serious commitments does not depend on a reverential
incorporation of ideas from intellectual history. In fact, there are so many ways of interpreting *Gravity's Rainbow* that it would be possible to make an argument for the influence on Pynchon of any and every writer, thinker, scientist, or artist who figures in any way in this very long narrative. Although such studies shed some light on the novel, on the extratextual source figure or, at the very least, on the critic's own thoughts about culture and literature, this approach is in itself problematical. There is no denying the extraordinary breadth of Pynchon's knowledge of historical facts, arcane trivia, scientific theories, and both elite and popular culture; but any effort to link the metaphoricity of *Gravity's Rainbow* very closely to one or more founding doctrines is likely to miss the way in which Pynchon pirates and processes his materials.

It is my contention that references in the narrative to thinkers, such as Freud, for example, draw on popularizations of some given works, or popularly received ideas, rather than on the details and small print of Freud's particular writings. To continue with this example, Freud becomes a metaphor in *Gravity's Rainbow* for a particular set of conceptions about the psyche that is appropriated by various characters into their different theoretical frameworks. Specifically, some story-lines in *Gravity's Rainbow* play with the impact of Freud's work on popular culture, undermining, in the process, the naivety of the Freudian world-view as it is popularly
conceived—that is, the assumption that the unconscious may be rendered conscious. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, when Oedipa's psychiatrist, always on the border of hysteria (his name is Dr. Hilarius), finally goes mad, he says to her: "I must have really wanted to believe that the unconscious would be like any other room, once the light was let in" (82). For Hilarius, the work of Freud points towards the possible rationalization, the bringing to consciousness and consequent taming of the unconscious. This does not necessarily mean that Pynchon believes Freud's theories are deterministic. The point I want to make, rather, is that "Freud" does not have one stable meaning: his ideas can be appropriated into many different frameworks, and made to suit every kind of epistemological bias.

When *Gravity's Rainbow*'s Firm decides to manage the fantasies of V.I.P.s, there is an acknowledgement of the Freudian description of the role of the unconscious in an individual's drives. Rather than try to rationalize these fantasies, or bring them to light in any way for their "owner," the Firm, making a behaviourist response, decides to keep them unconscious in the strictest sense of the word—someone else can pirate them into their own mind and "process" them. Prentice's mind becomes a kind of collective unconscious, therefore, in which the origin of any particular memory becomes increasingly elusive with the passage of time. Similarly, the text of *Gravity's Rainbow* is itself a bricolage
of ideas Pynchon takes out of their original context to use, quite irreverently, for his own ends. This is not to argue that discussions of the source materials have no value, but rather to suggest that Pynchon employs these materials metaphorically rather than doctrinally, imaginatively rather than politically.

Piracy turns out to be a useful concept, because it sheds light on the kinds of intertexts—the metaphoric narratives—created, not only by Pynchon, but also by Barthelme and Acker. That is, the concept of intertextuality cannot by itself shed light on particular narratives, because it has, as a term, more to do with the way in which texts are inter-related by virtue of shared conventions, by the use of language, and by influences which are not always entirely conscious, than with the way any actual text is constructed. All novels, or rather all pieces of writing are, in this sense, intertexts. Accordingly, I am using the term metaphoric narrative to refer to the macro-structures of the experimental postmodernist fictions I discuss throughout the thesis; and the term piracy to co-ordinate the examination of narrative micro-strategies to be found in the three sets of texts, such as plagiarism, bricolage, references to historical personages and historical facts, philosophical ideas, the uses of ready-made narratives from fairytales and films, and so on.

In the following discussion, I examine, through a series of analyses of particular narrative structures, the maturing
of Pynchon's poetics of piracy from V. and The Crying of Lot 49 to Gravity's Rainbow. Vineland constitutes, in each case, a counterpoint, an example of Pynchon's failure in his latest text to develop a fully metaphoric narrative, precisely because he does not process his materials enough. In other words, there is in Vineland insufficient distance between the world of the text and the world outside of the text.⁶

**Binary Opposites and the Motif of the Quest**

Each of Pynchon's novels plays with, and usually undermines, our attempts to place it in a genre. V., with its panoply of styles, appears to participate in at least four different narrative traditions--the picaresque, historical fiction, science fiction, and the detective story. The Crying of Lot 49 places itself directly, if somewhat ironically, into the frontier, romance, and perhaps even the grotesque traditions of American fiction, as well as inside the detective and spy fiction genre; in addition, it specifically engages the genre of Jacobean tragedy. Gravity's Rainbow has so much thematic and stylistic range that it would be impossible to mention all the literary-generic categories it invokes; in fact, it is often treated as an encyclopedia, not only of cultural reference points, but of fictional tropes. As for Vineland, it can best be described as a coming-of-age adventure story that spans two generations, but it also has elements of science fiction and detective fiction.
If the novels cannot be placed and interpreted in the light of generic categories, however, they do share a number of motifs, structuring devices, and thematic concerns. One such device is the binary opposition that functions on the surface as an organizing principle for much of the action in each novel. At a deeper level, it coordinates, by its invocation of Aristotelian either/or logic, the ontological issues that pervade Pynchon's work. Just as Borges' stories reveal the extent to which metaphysical assumptions, logical systems, institutions, language, and belief are inextricably intertwined in the world that "we (the undivided divinity operating within us) have dreamt" ("Avatars of the Tortoise," Labyrinths 208), Pynchon's use of the logic of binary opposition serves to reveal metaphorical connections that undermine strict dualisms.

V., Pynchon's first novel, is overtly structured around a guiding binary opposition between Herbert Stencil and Benny Profane, between the focus and zeal of Stencil's quest for V., which gives the novel its name, and the dissipation of Profane's life as a self-confessed schlemihl and human yo-yo: "offhand I'd say I haven't learned a goddamn thing" (428). Though they apparently have nothing in common, Stencil and Profane represent, in the strictest sense of the phrase, polar opposites, two sides of the same coin; and Stencil's "approach and avoid" (V. 44) strategy in conducting his quest makes sense only when we understand the profound connection between
these two characters.

Benny Profane represents, throughout the novel, what it is that Stencil used to be before he embraced the hunt for the "V" mentioned so cryptically in his dead father's diary. Stencil is consciously wary of completing the quest, solving the puzzle of V., because this might catapult him back into the life he had before, a life that Benny Profane still leads:

Finding her: what then? Only that what love there was to Stencil had become directed entirely inward, toward this acquired sense of animateness. Having found this he could hardly release it, it was too dear. To sustain it he had to hunt V.; but if he should find her, where else would there be to go but back into half-consciousness?

He tried not to think, therefore, about any end to the search. Approach and avoid. (44)

It is his reluctance to end the quest that leads Stencil to form so obsessive a relationship with the letter V. that he considers as a clue anything that starts with that letter. There are two sets of culturally diverse clues that take on particular significance. The first consists of a series of women, all said to be V., which includes the young Victoria Wren; Vera Meroving, who has an artificial eye with a clock in it; Veronica Manganese, friend of the young Mussolini; "the woman," said to be V., even though "no one knew her name in Paris" (382); and the bad priest of Malta, whose inanimate/mechanical body is disassembled by children while she is still
alive: "she comes apart" (322). The second is a series of geographical places, including Valletta, the capital of Malta, where, we are told in the last chapter, Stencil Sr.'s ship disappears in 1919; Venezuela, which is a meeting point for "secret agents"; and, most mysteriously, Vheissu, the obsession of old Godolphin, who describes this apparently imaginary, or at least unmapped and unfindable place, to Victoria Wren (154). With so many possible avenues for his quest, Stencil is in little danger of finding the definitive answer that he simultaneously approaches and avoids.

Stencil's "acquired sense of animateness" requires the constant deferral of closure, because finding V. constitutes a death, a sinking back into the inertia, the inanimateness, of Benny Profane. For his part, Benny is, as the first part of his name implies, profoundly aware that he is experiencing what Oedipa Maas, in The Crying of Lot 49, thinks of as "the sense of buffering, insulation . . . the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix" (CL 10), as we can see in this passage:

In this dream, he was all alone, as usual. Walking on a street at night where there was nothing but his own field of vision alive. It had to be night on that street. The lights gleamed unflickering on hydrants; manhole covers which lay around on the street. There were neon signs scattered here and there, spelling out words he wouldn't
Unable to make any commitments, Benny desires precisely what Stencil has found—an animating force that can bring those "neon signs" into clear focus and make the world significant. If Benny’s last name implies, in the first instance, that he is profane, that he lives a life in which nothing is sacred, Stencil’s "grim, joyless" (V. 44) tracking of V., however secular on the surface, echoes the typical religious quest, in which transcendence is to be discovered, not in concrete proof of God, but rather in symbols and metaphors which, one after another, point to God. Put differently, and in more Pynchonesque terms, Profane, despite acute surface paranoia, lives in a world in which nothing is connected to anything else, in "anti-paranoia" (Gravity’s Rainbow 434), while Stencil’s reality is a "paranoid" one in which everything is connected, through the sign V., to everything else.

Of course, because there is no "natural" connection between the various pieces of information he uncovers, Stencil filters (stencils, etches)’ everything through himself. In "Mondaugen’s story," for example:

The tale proper and the questioning after took no more than thirty minutes. Yet the next Wednesday afternoon at Eigenvalue’s office, when Stencil retold it, the yarn had undergone considerable change: had become, as Eigenvalue put it, Stencilized." (V. 211)

That there are numerous possible identities for V. does not
become a problematic multiple-choice matter for Stencil; rather, V. itself/ herself becomes multiple, complex, plural. Accordingly, the story of V. becomes a metaphoric narrative in which every clue is woven into a potentially infinite tapestry. What is most disturbing, in Stencil's view, is not that there could be more clues, more avenues to explore, but, rather, that he might discover his father's version of V.--one specific, singular object or person--when he goes to Malta:

He was afraid of ending it; but, damn it all, staying here would end it too. Funking out; finding V.; he didn't know which he was most afraid of, V. or sleep. Or whether they were two versions of the same thing. (324)

Stencil's V. and Profane's sleep are explicitly linked here as "two versions of the same thing." Alter egos, metaphorical doubles, not quite opposites after all, Stencil and Profane start at the same point, but go in different directions, Borges' "forking paths." In the future, they may return to the same spot, to that period that always accompanies the V.

If the bipolarity of Stencil and Profane provides a structure for V., it simultaneously reveals the complex, metaphoric inter-connectedness of the two characters. V. is not either something or nothing; V. is a function, a force that animates, not just Stencil himself, but the world that surrounds him. Where Benny Profane cannot see what makes Rachel Owlglass "hold any promise of being any more human" than someone on the other side of the TV screen (338), Stencil
finds significant every story he hears, every place he goes, every person he encounters. This is the function also of the Tristero in The Crying of Lot 49: "for there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America" (CL 137).

In the dense first chapter of The Crying of Lot 49, we discover that the highly educated Oedipa spends her days going to Tupperware parties in Kinneret, while her "thin-skinned" (4) husband, Wendell (Mucho) Maas, who has a weakness for underage lovers, works at a radio station nearby. Long before she sees her first muffled post-horn, or hears the line about Tristero in an un-bowdlerized version of a Jacobean play, we learn that Oedipa, whose first name invokes that great but tragic solver of riddles Oedipus, veers between a conviction that she can never escape her life because she cannot escape herself, and a sense that "what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous, and malignant" (11). Her either/or consists of solipsism or paranoia, or at least it appears to: in fact, these narrow alternatives blossom into multiple possibilities later in the novel.

When she leaves Kinneret, "with no idea that she was moving toward anything new" (12), Oedipa is keenly attuned to possibilities of hierophany, and her first view of San Narciso gives her "an odd, religious instant":

Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward
patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also just trembled past the threshold of her understanding. (13)

It is not surprising, then, that Oedipa, once she hears the name Tristero, should become obsessed with it, and see its signs everywhere:

revelations . . . seemed to come crowding in exponentially, as if the more she collected the more would come to her, until everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into the Tristero. (58)

Like Stencil's V., the Tristero pulls Oedipa out of what Stencil thinks of as "half-consciousness," and into the "grim, joyless hunt" (V. 44).

Unlike the conventional detective, whose amassing of clues will finally and inevitably lead, not only to a solution, but to Truth itself, Oedipa can never verify her sources. These include, among many other things, the foggy memories of an old man, the questionable experiments of a scientist whose motive in seeing her is to have sex with her, a number of postage stamps, several signs on bathroom walls, and some comments she overhears. There are no documents that can establish the alternative history of America that she is
trying to trace; and, in fact, again like Stencil, all that she can do is etch patterns, without ever knowing for certain what their status might be. What makes her different from Stencil, however, is that, whereas Stencil keeps the reader at a distance—he always speaks of himself in the third person—Oedipa is from the beginning an entirely sympathetic character, whose drama and confusion we are invited to share; and her quest is so much more specific than that pursued in V. that it seems feasible that she will find an answer.

While Stencil does not want to end his quest, Oedipa appears to have a real stake in finding out the truth about the Tristero:

For here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. Whatever else was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes, simple ignorance, this withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private. Since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum (could they?), there had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world. (92)

As time goes on, however, she instinctively begins to protect herself from some of the avenues that might lead to a definitive answer, "anxious that her revelation not expand beyond a certain point" (125). In other words, she too
develops a strategy of "approach and avoid." Her reasons for this are very different from those of Stencil, however: she is understandably nervous about what the "languid, sinister blooming of The Tristero" may ultimately mean:

Would its smile, then, be coy, and would it flirt away harmlessly backstage, say good night with a Bourbon Street bow and leave her in peace? Or would it instead, the dance ended, come back down the runway, its luminous stare locked to Oedipa's, smile gone malign and pitiless; bend to her alone among the desolate rows of seats and begin to speak words she never wanted to hear? (36)

After all, The Courier's Tragedy, the Jacobean play which introduces the word Tristero into The Crying of Lot 49, is filled with death, torture, and destruction; the acronyms she encounters that belong to the Tristero system are D.E.A.T.H. and W.A.S.T.E.; and she finds that all her supports--husband, co-executor, psychiatrist--are disappearing from her life: "There was nobody who could help her. Nobody in the world. They were all on something, mad, possible enemies, dead (128).

Oedipa considers herself caught inside a series of unresolvable binary choices: she is mad, or she is sane; there is a plot, or the Tristero is real; she is paranoid, or Pierce is playing an elaborate series of tricks from the grave. Towards the end of the novel, she describes four "symmetrical" explanations for the Tristero: "a real alternative," a hallucination, an elaborate "labyrinthine" plot, or her
fantasy of a plot (128), but she continues to think in terms of binary opposition:

[Oedipa] had heard about excluded middles; they were bad shit, to be avoided; and how had it ever happened here with the chances once so good for diversity? For it was now like walking along matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless. (136)

The either/or of Aristotelian logic to which this implicitly refers is what drives Oedipa’s quest for proof, "for there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America," but at the same time, she chooses to live in the excluded middle:

if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia. (137)

In other words, she can’t go home again.

What happens to binary opposition in this novel is that it becomes metaphor, which Oedipa describes as "a thrust at truth and a lie, depending on where you were, inside, safe, or outside, lost" (95). Caught inside binary thinking, Oedipa struggles for an alternative, for something that will explain her own existence in "the excluded middle," from which vantage point she cannot know whether she is unfolding or actually
weaving the intricate tapestry of the Tristero: paranoia vs. solipsism is the opposition that haunts her continuously throughout the novel. Her quest, to discover the truth about the Tristero, becomes less important than "teaching herself to breathe in a vacuum" (128), which requires letting go of her old Kinneret "tower," even though she cannot be sure there is anything to move towards. In other words, she has to find a way to live without the grounding of either the reductive solipsism that makes her the arbiter of reality or the equally reductive paranoia which renders her completely powerless.

In both *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, the logic of the quest is inextricably connected to the logic of binary opposition: *V.* and the Tristero do or do not exist; if they do exist, they are, like clues, good or bad, significant or meaningless. As the clues become more arbitrary, truth more elusive, and the ensuing narrative in each case more obviously partial, subjective, and desire-driven, both logics disintegrate to reveal themselves as conventions in both metaphysics and fiction. Detective fiction often pieces together the truth for us, but it is after all only in a closed, linear, and conventional form like a narrative that it is possible to have all the relevant pieces. In metaphysics, likewise, abstract logical systems are what Borges would call "phantasmagorias" that we mistake for "autonomous appearances" ("Avatars of the Tortoise," *Labyrinths* 208). At the same time, it is not possible to escape from these logics: they
animate us, they organise us, and we do not know what life would be like without them. They constitute the metaphors we live by.

One of the most prominent and obvious structuring devices of Gravity's Rainbow is also an overt binary opposition. Embodied by the Pavlovian determinist Edward Pointsman and the statistician Roger Mexico, this is the paranoia/anti-paranoia bipolarity which, as is often noted by critics, is a central feature in Pynchon's work:

Pointsman can only possess the zero and the one. He cannot, like Mexico, survive any place in between. Like his master I.P. Pavlov before him he imagines the cortex of the brain as a mosaic of tiny on/off elements. . . . One to Zero. . . . But to Mexico belongs the domain between Zero and One--the middle Pointsman has excluded from his persuasion--the probabilities. (55)

Here, as in The Crying of Lot 49, we encounter the image of the computer, with its digital processor, and once again, a sympathetic character appears to be caught in the excluded middle. It will turn out, however, that Mexico, whatever his beliefs, and despite his scientific knowledge, is unable to live his life as though events are purely random, as though God really does play dice with the universe; and that, ironically, the paranoia of Pointsman, one of the most negative characters in Gravity's Rainbow, constitutes a more comprehensible position than the anti-paranoia of Mexico,
which some critics argue represents Pynchon's own view.\textsuperscript{9}

If paranoia denotes, as a psychological term, a disorder characterized by systematized delusions either of grandeur or persecution, it has become, in much contemporary fiction, an appropriate response to a crazy world.\textsuperscript{10} In Gravity's Rainbow, it turns out that many of the characters are right to be paranoid, because there are things, often in the form of "the Firm," gunning for them. Moreover, Slothrop welcomes any form of paranoia:

If there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long. . . . Either they have put him here for a reason, or he's just here. He isn't sure that he wouldn't, actually, rather have that reason. (434)

This suggests that paranoia is intrinsically related to the religious impulse, because it posits a system of relationships going beyond, and controlling, the individual. Furthermore, it is possible to live with paranoia, and impossible to live with nothing. I will take a closer look at the theme of paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow as it relates to the story of Tyrone Slothrop, not because it is prominent only there, but rather to show what has happened both to binarism and to the motif of the quest since V. and The Crying of Lot 49.

A map Slothrop keeps of his many sexual encounters in London during WWII turns out to resemble a map that records
where the German A4 Rockets have fallen. Both follow what is called, in statistical theory, a Poisson distribution curve, but the former precedes the latter by two or three days in each instance. Although it is uncertain whether the correlation between the two maps is anything more than a strange and sinister coincidence, the suggestion of the relationship is an intriguing one, because it defies every scientifically recognized psycho-physical model. For this reason, the correspondence, which is thought to have something to do with behavioral experiments performed on Slothrop when he was an infant, intrigues and alarms many of the characters in Gravity's Rainbow, including Slothrop when he finds out about it. Hoping that if he can discover the truth about the conditioning to which he was submitted he can free himself from it, Slothrop sets off across Europe in search of clues. Once there, however, he is quite unable to sustain any commitment to or interest in his quest. Instead, he becomes involved in a bizarre series of adventures in which he shows a remarkable capacity for role-playing and adaptation, but little or no purpose or integrity. In the end, his personality disassembles, and the information he seeks adds up to a handful of clues that may or may not be significant. Slothrop's disappearance from the text constitutes one of the many narrative disruptions the reader encounters in Gravity's Rainbow. Ostensibly the main character, it could be argued that Slothrop functions in the text as a link between the
other characters, all of whom come into contact with him in one way or another. Once they have all been introduced—once the network or labyrinth has been set in place—Slothrop is no longer strictly necessary to the narrative. At another level, it is possible that as long as Slothrop holds on to his paranoia, he remains integrated, but, once divested quite literally of the trappings of his identity, he becomes anti-paranoid, thereby losing (also literally) his Self.

The anxiety provoked among scientists and non-scientists alike about the rocket-erection correspondence is even more complex, if more abstract, than that experienced by Oedipa about the Tristero. For Stencil and for Oedipa, the things they seek, V. and the Tristero respectively, are objective, at least theoretically. Slothrop is in search of something simultaneously more ephemeral, more personal, and more disruptive of reality. Put differently, it is possible to imagine that there is an end to the quests in both V. and The Crying of Lot 49, whereas, in Gravity’s Rainbow, it is impossible to explain the Slothrop phenomenon either in terms of random probability or in terms of deterministic cause-effect. In one case, even though the two maps follow random distribution patterns, their exact identity cannot be accounted for by Mexico’s statistical knowledge; in the other, the telepathic, or even prophetic nature of Slothrop’s erections, though apparently measurable and constant in relation to the fall of rockets, also defies the mechanism of
Pointsman's determinism, which requires a physical, predictable, and measurable cause-effect connection between Slothrop and the rocket.

If neither statistical probability nor Pavlovian determinism/behaviourism can account for the maps, the either/or of probabilism-determinism, as embodied by Mexico and Pointsman, is a false choice; or, rather, both sides of the paranoia/anti-paranoia binarism are simply limited human models of reality. Put differently, while Slothrop's disappearance has been interpreted by some critics as a confirmation of Mexico's probabilism—that, in fact, randomness rules not only events but also identity—I would suggest that probabilism and determinism constitute the two extremes of a purely theoretical spectrum, and that neither is validated in Gravity's Rainbow. In fact, as I have already said, it may be less possible to live in a world of random probabilities (anti-paranoia) than it is to cling to absolute mechanical determinism (paranoia). Furthermore, there is a third term introduced regularly into the text—magic, as represented in the Geli Tripping story-line, and, more casually, in the Roger Mexico-Jessica Swanlake love affair: "the very first real magic: data he can't argue away" (38).

One of Pynchon's strategies in Gravity's Rainbow is to literalize metaphors for reality by embodying them: at one level of the text, therefore, Mexico represents randomness, Pointsman, determinism, Geli, magic, and so on. Each of these
metaphors gives rise to multiple, often conflicting implications; although, of course, these are not examined as overtly and systematically in Gravity's Rainbow as they are in Borges' stories. I will demonstrate this colliding of metaphors in more detail in the next section, but the point here is to suggest that the guiding binary oppositions that structure Pynchon's first three novels are deeply metaphoric. Far from being resolvable into doctrine, these metaphors give rise to what Davidson calls "limitless insights," going far beyond Oedipa's binarist notion of metaphor as "a thrust at truth and a lie" (CL 95).

Vineland Pynchon's latest novel, which appeared after a 17-year hiatus, provides a point of comparison to the earlier novels. Another "quest" novel set, like The Crying of Lot 49, in California, it is organized around the conventional binary of past and present: the book opens in 1984, and flips back and forth between various parts of the previous twenty to thirty years and 1984. Vineland would not necessarily be included in a list of experimental fictions, even though it clearly comes from Pynchon's pen; and it is interesting to see how and why this particular text does not provide either the literary disruptions or the metaphorical play we have come to expect from him.

Teenaged Prairie Zoyd's quest is to find out the truth about Frenesi, the mother who abandoned her as an infant:

... on Prairie followed, a girl in a haunted mansion,
led room to room, sheet to sheet, by the peripheral whiteness, the earnest whisper, of her mother’s ghost.

(114)
She is motivated by the fact that Brock Vond, the villain of this piece, wants to destroy both of them. Vond, Frenesi’s former lover, is killed by the end of the novel, just at the moment that the past and present come together in the family reunion at which Frenesi and Prairie finally meet. There is in this novel an explicit sense of closure simply not available in the earlier novels. Unlike Stencil, Oedipa, and Slothrop, Prairie is not paranoid; nor does she have to undergo inordinate suffering. In fact, she finds most of the answers she seeks; truth is revealed; old family feuds are laid to rest; and the 1960s are linked up, in cause-effect manner, with the 1980s.

The quest motif in Vineland simply does not raise the epistemological or ontological issues so pressing in the earlier novels. Not only does Prairie find what she is looking for in the end, but she also never needs to doubt the status of the information she is receiving, as it comes from a reliable friend of Frenesi, from her unquestionably honest grandmother, and from actual, verifiable video footage of crucial events in her mother’s life in the 1960s. Furthermore, the question of identity, so problematic in the earlier novels, particularly Gravity’s Rainbow, is so specifically tied to immediate family that this is a
relatively straight-forward coming-of-age story: in the end, past and present are reconciled, mother and daughter are reunited.

**Metaphors of Mediation**

Another thematic concern that can be traced through all of Pynchon's work, and that sheds light on the way he processes materials is, put very generally, that of mediation, or of the "buffering, insulation" described in *The Crying of Lot 49*, but encountered by characters in all four novels. Profane in *V.*, Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pirate Prentice, Tyrone Slothrop, Roger Mexico and many others in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Zoyd Wheeler in *Vineland* experience the sense of being either unable or unwilling to remember, grasp, or interpret information. For instance, the very first paragraph of *Vineland* records Zoyd's dream about carrier pigeons, "each bearing a message for him, but none of whom, light pulsing in their wings, he could ever quite get to in time" (3). When this chapter ends with Zoyd considering whether or not Hector Zuniga will be able to "turn" him into an informant, we can discern, besides the theme of inscrutability, another level of the mediation metaphor, which has to do with references to mass media:

Should he wait for another spin? It was like being on "Wheel of Fortune," only here there were no genial vibes from any Pat Sajak to find comfort in, no tanned and
beautiful Vanna White at the corner of his vision to cheer on the Wheel, to wish him well, to flip over one by one letters of a message he knew he didn't want to read anyway. (130)

In a mass-mediatised reality, it is hardly surprising that the characters find their categories, their perceptions, and their responses either filtered, influenced, or describable in terms of those media. In the first three novels, it is perhaps the movie that dominates the pervasive metaphors and images from different forms of media, although there are also references, in V., to radio and, in all the books, to popular songs and television. I will now discuss, albeit briefly, some of the movie metaphors and motifs in all four books, and also the references to television in The Crying of Lot 49 and Vineland.

In V. and The Crying of Lot 49 Pynchon begins to develop the "life is a movie" metaphor that pervades Gravity’s Rainbow, and that is also to be found in Vineland. Specifically, characters in V. are often described in terms of movie stars: George Raft’s name comes up a great deal in physical descriptions, especially of clothing, for example; and some scenes are explicitly related to features of movies:

They wrestled around, stumbling and inexpert, trying to fight like a western movie. It is incredible how many amateur brawlers believe the movie saloon fight is the only acceptable model to follow. (267)
By the time we get to *Gravity’s Rainbow*, we discover that Pynchon continues to make casual references to movie stars, directors, plots, and generic movie gestures, but he does not spell out the connection quite as deliberately as in the quotation above. Perhaps the best example of the influence on movies on behaviour is: "Springer, with the classic gangster head move, gestures [Slothrop] up to the bridge" (530). Any reader who has ever seen it knows immediately the gesture described. Springer, director of movies, and Slothrop, avid consumer of movies, are living out in real life a classic gangster-movie sequence. Both characters surely know that they are re-enacting a familiar gesture developed specifically for movies, but they are not exactly copying it. Perhaps it is for them spontaneous performance. This is just one level of the "life is a movie" metaphor as it plays through *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and I will come back to some others shortly.

While the main use of film in *V.* is the invocation of cinematic conventions and the names and individual styles of movie stars, *The Crying of Lot 49* extends this usage to explore some of the ontological implications of thinking of oneself as living as if one is in a movie. We learn in the first chapter of the novel, before the "blooming of the Tristero" (36), that Oedipa thinks of her life as "a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix" (CL 10). Like Stencil’s use of the third person to
speak about himself, this image implies that Oedipa sees herself as a fictional character directed by others, kept from understanding her own situation by a malign force, the projectionist, someone who deliberately prevents her from seeing anything clearly. Her quest for the Tristero is, of course, an attempt to bring this movie into focus herself. Finally, in desperation at the epistemological problems she faces in trying to hunt down an unimpeachable source to authoritatively confirm or deny her suspicions, she asks "shall I project a world?" The word project refers here both to a psychopathology, and also to the movie metaphor I have been exploring. That is, this notion of projection may signal a return for Oedipa to where she began, the tower of her own ego from which it is impossible to escape. Alternatively, it may reveal that she is making the world her project, that she is prepared to bring some focus to her own movie, whether or not she can verify its contents. It turns out, however, that she cannot let go of the idea that she can find out The Truth, and so, caught once again in between two untenable options, she continues on her quest.

The "life is a movie" metaphor is elaborated in various ways in Gravity’s Rainbow, especially in the story of Slothrop, who literally lives as if his life is a series of movies. In the course of his travels, he pirates at least all of these identities: a British officer, Ian Scuffling; a Russian soldier, Tchitcherine; a German actor, Max Schlepzig
(an adopted name to begin with); and, more ludicrously, the cartoon character, Rocketman, and the folk-pig-hero, Plechazunga. Furthermore, Slothrop is so immersed in movies that, unable to deal with the reality of Europe in the second world war, he literally sees the devastation in the Zone from the viewpoint of a movie aficionado:

Someone here is cleverly allowing for parallax, scaling, shadows all going the right way and lengthening with the day--but no, Saure can't be real, no more than those dark-clothed extras waiting in queues for some hypothetical tram, some two slices of sausage (sure, sure), the dozen half-naked kids racing in and out of this burned tenement. They sure must have the budget all right. Look at this desolation, all built then hammered back into pieces, ranging body-size down to powder (please order by Gauge Number), as that well-remembered fragrance Noon in Berlin, essence of decay, is puffed on the set by a hand, lying big as a flabby horse up some alley, pumping its giant atomizer. . . . (374)

Over and over again, Slothrop does project a world, then; but he, or it, disappears in the process. Put differently, while Oedipa refuses to let go of the idea that there is an objective reality to which she, as an individual, must relate, Slothrop discards his sovereign ego, in favour of what is referred to as his "scattering."

Slothrop lives his life as though he is a series of
characters in the movies, and he interprets his environment as though it is a movie set. In the long run, this leads to disintegration; but this is only one possible implication of the literalized "life is a movie" metaphor. For Slothrop, as for Oedipa Maas, someone else is always in charge: the projectionist, the director, the script-writer. For Springer, however, this is not the case. "Der Springer," whom Slothrop encounters in the Zone, is Gerhardt Von Goll, director of movies. During the War, Von Goll makes several propaganda films for the Allies, one of them a news reel falsely reporting the advance across Europe of a black German Commando troop (74). When he subsequently discovers the Schwarzkommando exists, he decides that his images "somehow have been chosen for incarnation":

Since discovering that Schwarzkommando are really in the Zone, leading real, paracinematic lives that have nothing to do with him or the phony footage he shot last winter in England for Operation Black Wing, Springer has been zooming around in a controlled ecstasy of megalomania. He is convinced that his film has somehow brought them into being. "It is my mission," he announces . . . "to sow in the Zone seeds of reality. The historical moment demands this, and I can only be its servant." (388)

For Von Goll, then, "life is a movie" is not a metaphor, but a justification for megalomania: after all, the director--unlike the actor--is a kind of God.
This metaphor, which has limited play in the first two books, sets in motion in Gravity's Rainbow a number of conflicting implications which collide with each other, as well as with all the other metaphors that structure the text. Besides those already mentioned, perhaps the most vivid series of engagements with the movie metaphor has to do with the designated "children": Katje and Gottfried, adopted as adolescents during the war by "Captain Blicero," though young adults at the opening of the novel; the movie star Greta Erdmann's daughter Bianca, also an actor in movies; and film-fanatic Franz Pökler's daughter, Ilse. These four characters are inextricably inter-connected by virtue of a series of doublings throughout Gravity's Rainbow. Blicero adopts Katje because she and Gottfried are identical:

his face . . . is so close to what she's been seeing all her life in mirrors, her own studied mannequin's stare, that she catches her breath, feels for a moment the speeded percussion of her heart, before turning just such a stare toward Blicero. He is delighted. "Perhaps," he tells her, "I will cut your hair." He smiles at Gottfried. "Perhaps I'll have him grow his." (95)

Bianca Erdmann and Ilse Pökler are constantly equated throughout Gravity's Rainbow: Greta Erdmann conceived Bianca during the filming of the movie, Alpdrücken; and Pökler believes that Ilse was conceived on the night that he first saw the movie. To complete the circle, Greta Erdmann sees
Bianca "clearly yes very clearly in Gottfried, the young pet and protege of Captain Blicero." In fact, "it's possible, now and then, for Greta to see Bianca in other children, ghostly as a double exposure" (484).

In the cases of these characters, the "life is a movie" metaphor engages the functions of scripts and script writers. In his own milieu, like der Springer, a Director, Blicero re-writes the script of Hansel and Gretel, a narrative that provides metaphoric resonances throughout the novel. In Blicero's version, the fairytale becomes, not only pornographic, but also inverted, so that the witch is successful in the end at putting Hansel/Gottfried into the oven/Rocket. We do not know very much about Gottfried's motives in playing the game, but both he and Katje are from an early age corrupted by the megalomania of Blicero. As for Katje, she will, as mentioned earlier, go on from Blicero's script to work for "the Firm," more particularly for Pointsman, another of Gravity's Rainbow's wicked witch figures. She, like Barthelme's Snow White in a rather different cultural context, recognizes in herself a need to play a designated role inside a predetermined script, in order to ward off "the absolute rule of chance, their own pitiable contingency here, in [the] midst" of the War (96). At the same time, she feels hollow and worthless, "corruption and ashes" (94). It is interesting to note in this context that we are first introduced to Katje through the lens of a camera,
near the beginning of *Gravity's Rainbow*, before we know anything about her, which implies that, like Slothrop, she is prepared to live as though she is a character in a movie. Perhaps unfortunately for her, however, she is unable to disintegrate in the way he does.

Bianca is also both psychologically and literally destroyed by one of the wicked witch figures, her own mother, Greta Erdmann. Bianca has been taught from an early age to play the roles designated for her. Like all children in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and even though she is depicted as something of a Lolita, she has no real agency: she is simply a child alone in the forest. Her prototype in Pynchon's earlier fiction is Mélanie L'Heuremaudit in *V.*, the love object (*la fétiche*) of V. in Paris. Reality and simulation come together in that novel when Mélanie is impaled on stage by a prop that does not work properly. Bianca, who plays victim/fetish in movies, also dies playing a role, probably at the hands of her mother. Ilse is an even more shadowy figure than the other three, but, like Katje and Gottfried, she is a pawn in Blicero's plans to control her father, Franz Pökler. Separated from her for 11 months of the year, Pökler is allowed to spend a couple of weeks each year with Ilse at Zwölfkinder, a children's playground--a place, incidentally, which prominently displays figures from *Hansel and Gretel*. Pökler cannot be sure if the girl he sees each year is actually one and the same child; but he nevertheless plays out
the father-daughter script, much as if he is in a movie where the continuity of leading ladies is of little consequence.

The foregoing discussion of Katje, Gottfried, Bianca, and Ilse could perhaps have been just as effectively co-ordinated by an analysis of some other metaphor in the novel, such as the Hansel and Gretel motif. The argument here, however, is not that Gravity's Rainbow can be thoroughly explicated by understanding any overarching metaphor, but rather that the deep structure of the novel is a labyrinth of intertwining metaphors, the implications of which play and collide throughout the text. The "life is a movie" metaphor is just one possible starting point for examining what might be called Pynchon's thematic concerns, and it allows us to see many of the analogical connections between the different story-lines. It also shows what I take to be the development of Pynchon's poetics: in V., identifiably different styles are separated into different chapters, or at least different sections; in Gravity's Rainbow, the style, and the reference points, may change from one paragraph to another, even one sentence to another, which makes a metaphor-oriented approach an effective way to understand the transitions. This is, of course, simply not the case in Vineland.

In the first few chapters of Pynchon's fourth book, while Zoyd Wheeler is the central narrative focus, the text is saturated by references to popular culture, including brand-name foods, designer labels, cartoon characters, bands,
videotape, television series, and, perhaps most significantly, game shows like "Wheel of Fortune" and "Jeopardy." This is not continued throughout the novel as a whole in any significant way. In fact, rather than reveal how the techniques and values of television might become a profound influence on the individual psyche, as we might have expected from Pynchon, and which is already the case in the early text of *V.*, these references serve only relatively superficial purposes: they situate the novel historically, and they reveal some of the influences television reality can have on surface behaviour. Here, for example, is a snippet from a conversation between Zoyd and his daughter Prairie:

"Let's see, 1984, that'd make you . . . fourteen?

"Nice going, like to try for the car?" (Vinland 14)

This is cute, but it is not very deep; and it appears that Pynchon has not really processed his materials. However, even in this relatively conventional text, the use of the life is a movie metaphor creates some wonderfully comic effects in the first few chapters, as well as deep resonances later on in the story of Frenesi Gates.

Towards the beginning of *V.*, there is a reference to "one potential berserk studying the best technique for jumping through a plate glass window (when to scream Geronimo? before or after the glass breaks?)" (V. 2). Almost thirty years later, in *Vineland*, Zoyd Wheeler performs this transfenestration. Zoyd, however, is not berserk: he can only
receive disability checks as long as he pretends to be crazy. This year, 1984, the staged nature of his "spontaneous," but taped performance takes on an extra twist, because the window he jumps through turns out to be made, not of glass, but of candy. His jump can be dubbed with appropriate sound effects; and Zoyd realizes, with some disappointment, that he may never again perform the "real," somewhat risky, and certainly thrilling jump, now that cinematic effects can simulate everything. This episode engages in quite interesting ways with the issue of the authentic image, the picture that purports to tell us the truth. Even Zoyd has been able to fool himself that it is okay to carry out his hoax as long as there is something real—the glass. Now, the jump has become pure movie product.

This is an interesting and comical opening to the book, but it is only in the complex story of Frenesi Gates, "turned" by Brock Vond into a government agent, and responsible for the killing of her political cohort Weed Atman, that Pynchon employs the movie metaphor in a way that echoes its use in The Crying of Lot 49 and Gravity's Rainbow:

Beginning the night she and Rex had publicly hung the snitch jacket on Weed, Frenesi understood that she had taken at least one irreversible step to the side of her life, and that now, as if on some unfamiliar drug, she was walking around next to herself, haunting herself, attending a movie of it all. If the step was
irreversible, then she ought to be all right now, safe in
a world-next-to-the-world that not many would know how to
get to, where she could kick back and watch the unfolding
drama. No problem anymore with talk of "taking out" Weed
Atman, as he'd gone turning into a character in a movie,
one who as a bonus happened to fuck like a porno star . .
. but even sex was mediated for her now--she did not
enter in. (237)

Like Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and Prentice in *Gravity's
Rainbow*, Frenesi here discovers irrevocability, the point at
which the words "it's too late," the words which open
*Gravity's Rainbow*, signal irreversible change. Unlike the
earlier books, however, it is not too late; Frenesi returns to
her family, she reclaims both her long-lost daughter and her
mother, and, especially once Brock Vond is dead, she might be
able to put the past behind her. In short, the life is a
movie metaphor operates more as a stylistic device in *Vineland*
than an ontological exploration.

**History, Identity, and Genocide**

At one point in *V.*, there is a narratorial comment that
"people read what news they wanted to and each accordingly
built his own rathouse of history's rags and straws" (209).
In each of Pynchon's novels, the main character's quest is to
construct a specific and limited history out of, yet
simultaneously implicating, the full range of "history's rags
and straws*: Stencil’s tracing of the history of V. takes him around the world, from one story to another analogically related one; Oedipa attempts to uncover the "unofficial" history of the Tristero which is inextricably bound up with the history of America and what she perceives as the deterioration of that imaginative structure, "the American Dream"; Slothrop’s investigation of what happened to him as a child hints at global conspiracies; and Prairie’s reconstruction of her mother’s history as activist film-maker and government spy connects the radicalism of the sixties to Reaganite over-regulation in the eighties. I have already looked at what happens to the motif of the quest in Pynchon’s fiction. Below, I look at the way Pynchon’s approach to history in Gravity’s Rainbow elaborates deep metaphoric connections between colonialism, racism, sadism, and genocide.

It would be reasonable to expect that Gravity’s Rainbow, set in the Europe of WWII, would give us direct references to, even detailed descriptions of concentration camps and gas chambers; and yet Hitler’s final solution is seldom, and then only obliquely mentioned. Furthermore, whereas there are many Jewish characters in V., including most of the Whole Sick Crew, there are no central Jewish characters in Gravity’s Rainbow. Nevertheless, the Jewish holocaust is very much at the heart of this novel, which has in it many stories of genocide, from references to Frans Van der Groov, who exterminates dodoes in the Mauritius for reasons that are
inexplicable even to him but which have to do with their "ungodliness" (110), to the systematic genocide of the Hereros and Hottentots between 1904-1907 in South-west Africa, also one of the subjects of "Mondaugen's Story" in V., where the attempt to wipe out two tribes in the space of three years is linked to the holocaust:

Allowing for natural causes during those unnatural years, von Trotha, who stayed for only one of them, is reckoned to have done away with about 60,000 people. This is only 1 percent of six million, but still pretty good. (227)

Lieutenant Weissman, a character first introduced in V., and who appears in Gravity’s Rainbow under the sobriquet of Captain Blicero, is the "von Trotha," or Hitler stand-in, of the later novel.

Blicero, one of Gravity’s Rainbow’s villains, is the literary figure par excellence of the colonizer in Pynchon’s work, the Kurtz-like man who discovers in the colony freedom from the restraints of European civilization:

Colonies are the outhouses of the European soul, where a fellow can let his pants down and relax, enjoy the smell of his own shit . . . Christian Europe was always death . . . death and repression. Out and down in the colonies, life can be indulged, life and sensuality in all its forms, with no harm done to the Metropolis, nothing to soil those cathedrals, white marble statues, noble thoughts. . . . No word ever gets back. The
silences down here are vast enough to absorb all behavior, no matter how dirty, how animal it gets. (317) Once having released hitherto repressed desires, Blicero commits, again and again, transgressions of societal norms in the private as well as the public realm, as we have already seen in his corruption of the children, Katje and Gottfried.

The metaphor "colonies are the outhouses of the European soul" occurs in so many words only once in the narrative, but it co-ordinates the metaphoric connections made constantly in Gravity's Rainbow between death, racism, sadism, and excrement. One of the most explicit statements about these deep psychological and metaphorical linkages is made in the comic context of the King Kong movie, which functions in Gravity's Rainbow as a ludicrous version of the dominance-submission motif. At one point the narrator reconstructs the director's motivations in making the film:

He had not meant to offend sensibilities, only to show... that... feelings about blackness were tied to feelings about shit and feelings about shit to feelings about death. (270)

King Kong is the "scapeape" who has to be annihilated, more because of his Otherness than because he would hurt Fay Wray: "you know, he really did love her, folks" (275).14

Racism takes many forms in Gravity's Rainbow, but at its most extreme it is the labelling of Otherness, of difference, as Evil. The blackness of King Kong, like the blackness of
the African native, is easy to scapegoat, especially when it symbolizes, in the subconscious continent of the purity-conscious European mind, a part of the human that must be annihilated, or flushed away. The most overtly brutal character in the text is the thug-like American soldier, Major Marvy, Slothrop's arch-enemy, who longs for "nigger submissiveness" (606), not only in his sexual encounters but in all his relationships. The reader is not encouraged to have any sympathy whatsoever for Major Marvy, who seems to meet his poetically just desserts when Pointsman's employees, mistaking him for Slothrop, castrate him. With this exception, however, many of the characters who exhibit racism, like Tchitcherine, are not thereby inscribed as villains.

Tchitcherine, needing a scapegoat for his alienation and unhappiness, chooses to believe that his career and his life have been unsuccessful because his father had an illegitimate Herero child while a colonizer in South-West Africa (349). His strange quest to hunt and kill his half-brother Enzian, whom he has never met, is an attempt to annihilate the impurity in his, or at least in his father's, past. By the time Tchitcherine meets Enzian, he is under the love-spell of Geli Tripping, and it does not even occur to him that the black man with whom he has a pleasant encounter is the half-brother he has hated so long. He never finds out who Enzian is, and we never know whether in a different mood, at a different stage of the narrative, he would have actually
carried out his murderous intentions. It is clear, however, that Tchitcherine’s racism is deeply symbolic. He is free of it at the moment of the encounter but, should life become once more difficult and unsatisfying, it would most likely resurface. It is interesting that Tchitcherine is not thereby negatively coded in Gravity’s Rainbow. Geli’s love for him indicates that he is, by and large, a good man; and he does not exhibit the sadism of the more villainous characters, Marvy and Blicero. The point of the Tchitcherine story, then, is to illustrate at an individual level the way that the complex phenomenon of racism operates among quite ordinary and even well-meaning people.

Tyrone Slothrop also exhibits—in a sodium-amytal induced hallucination/fantasy—what appears to be a deeply racist tendency which never overtly affects his conscious behaviour. His strange journey into the underworld of the toilet in the Roseland Ballroom (65) makes explicit the metaphorical connections between colonialism, racism, and excrement that resonate through the narrative. Specifically, Slothrop hallucinates that, while trying to retrieve his mouth organ from the toilet bowl, he becomes so overwhelmed by the fear that the black shoeshine boy will rape him that he escapes into the sewer. The juxtaposition of the detailed and fascinated description of the excrement Slothrop encounters and the possibly (tantalizingly) sadistic tendencies of the normally deferential black man reveals a deeply-rooted linkage in
Slothrop's mind between the black man, sado-masochism, and the wastes of the human body. The doctors interpret this as a simple racism which will translate into concrete hostile actions. What they fail to understand is not only that latent prejudice is not always and necessarily kinetic, but also that this hallucination is mostly fantasy, and not simply nightmare. Later, Slothrop fantasizes that he is Fay Wray (688); and, disgusted by the rabid racism expressed by Major Marvy (560) he saves the Schwarzkommando from annihilation.

Slothrop's apparently masochistic, though largely unconscious, fascination with blackness is only a very mild version of Brigadier Pudding's desire for pain and humiliation. Like the colonist, Pudding, a senile veteran of World War I, can only satisfy his need for "something real"--a need expressed by many of the characters including Gottfried, who believes that when he is put in the Rocket he will finally feel something--in a sado-masochistic relationship of the type he has with Katje Borgesius, who plays the role of Domina Nocturna:

he lies humped on the floor at her feet, withered ass elevated for the cane, bound by nothing but his need for pain, for something real, something pure. . . . They have stuffed paper illusions and military euphemisms between him and this truth, this rare decency, this moment at her scrupulous feet . . . no, it's not guilt here, not so much as amazement--that he could have listened to so many
years of ministers, scientists, doctors, each with his specialized lies to tell, when she was here all the time, sure in her ownership of his failing body, his true body: undisguised by uniform, unadulterated by drugs to keep from him her communiqués of vertigo, nausea, and pain . . . Above all, pain. The clearest poetry. . . . (234-35)

The ritual that Katje and Pudding repeat several times a week culminates, if he is lucky, in his eating her excrement while she produces it. While it is "Domina Nocturna" who actually subjugates and humiliates Pudding, it is at this point another image that excites him: "he's thinking, he's sorry, he can't help it, thinking of a Negro's penis . . . it will not be denied, the image of a brute African who will make him behave" (235). Here, excrement, blackness, and sado-masochism are explicitly linked in Pudding's mind, as he tries to escape the barrenness of the bureaucratic world in which he lives.16

Pynchon does not deliver a didactic message here about colonialism and its equivalents. On the contrary, what is most interesting about the way he addresses genocide and holocaust is that the metaphor "colonies are outhouses of the European soul" reveals the phenomenon of racism, and its concomitant of scapegoating, to be a complicated and highly symbolic mixture of desire and repression. The relationships between Blicero and his three protégés, Enzian, Katje, and Gottfried, are highly complex; and, even though all three are victimized by Blicero, it is possible to develop some sympathy
in Pynchon’s text for the villain, perhaps for the same reasons that, in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow cannot reveal the truth about Kurtz to the Intended. Blicero, like Kurtz, is intelligent, verbal, and idealistic, and, also like Kurtz, he has released himself from the conventional repressions of western society:

> It’s impossible to describe the sudden release; the comfort, the luxury; when you knew you could safely forget all the rote-lessons you’d had to learn about the value and dignity of human life. Till we’ve done it, we’re taught that it’s evil. Having done it, then’s the struggle: to admit to yourself that it’s not really evil at all. That like forbidden sex it’s enjoyable.” (V. 234)

In the Tchitcherine and Slothrop stories, two positively-coded characters exhibit what we could call conventional racism, and yet this does not mean that their attitudes are even on the same spectrum as those of, say, Major Marvy, *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s thug. Their deep-seated desires and resentments are simply part of their historical heritage, and it is not entirely clear whether repression is itself good or bad.

**Metaphor**

In *V.*, Fausto Maijstral, the poet from Malta, whose memoirs, a palimpsest of modernist poetry, become a source for more clues to Stencil’s quest, has this to say about metaphor:
Living as he does much of the time in a world of metaphor, the poet is always acutely conscious that metaphor has no value apart from its function; that it is a device, an artifice. (305)

This view of metaphor is very literary and conventional, compared with Oedipa Maas' more contemporary definition: she believes that any attempt to characterize the world can only be "an act of metaphor . . . a thrust at truth and a lie, depending on where you were, inside, safe, or outside, lost" (95). There is in her view an element of artifice in metaphor, then; but one has to ask, compared with what? Perhaps, in the world of The Crying of Lot 49, truth is simply not available, and the only way to survive is to posit extended metaphors inside which to live.

By the time we get to Gravity's Rainbow, reality is fully metaphoric. This does not mean that there are no events, but rather that the characters in this book are condemned to live inside literalized versions of the metaphors they have adopted at the epistemological level. In the case of Roger Mexico, for example, the statistical view that he has of the world, if literally true, is an anti-paranoid vision: nothing connects to anything else, except randomly. When Jessica leaves him, he abandons his scientific detachment in order to adopt the political values of "the Counterforce." Notwithstanding the statistical reliability of his data, then, he cannot actually live as though his scientific approach to the world is more
than a rather limited metaphor, "a thrust at truth and a lie."
CHAPTER FOUR
THE STRATEGY OF PLAGIARISM: KATHY ACKER

The confessions are taped, scrambled, recomposed, dramatized, and then appear in the city's theaters, a new feature-length film every Friday. One can recognize moments of one's own, sometimes. (Barthelme, Dead Father 4)

My world isn't about ownership. In my world people don't even remember their names, they aren't sure of their sexuality, they aren't even sure if they can define their genders. (Acker, Hannibal Lecter 23)

Like both Pynchon\textsuperscript{2} and Barthelme, Acker writes fully metaphoric narratives that foreground the issue of narrative itself. Her source materials include different types of writing, whether these are literary, philosophical, sociological, or documentary; other media, like film, theatre, and music; popular cultural forms, especially hard-core pornography; and events from her own biography. Although her experiments are at times awkward, she has managed to develop an arresting and original voice in postmodernist American fiction. In what follows, I examine what I take to be the stages in the development of Acker's narrative strategy of plagiarism, her most foregrounded act of piracy, from its early appearance in Blood and Guts in High School and Don
Quixote to its mature use in *Empire of the Senseless* and *In Memoriam to Identity*. I argue that, despite Acker's overt feminism in interviews, her strategy is not to re-write the canon from a feminist or any other point of view, but to explicate, or explicite the psycho-sexual aspects of her chosen objects of plagiarism that have been hitherto repressed because of their taboo character. Finally, I conclude the chapter, and the thesis, with some comments on the implications of the term metaphoric narrative for interpretation.

**Imaginative Identification: Janey Reads The Scarlet Letter**

*Blood and Guts in High School* is a radically counter-realist and ironic coming-of-age story told from the crude and jaundiced viewpoint of Janey, a teenage deviant, whose father sends her to school in the United States when he finds her too difficult to tolerate. The series of adventures she has while hanging out with "poor people" in New York are just as strange as, though more violent and depressing than, those of Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow's Zone*, and they culminate in her being kidnapped by a Persian slave trader. Acker experiments in this text with a variety of narrative strategies, including "cut-up" fragments, "Persian" poetry, literary criticism, and drama. Furthermore, the novel self-consciously invokes narrative structures, such as the Freudian family drama and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. 
Shortly after she has been locked up by the slave trader, Janey starts "to write down her life," and as this sentence is immediately followed by the heading, "A book report" on The Scarlet Letter, we are led to connect Janey's life to that of Hester Prynne. This section is of interest for several reasons. Not only is it engaged with a canonical American novel, The Scarlet Letter, but also, this extended "report" is the first stage in Acker's development of the poetics of plagiarism.

The sentence "We all live in prison. Most of us don't know we live in prison" (65) signals the textual transition from Janey's (textual) life as a slave in twentieth century New York to Hester's (also textual) life in seventeenth century Massachusetts. There follows an extended back-and-forth between Janey's "totally fucked up" world (66) and the world of Hawthorne's text: "Hawthorne lived in . . . the society that created the one we live in today" (66).

The way that this episode proceeds, then, is by way of what psychoanalysis calls "projection." Janey, breaking most of the modern rules of literary interpretation, which proscribe arguments from affect, intention, identification, or paraphrase, links her life with that of Hester: "Hester Prynne, Hawthorne tells us, had wanted to be a good girl. I remember I wanted to be a good girl for my father" (67). The idea of the good girl is highly ironic in this context, of course, because, for Janey, the phrase has explicitly sexual
meaning: Acker's novel opens, in fact, with an imaginary conversation between the protagonist Janey and her father, in which it is implied that they have an incestuous relationship. We never find out whether this is actually true, or only a fantasy on Janey's part; but the fact that her father is remarrying clearly disrupts whatever psycho-sexual relationship Janey thinks exists between them.

The book report deviates from traditional approaches to literary criticism; and it imposes a modern, unliterary, and sexually explicit idiom on The Scarlet Letter:

All of them even the hippies hated Hester Prynne because she was a freak and she couldn't be anything else and because she wouldn't be quiet and hide her freakiness like a bloody Kotex and because she was as wild and insane as they come. (65)

Janey follows this up in the next few pages by explaining what she means by the word "freakiness":

Long ago, when Hawthorne wrote The Scarlet Letter, he was living in a society that was more socially repressive and less materialistic than ours. He wrote about a wild woman. This woman challenged the society by fucking a guy who wasn't her husband and having his kid. The society punished her by sending her to gaol, making her wear a red 'A' for adultery right on her tits, and excommunicating her. (66)

This pastiche combines the sentence about materialism, which
is one of those "student" sentences cribbed from the textbook or the teacher, with a refreshingly simple and explicit description of the situation at the opening of the novel. I would argue that, comical aspects aside, what Acker achieves here is significant. The use of slang--"fucking," "tits"--shows up the repressed nature, not only of Hawthorne's own necessarily indirect description, but also of literary criticism which tends not to use sexually explicit idioms.

Janey explores the similarities and differences between these two textual worlds, and the worlds outside the texts to which they are allegorically related. Janey claims, "Right now I can speak as directly as I want 'cause no one gives a shit about writing and ideas, all anyone cares about is money" (66); "anybody can say anything today; progress does occur" (66). In her attempt to understand what it is that Hester goes through, Janey thinks about imprisonment as an appropriate metaphor for Hester's experience, presumably because she now finds herself literally (or literarily?) imprisoned:

It's possible to hate and despise and detest yourself 'cause you've been in prison so long. It's possible to get angrier and angrier. It's possible to hate everything that isn't wild and free. A girl is wild who likes sensual things: doesn't want to give up things being alive: rolling in black fur on top of skin ice-cold water iron crinkly leaves seeing three brown branches
against branches full of leaves against dark green leaves through this the misty grey wander in garbage on the streets up to your knees and unshaven men lying under cocaine piled on top of cocaine colors colors everything happening! one thing after another thing! . . . you keep on going, there are really no rules: it doesn't matter to you whether you live or die. . . . (67)

Here, in a highly expressionist mode which contrasts sharply with its surrounding paragraphs of stark dialogue, crudely pornographic passages, and crass criticisms of capitalism, Janey moves very quickly out of a specific meditation about Hester Prynne and into her own desire for life and love.

Whenever we get close to Janey's thought-processes, as we do here, it becomes clear that she is unstable and unreliable. She shows intuitive insight into Hawthorne's work; but there is a madness and confusion about the jumble of discourses in her head. The "Persian Poems," which turn out to be unpoetic, interrupt the book report because, in the middle of the painful process of writing down her life with reference to Hawthorne's text, she is looking for some new forms of textuality inside which she can belong. In fact, we find out that "Janey fell in love with the Persian slave trader because she had nothing else to feel" (101). This sense of instability, or uncertainty about reality, language, and love, is reinforced by the fact that, half a page after the passage quoted above, love is described as, "a big King
Viper spreading his hood, rising up and spreading overtaking everything, that’s what love is like” (67).

Janey identifies closely with the need for the sensual that she understands has been suppressed in Hester Prynne, but it is clearly the idea of public ridicule and condemnation, later called "the torture" (69) outside the gaol, that leads her to project her own life onto Hester’s:

Your conception of who you are has always, at least partially, depended on how the people around you behaved towards you. You sense the people around you aren’t right: what you did, your need, you weren’t defying them to defy them, it was your need, was OK. You don’t know. How can you know anything? How can you know anything?

You begin to go crazy. (67-68)

Another point of comparison, in Janey’s mind, between her story and Hester’s is that both of them have been sent on their own to America by the most powerful male figures in their lives, Hester by her husband and Janey by her father. Once there, they find themselves in (sexual) trouble. When, in Janey’s version of the story, Chillingworth departs from Hawthorne’s text to say "I’m the guilty one," it is pure wish-fulfilment on her part.

Given these various points of connection, it is not surprising that Janey writes: "The Scarlet Letter is the best book I’ve read locked up in the Persian slave trader’s room and I think everyone should read it" (100). The end of the
book report is purely conventional, containing a little comment about what Hawthorne thought people should get out of his books. The framing device of the book report is effective because it ironizes the various discourses that float inside it. However, the main point here is not irony, and I will now address some elements of the report which go beyond the Hester/Janey connection.

In Janey's analysis, Chillingworth represents, in Hawthorne's book as much as in Acker's recycling of it, the Law, the Father, the roads, civilization—in short, patriarchy. As a scholar who feels no connection with Hester beyond an intellectual interest in "who fucked her," and later a punitive interest in torturing Dimmesdale, who Janey calls Dimwit, he is what Janey thinks of as a "top cop":

A scholar is a top cop 'cause he defines the roads by which people live so they won't get in trouble and so society will survive. A scholar is a teacher. Teachers replace living dangerous creatings with dead ideas and teach these ideas as the history and meaning of the world. Teachers torture kids. Teachers teach you intricate ways of saying one thing and doing something else. (68)

Here, the road is, far from being part of the romantic tradition of the open road or the frontier, symbolic of prison: "I think it's becoming harder to get off the roads" (69). Hester lives off the main road, and she is told that
she will never be loved again because of this. Pearl, in her "hippy clothes" (93), is thought to be wild and evil because she lives in the forest, and not out in the open. In Janey/Acker's reading of *The Scarlet Letter*, the forest, where Hester is hidden, and where she can nurture her passion, represents the subconscious, sexuality, death, and danger; and, in the final analysis, the imprisonment Hester experiences is internal: it is only when she "dumps" Dimwit that she "begins to break out of the prison of her mind" (98).

One of the most interesting things to note about Janey's book report is that it is an accurate description of Hawthorne's text. In other words, despite, or perhaps because of the introduction of sexually explicit material and a simplification of cultural conventions, this reading of *The Scarlet Letter* slants, but does not destroy Hester's story. By treating it literally rather than allegorically, Janey reveals how limited is the allegorical perspective, which, in its emphasis on the symbolic aspects of Hester's A, tends to downplay the fact that this is a story about sexuality and social convention. By naming the acts that bring down so much ire on Hester's head, Janey reveals one of the things Hawthorne is certainly pointing to, which is the arbitrariness of Hester's punishment.

*Blood and Guts in High School* introduces the use of canonical narratives to achieve the psycho-sexual explicitation that is such a hallmark of Acker's work. In
later novels, she develops this strategy of projection into plagiarism proper, in order to create an effect that is far less distanced or double. In other words, the mapping between her textual world and that of the "original" becomes simultaneously more seamless and more of a palimpsest.

Ironic Identification: "I am Jane Eyre"

Acker's later novels, *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote*, which steal their titles from existing and canonical texts of western culture, signal Acker's decision to make plagiarism her foregrounded narrative strategy. In *Blood and Guts in High School*, the identification between Janey and Hester Prynne is established through the medium of a book report; in these two texts, the identification is more immediate. The result is, in my view, quite uneven: Acker's *Great Expectations* is almost unreadable, while her *Don Quixote* is lively, and sometimes comical.

In *Great Expectations*, Acker does very little with the source text beyond the first section; but as we read through this novel, there are themes and motifs that suddenly place the original in a new light. The use of Réage's *Story of O*, for example, with its pornographic and de-Sadean "coming-of-age" narrative, is a new twist on the themes of expectation and servitude that are motifs in Dickens' text. Issues of betrayal, spousal abuse, death of parents, deception, the search for love, men-hating women, and blasted hopes are all
present in both texts. Acker's *Great Expectations* opens with a word-for-word transcription of the original paragraph from Dickens' novel, but it introduces the female protagonist Peter rather than the boy Pip. From the first page, then, she disrupts her readers' expectations. I would argue that this is the most difficult to read of all her books because her narrative strategies are still somewhat immature, and some of the materials she wants to use remain unprocessed. In fact, like Pynchon's *Vineland*, Acker's *Great Expectations* is too raw and under-developed to be of very much interest in the context of a discussion of metaphoric narratives. Unlike Pynchon's novel, *Great Expectations* is not a "good read." I see it as an unsuccessful experiment in deconstruction that she leaves behind when she writes her next book.

There is one way this novel is of interest here, however: it introduces the motif of the suicide of the protagonist's mother, which permeates her subsequent novels, and represents, in most cases, a possible model for action that the protagonist must reject. In an interview with Sylvère Lotringer, Acker mentioned that her own mother committed suicide when she, the daughter, was about thirty years old (*Hannibal Lecter*). In *Great Expectations*, it seems that this event is still a raw and sore spot for Acker, and it is presented on the very first page: "On Christmas Eve 1978 my mother committed suicide and in September of 1979 my grandmother (on my mother's side) died" (5). Great
Expectations ends with a powerful and painful reference to this traumatic event:

My mother committed suicide and I ran away. My mother committed suicide in a hotel room because she was lonely and there was no one else in the world but her, wants go so deep there is no way of getting them out of the body, no surgery other than death, the body will hurt. There are times when there is no food and those times must be sat through.

I ran away from pain.

What is, is. No fantasy. Pain. Just the details: the streets, the green garbage bag a bum’s sleeping next to, a friend, too much time no time, too much to eat not enough to eat, going to a movie with Jeffrey I don’t know if the world is better or worse than it has been I know the only anguish comes from running away.

Dear mother. (127)

In the next three books, Acker uses this scene again and again, but with more narrative success, as she reworks it, reprocesses it to suit different contexts. In other words, when Acker uses this, and other aspects of her life in her work, she is plagiarizing those facts for her art.

Don Quixote is a much better work than Great Expectations, primarily because Acker actually does the work she needs to of recycling and reworking the Don Quixote story for her own ends. Taking the picaresque novel into regions of
sexuality and pain it has not gone before, Acker also works out the comedic side of this work, by making the sidekick, Sancho Panza, a dog--called Dog. Whole sections of the novel are written from the vantage point of the Dog's view of humans. It is also here, in *Don Quixote*, that Acker gives her readers a fictional genesis of her pen name, in the context of "Don Quixote's Abortion":

She had to name herself. When a doctor sticks a steel catheter into you while you're lying on your back and you do exactly what he and the nurses tell you to; finally, blessedly, you let go of your mind. Letting go of your mind is dying. She needed a new life. She had to be named.

As we've said, her wheeling bed's name was 'Hack-kneed' or 'Hackneyed', meaning 'once a hack' or 'always a hack' or 'a writer' or 'an attempt to have an identity that always fails.' Just as 'Hackneyed' is the glorification or change from non-existence into existence from 'Hack-kneed,' so, she decided, 'catheter' is the glorification of 'Kathy.' By taking on such a name which, being long, is male, she would be able to become a female knight or a night-knight. (10)

When Acker plagiarizes from the text of her own life--experience of abortion--in order to find materials for her novels, there is an element of 'tease' because we never really see her stripped down naked: despite the apparent
vulnerability, there is always a perceivable artifice in the affair.

In her Don Quixote, Acker makes a historically male literary character into a female protagonist—a practice she started at least as early as The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec—and here it is combined with a constant and comic play with the connection between the meanings of night and knight. In the Don Quixote story, Acker has found a perfect vehicle for what is, in her earlier texts, a foregrounded social mission: Kathy Goes to Haiti, for example, is full of references to the poor, and to the protagonist’s desire to do something meaningful to help. In this work, Acker’s sometimes apparently explicit politics are reworked, partly as irony, but mostly as textual technique. The female Don Quixote who travels through Nixon’s and Reagan’s America is the picaro working her way, however, not through geographic territory as much as through the texts of western culture, including dramas like Sophocles’ Oedipus, Shaw’s Pygmalion, Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, and many others in a section called "Other Texts." The passage I will look at here is in the third section, and uses the English novel Jane Eyre.

Where Acker fails to recycle the available materials of Dickens’, or anyone else’s, work in her Great Expectations, she certainly works in Don Quixote with the first few chapters of Jane Eyre, especially as it echoes The Mill on the Floss, another nineteenth century English bildungsroman written by a
woman. The context is comical: in a discussion of "human heterosexuality," Dog describes her childhood, most of which is structured around Jane Eyre, though there are more and more digressive features as we go through.

The beginning of the section called "The River" leads readers familiar with both Jane Eyre and Mill on the Floss to guess that the section will be about Maggie Tulliver, a young girl, like Jane Eyre, who is often told by the adults around her that she is less worthy of love than "normal" children. The apparently central image of the river disappears very quickly, however, and Jane Eyre is revealed to us:

"My sisters and brothers're lying around their mother on her bed. She never gets up from her bed. She hugs them and even kisses them. I have to sit at the foot of the bed. Their mother, not my mother, says to me that she's sorry she can't touch me and I'm untouchable, "but until the nurse or any other person who is another person says to me you're normal and you're trying to do the only possible thing you can do to adjust to life--be happy like everybody else in this world--, I cannot allow you to be around happy people, that is, people. Because you are diseased." (142)

Shortly after this, the girl retires to "the windowseat at the bottom of one of the huge livingroom windows" (143), where she reads a book: "here, at the edges of meaning, I'm safe" (143). Just in case we are at all unsure as to which fictional
character we are dealing with here, her book, which is "about bleakness which I love" "says" the first sentence of Jane Eyre, with its explicit reference to Mrs Reed. (143)

What follows is a psychological description of John Reed:

His combination of mental and physical, or he, is powerful and frightening . . . his mother adores him because he acts like this, like a big man. (144)

The various physical details of the fight between John and Jane and her subsequent punishment are missing here, because Acker concentrates on the effect of the power of this brutal boy and his mother on the mind of the protagonist. That is, instead of Brontë’s objective details, Acker substitutes a psychological narrative:

My fake brother is the human world. Being four years older than me, my fake brother explains to me the reasons why he hates me so that I’ll learn them: I don’t know how to love sincerely; I care too much what other people think about me.

If this isn’t true, if I don’t care what other people think about me, I wouldn’t care if he loved me and I’d think he’s crazy just as his own mother thinks he is. But, since I do care cause I hate him, what he says about me must be true: I don’t know how to love; therefore, he does.

Since I’m bad and don’t even understand my badness, I can’t trust myself, so I do everything my fake brother,
even though I hate him, tells me to do. I'm always scared. (144)

What is remarkable about this passage is that, although Acker reworks the text, she does not change it as much as amplify it. That is, what she is interested in here is the development of masochism in what would otherwise be an essentially independent and passionate temperament. The messages Jane/Dog gets about herself from her bullying step-brother who pushes her around and her "fake mother" who neglects her have a traumatizing effect on her: this is all in Bronte's story, but not in such psychologically explicit terms.

In "Dreams Of/in the Human World," the dog tells Don Quixote a fantasy/dream of a sado-masochistic and, later, Oedipal relationship, which suddenly returns, albeit briefly, to the Jane Eyre narrative, revealing that the fantasy is a way of working out a psychic relationship many years after the fact:

My family protests the way I am. The fact is that I am this way. I'm conscious that my refusal, my refusal upon refusal, my double mutiny that mutiny, this momentary attempt of mine to be a whole human, renders me liable to their disgusting penalties. Like any other rebel slave, perverse rebel, I resolve, now and forever, with total desperation, always to go to all lengths. (146)

This section is an embittered meditation on the relationships
between parents and children, with very little of Bronte’s narrative in it; but the two sections are metaphorically, tangentially, and once specifically related by the resistance to being rendered a victim.

"The Female Side Of The Oedipal Myth" returns quite explicitly to Jane Eyre, and the protagonist’s growing awareness of the "double bind" she finds herself in:

Being mean and cruel he refused to touch me. That’s how males’re: they always deny physical affection so that we females’ll be tied to them via this double bind: we want them and we hate their guts (148-49).

This passage sheds new light on Jane Eyre’s mature relationships in Bronte’s text. Jane can only be with Rochester once he has been crippled and blinded, once she can, despite her modest appearance, be in charge of the situation. Helpless, Rochester will love her the way she needs to be loved; whereas, when he was strong, he could not satisfy her, because his will was always too demanding, and she was expected to be too yielding, just as she was expected to be with her cousins, John Reed and St. John Rivers. At the same time, she can serve him, in a semi-masochistic fashion. In fact, her continuing to call Rochester "Sir," throughout the novel is explicitly linked in this text with master-slave relationship in sado-masochistic relationships, in which the "slave" is often far more in charge than anyone would want to admit. What Acker achieves here, on my reading, is an
explicitation of Jane’s psycho-sexual development as a child, at this very early stage consisting of pure masochism, coupled with suicidal tendencies: "My only sexuality is fear of everything I know as human. My sexuality is wanting not to exist" (149). These thoughts are the "subjective correlative" of what is known as the "red room" scene in Jane Eyre, which culminates in a dream in which the child learns to know love (153).

"Actuality Repeats the Dream" reworks the conversation Jane Eyre has with the family doctor which leads to her being sent to Lowood School: "The doctor and my fake mother agreed to send me away to school. I was able to leave the hateful home" (154). The result in both versions of the story is the same; but here again, the conversation between "Dog" and "Doctor" brings some things to the surface that are hidden or symbolic or merely implied in Bronte’s text. For example, Dog says "I hate myself," to which the doctor replies, "Can’t you learn to think, or unthink, in some other way?" (154) The answer is an interesting one, and very typical of Acker, but also very insightful about Bronte: "Since there is nothing but this, if I stop feeling unhappy, I’m nothing. I’m scared of nothingness" (154). For Jane/Dog, something, even self-hatred, is better than nothing, which is death: her masochism is so close to a death instinct in any case, that she sees in herself the suicidal tendencies that the Lowood school will also establish in her personality.
Acker explicitly foregrounds the relationship here between sex and death that has been a metaphoric feature of western literature at least since the time of Shakespeare. Moreover, she uncovers what it is that leads us to make this imaginative connection by examining the psycho-physical relationships in "gory" detail, sometimes as hard pornography, and often in sado-masochistic terms. In Acker’s world, the act of suicide is an ever-present alternative to the search for connection with the rest of the world through the intimacy of the sexual relationship.

There is a hint of the suicidal impulse in the loneliness Jane/Dog experiences at Lowood. In both versions we know of this story, Lowood is better than Gateshead because "I would rather have this loneliness than be with people who're supposed to love me because they're my only home but hate me" (155). Her fantasy life, all about being touched either as a baby or as a lover, makes explicit the sexual undercurrent expressed symbolically in Bronte's text. In Bronte's text, Jane's loneliness is assuaged by her relationship with the highly spiritual, terminally ill Helen Burns, and a teacher, Miss Temple. In Acker's version, "Burn" is Dog's love object: "I worship you" (159), but Burn does not see any "need for love and tenderness" (160). Again, what Acker does here is to delve a little into the relationship between these two young girls, noting the sensuality and love-need in Jane, as compared with the aloofness of Burn from these human
The *Jane Eyre* section is interrupted by another text, in which the girls hold secret orgies with one of their teachers, in which they use dildos, whips, and other sexual toys. This departure from the Bronte narrative is nevertheless related to it, because, as Acker shows, the personality structure we see developing in Jane, as this is explicitated through the narrative of Dog, is exactly that of the masochist who requires pain and other extremes of physical connection in order to feel his/her own identity.

How does this relate to what Acker does in *Blood and Guts in High School* with *The Scarlet Letter*? The most obvious difference is the identity between Dog and Jane, made in the service of examining the development of the masochistic personality. In the earlier experiment, *The Scarlet Letter* is examined as a separate text; here, *Jane Eyre* is simply plagiarised in some of its basic structures and images, and mixed with a number of other texts. The effect here is an interesting one of shock and recognition, as we begin to see that what Acker does is desublimate some of the things that Jane feels but cannot say. Just as Acker explores suppressed aspects of Hawthorne's text, she expands the text Bronte offers. In her *Don Quixote*, Acker arrives at what I think of as the second stage of the development of her use of plagiarism. The gap between character and story has been narrowed; but many of the works *Don Quixote* and Dog adopt are
Total Collision: De-sublimating the Repressed Hero

In *Empire of the Senseless*, this technique of simply using an existing, and usually widely read or canonized text to structure its reworked version has reached impressive maturity. Before looking a little more closely at what has happened since *Don Quixote*, I should comment on the fact that Acker deliberately turns away here from what she thinks of as deconstruction to a more narrative-oriented approach to her craft.6 In *Empire of the Senseless*, we follow two characters, Thivai and Abhor, as they negotiate their way through a post-apocalyptic Paris.7 In this book, Acker shows us that she has in her arsenal of techniques an ability to sustain the comic. There are some very funny sections in her earlier novels, particularly in *Kathy Goes to Haiti* and *Don Quixote*, but there is a sureness as well as intelligence that makes this book far more interesting and absorbing than anything earlier. It is also easier to read because it matters less that the reader knows all the references. The major difference between *Don Quixote* and *Empire of the Senseless* is that, in the latter novel, the "other texts" have simply become part of Acker's own text, without her particularly flagging them as other. That is, she makes these texts her own, without requiring that the reader know the source material. I will look at two different plagiarisms in
Empire of the Senseless: the first re-writes the contemporary cyberpunk novel Neuromancer, and the second plagiarizes The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

Gibson

Part of "Elegy for the World of the Fathers," the first section of Empire of the Senseless, about the developing relationship between Thivai and Abhor, is structured around motifs, references, incidents, and characters from William Gibson’s Neuromancer, the book that signalled the literary arrival of cyberpunk science fiction.9 Once again showing a sure-footed understanding of what she is reading, Acker makes this text her own, sometimes out-Gibsoning Gibson. In a section called "Nightmare City," an obvious echo of Gibson’s "Night City," Thivai becomes Case, the cowboy-hacker protagonist of Neuromancer (27). From here to the end of the "Elegy" section (86), Acker cribs the plot of Gibson’s novel for the main structuring device for her own text—which is, like her other novels, a palimpsest of many different kinds of discourses. She makes strategic changes, of course, in order to foreground the character structures that are of interest to her, as I will show after a very brief introduction of the source novel, which is more recent, and therefore less well-known than any I have dealt with so far.

When we first meet Case in Neuromancer, he is a low-life criminal in Chiba, trying to escape death at the hands of the
drug-dealer he has double-crossed: he cares very little for his life, because neurological damage has disabled him from "jacking in" to cyberspace, the virtual reality created inside his mind when he plugs himself (his cerebral cortex) into the computer networks. He thinks of this turn of events as "the Fall" from the world of the mind, and into the world of the flesh, or "meat." He is a drug addict, and the woman who loves him, Linda Lee, has become a junky, perhaps in part because she cannot ever get as close to Case as she would like: after all, he is the not-necessarily-so-strong, silent, adventurous type, who has no real interest in "meat" emotions like love.

This is just introductory. The main action of the novel begins when Case meets Molly, a "street samurai" with whom he will become partners in a number of "heists." Their boss, who fixes Case's neurological damage, is a man called Armitage, who later turns out to have been "programmed" by an Artificial Intelligence from the computer matrix called Wintermute: Wintermute is their real boss. In Neuromancer, there are many kinds of inanimate intrusions into the animate body, from prostheses and implants to whole constructs like Armitage, whose identity is programmed into another person's body, and the Dixie Flatline, the program/construct of a now dead hacker, to the Artificial Intelligences who are trying to over-write software that keeps them apart: Wintermute and Neuromancer.
In Acker's text, Thivai/Case is "physically and mentally damaged" by a bad case of gonorrhoea, which has left him hopeless: "my only desire is to suicide" (27). In the first two pages of "Nightmare City," Acker follows the Gibson text quite closely, though it is compressed and fragmented. There is a description of Linda Lee, though she is referred to here only as "my current fuck," (27) and her growing drug addiction:

I watched her personality fragment, over a period of time, calving like an iceberg or space, splinters of identity drifting away, until finally I saw her raw need, obsession which is addiction. (Empire of the Senseless 28)

Also, Thivai/Case meets Abhor/Molly, the street samurai, who greets him in his own apartment with "a Luger" (28). There is then a digression, in a section called "Suicide," into Thivai/Case's background and childhood; and in "Beyond the Extinction of Human Life," we return to Acker's version of Neuromancer. This is the pattern that continues through the rest of the section; and it serves to introduce various materials into Acker's plagiarism which highlight the features of Neuromancer that interest her.

In Neuromancer, Case does not call himself suicidal, but it is quite clear that he is on the road to destruction: in Acker's version, then, Thivai/Case makes explicit all the unspoken assumptions and feelings that Gibson's character
cannot, and does not want to express. For example, at one point, Thivai/Case says, "I didn't bother saying anything. It's a policy of mine" (27). In "Suicide," furthermore, Thivai/Case outlines his attitudes towards women: "there are three types of females: dead, dumb, and evil," (29) and he calls his own behaviour generally "socially unacceptable" (30). The effect that Acker achieves here is not so much to undermine or change the protagonist of Gibson's book as to examine psychological dimensions already present in Case: after all, Case rejects the "meat love" of Linda over and over again; and even though he develops an attachment to Molly, the relationship does not last beyond their capers. His rejection of "meat," and his embracing of the world of cyberspace he can reach through his mind, places him, in Acker's world, in the realm of "the fathers," where the male principle is one of sterility and frigidity.⁹

What particularly draws Acker to Gibson's work, however, apart from the portrayal of the loner-cowboy male protagonist which gives her a grounding for her own first male protagonist, Thivai, is, in my view, the deconstruction in Gibson's novel of the integrity of human identity itself. If an Artificial Intelligence can orchestrate the plot, and personalities can be downloaded from and uploaded into computer programs, our sense of "humanity" is severely problematized.

The section "Beyond the Extinction of Human Life"
specifically addresses this issue of the constructed nature of identity and personality. Once Thivai/Case understands that Dr. Schreber/Armitage will be able to cure him, he realizes that "I, whoever I was, was going to be a construct" (33). In Neuromancer, this is not a question that Case addresses; in Acker’s version, however, Thivai/Case understands that the engineering of his brain constitutes programming. Abhor is introduced into Empire of the Senseless as "half-robot," and later, Thivai/Case remembers that she too is a construct. In fact, this notion of the construct pervades the "Elegy" section; and Thivai and Abhor discuss that the construct they seek is called "Kathy" (34). In this metafictional move, which is reminiscent of the opening of her Don Quixote, Acker foregrounds the constructed nature of narrative and character in her textual world.

In Gibson’s text, Case’s experiences with Neuromancer take place while he is officially dead (flatlined), though for very short periods, and it is this effacement of life in the pursuit of adventure, Case’s death instinct, that Acker makes a central feature in her version. Accordingly, Gibson’s Wintermute becomes "Winter," and, later, "Death": once again, Acker makes explicit what is already quite apparent, though situated differently, in Gibson’s text. Interestingly, there is, in Empire of the Senseless, no explicit mention of cyberspace itself, despite the use of the cyberpunk novel. To be sure, there are some references to computer terms which
imply that the novel is itself a computer program--"A pulsing red and black cursor crept through the outline of the doorway" (34) --but there are also many alterations of Gibson's text. For example, "AI," which means "Artificial Intelligence" in most cyberpunk novels, means "American Intelligence" in this one; the "Panther Moderns" of Neuromancer becomes "The modern Terrorists" of Empire of the Senseless.

Perhaps the most important difference is that Acker's version of the Neuromancer story, which Gibson gives a beginning, a middle, and an end, is left incomplete. After Abhor/Molly kills Schreber/Armitage, Thivai and Abhor find themselves at a dead end; although their prototypes, Case and Molly, are able to carry out their mission, with the help of Wintermute. Thivai and Abhor, on the contrary, find themselves inside other narratives, other discourses, other multiple constructions.

Twain

Towards the end of the novel, there is an interesting turn in the narrative from the doubly perspectival equality of Thivai and Abhor, partners in crime and friends as well as lovers, to a resentful attempt by Thivai to keep Abhor "down." Acker traces the break-up of Abhor and Thivai by using a section from the American classic, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. "I Realize Something," (175-208) opens with Thivai thinking and speaking in what is recognizably Huck
Finn's (unbowdlerized) idiom:

I got up off that concrete, bare-assed, naked, and thought to myself: I've just been pretending I'm a pirate and mean and an Arab terrorist and have no morals. Actually, I ain't none of these. Then, I almost started to cry, which I don't usually do cause I wasn't anything and cause I was all alone on the concrete and cause my asshole hurt. (175)

This voice does not remain a continuous feature of the section, because, as in Don Quixote, there are always a number of competing discourses, but there is an extended engagement almost to the end of the novel with Huck's story.

In Acker's version of Twain's famous tale of the flight of Nigger Jim and Huck Finn down the Mississippi, Thivai is Huck, Abhor is Jim, and Mark, the gay motorcyclist, plays the role of Tom Sawyer, who tries to make sure that Abhor's escape from prison is not too easy, because that would take the romance out of the situation. As with the other books she uses, Acker here develops the narrative strategies and thematic concerns of Huck Finn, as well as the ironies of romance that Twain introduces into his text. She also introduces some new aspects, including a possible homoeroticism between Huck and Tom that is made extra visible in this version because the two men are essentially in collusion to damage Abhor. Like Huck, Thivai takes on many personalities; and his on-off relationship with Abhor echoes
the pattern in *Huck Finn*, in which Jim keeps on disappearing and reappearing.\(^{10}\)

Thivai’s decision to "get Abhor in prison," by giving away her whereabouts to the CIA—thus linking this last section to the *Neuromancer* part of the story, in which terrorists blow up the Washington DC computer library, for which crime Thivai now frames Abhor—is motivated by his resentment that "she was as strong as I was" (192), and "just like Ahab" (192). Once she gets arrested, Thivai feels remorseful enough to want to rescue her, although this desire is primarily stimulated by his thinking that his rescuing her will obligate her to him, so that she will act like his piece of property: "I really like the idea of stealing Abhor" (195).

The whole "rescue from jail" is, in spirit, straight Twain, with its attempt to maintain the romance element of what should be a perfectly straight-forward operation: we told her . . . she was going to have to get permanently and seriously maimed escaping from her jail because escaping from jail is a difficult and dangerous thing for a man to do. (202)

Abhor is aware that these men are working out their fantasies at her expense, while Jim, in Twain’s novel, does not necessarily know what is going on. In this extended plagiarism, Acker uses the humour of the story in Twain to examine some of the deep motivations behind the ways in which people treat each other. Acker’s text reveals, not only the
victim's perspective, but also the deep psycho-sexual relationships between men who hold power over someone weaker than themselves. Abhor was Thivai's lover, but because she withdraws love from him, he feels entitled to betray her and have her imprisoned. His desire to rescue her is equally self-serving; and when he allies with Mark, it is made absolutely clear, only partly by the fact that they have sex, that Abhor has become simply a passive object in their minds. At the same time, we learn after Abhor leaves the prison, that she, like Jim, was actually in a position to escape at any time: she chose to stay and play through Thivai's narrative in which she is passive victim.

The Thivai and Abhor we encounter in this last section speak different idioms from those in the first; but their personality traits are (for Acker) relatively continuous. Thivai continues to think of Abhor as his property, while Abhor continues to act independently of him: after she is finally rescued from the gaol, she escapes Mark and Thivai on a motorbike, in a bid for autonomy and freedom. In her view, Thivai continues to represent a death instinct, while she, like many of Acker's female protagonists, is in search of life.

Mature Reflections: Caddy Speaks

I would say that the extended use of Faulkner in In Memoriam to Identity is the most convincing and powerful work
Acker has yet produced using other texts. Her narrative strategies here are not new; but her writing is quite mature, and her continuing experimentation is more playful, not so heavy-handed or clumsy, or as overdone, as in the earlier works. As in *Empire of the Senseless*, Acker does not maintain distance in this book between her texts and "other texts," but rather simply assumes a plagiaristic strategy, and adopts idiom, plot, and structure at will.

The "Capitol" section of *In Memoriam to Identity* is Acker's recycling of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, a modernist classic of American fiction, in which the story of the Compson family is told from four completely different points of view. Faulkner's book, which deals with issues of incest, gender, race, and suicide, seems a natural choice for Acker; and it is not surprising that her best work to date would use Faulkner's work as a guiding structure. The section is divided into two parts, "Girls Who Like to Fuck" and "The Last Days of Rimbaud." The first focuses on a meeting between Quentin and Caddy that does not take place in Faulkner's text. The second is a reworking of the "Jason" chapter in *The Sound and the Fury*. The character of Capitol is, in Acker's text, both Caddy (mentioned as "one of the happiest women anyone's ever seen" 209) and Quentin Jr., Caddy's daughter, who steals back from the greedy Jason money that is rightfully hers before running away from Yoknapatawpha County. The identity between these two women is already
implied in Faulkner’s text, especially in Jason’s narrative, when he refers to them both as whores, but the renaming of Candace and Quentin into one character, Capitol, reinforces the "property" aspect of gender relations, especially in this particular textual world, which relates allegorically to the deep South of the USA.

The voice of Caddy is absent from Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. Acker revisits the family in order to add the viewpoints of Caddy/Quentin Jr. to those of the three sons. This voice introduces a distinctive modern idiom, one we find in *Don Quixote* and also, of course, in all the earlier novels; and we are introduced to it in this way:

Daddy was a drunk, and mom had decided to be a crip, but I didn’t mind them too much. Quentin came back from Harvard with all these ridiculous theories. He told me that Freud had said that all women are naturally masochists, though he didn’t say that that simply.

I understood what Quentin meant and I got angry at him. "They teach you stupid things in universities and universities are no good for anybody." I was angry, though I didn’t know why.

I had never known Quentin. Or anyone. It’s impossible to know a person who’s always fantasizing about you and about whom you’re obsessing.

I saw Quentin as someone who desperately wanted to touch me but never could because he was mean. (153)
In Faulkner's text, Quentin kills himself before he can come home from his year at Harvard. Before he dies, he tells Mr. Compson that he is the father of Caddy's child, but it is unclear if this confession is the truth; it seems more likely, in Faulkner's text, that it is an attempt to protect Caddy's reputation. In her reworking of the original text, Acker examines the brother-sister relationship as though the incest charge were true. Both Jason and Quentin are obsessed throughout their textual lives with Caddy's promiscuity; and so Acker gives us a girl "who likes to fuck" (153):

I fuck every man in sight. Men open me up or sex with them opens me up, so I learn something about myself. My story has something to do with opened-out flesh. (154)

Caddy's sexuality, which broods below the surface of the Faulkner novel, is out in the open here; its psycho-sexual meanings, in Faulkner represented only symbolically, become quite explicit. Capitol is in search of life, while her brother Quentin is looking for death. As Capitol describes it: "all he cared about was death" (164).

In Acker's version, Quentin does not commit suicide, but becomes an artist, and follows his father's strategy for dealing with others:

For the rest of his life Quentin would drink cause drinking was a way of moving among people without having to touch or be touched. Not having to belong. Ever again past death. Who gives a shit how your mother died
or if you have a real father. Only stupid Oedipal-obsessive theorists care about that sort of thing. (174)

In the early part of the chapter, Capitol and Quentin are inseparable. He displays a great deal of sexual jealousy, and the two clearly have, at both the physical and the psychological level, a sexual relationship, which is fully consummated: "we had done it" (164). It is not, however, the kind of love relationship Capitol wants from him:

The more Quentin wanted to touch me, the more he was unable to touch me, not because of guilt, but because he wanted to remain in love with death, frigid. Nothing in him, and sexual desire wasn't the strongest of these impulses, was going to make him grow up. I didn't want to be in this world where people had no protection against being hurt and I was. (167)

By making the incest explicit, Acker de-sublimates the text she reworks. That is, Acker picks out from The Sound and the Fury Quentin's death instinct, which is shown to be intrinsic to his culture, and uses that as a counterpoint throughout this section to Capitol's desperate desire for connection, opening, life.

Incest, therefore, instead of being the main structure around which the text develops, becomes a symbol for what we would now call a dysfunctional family: "Father had taught Quentin to want to die. Mother had taught me I should. That's what parents do" (164). Capitol claims to be, at some
level, her mother, but her mother, a drug addict of the "Betty Ford Clinic" variety, is the one person who, in Acker's version, probably commits suicide; and it is only with the escape of the young Quentin that the cycle can be broken.

In "The Last Days of Rimbaud," Jason tries to cash in on his sister Capitol's promiscuity by turning her into a prostitute. The renaming of Faulkner's Jason as Rimbaud combines two different characters--the macho American superhero Rambo, and the poet. Jason claims, in fact, that he would have been a poet, "but I've the burden of this decadent family" (178), "our whole fucking family," whose "genes are so bad" (182). Capitol, in this version the textual equivalent of Quentin Jr., Caddy's daughter in The Sound and the Fury, who has been abandoned with the Compson family, thinks of Jason as "a dead poet" (183). As for Jason/Rimbaud's view of Capitol: "She's now doing what bitches do and she's going to end up the way bitches end up if one of us doesn't do something about it" (177). Of course, what Jason does about it is try to make money out of Capitol's sexual activity: "sex is the surest business there is" (187).

The chapter opens with Father and Jason, but the "I" is still the voice of Capitol. Unlike the first chapter, however, which is mostly about Capitol and Quentin, and the effect of the mother's suicide on them, here we learn something about the father, whose "problem," according to Jason, is, in the first place, "rhetoric and booze," (181) and
also that Mr Compson has "never understood anything about women" (181). There are long sequences from which Capitol is absent, except as the constant focus of conversation. The confrontations between Capitol and Jason, first in the motorcycle garage, and then in Jason's car, show a slightly different Capitol, one who is scared all the time, but who is also the same rebel we have already encountered: "Jason or Rimbaud hates when I say things out loud, especially the things he wants to repress. He says I'm scared all the time cause he's scared" (184).

Capitol calls Jason "the first sane member of our family" (192). She knows that he "hadn't made me low enough yet" (192): "Rimbaud intended to reach and cling to the topmost rung of success on the ladder of my body" (194). Part of his sadism, his attempt to break her, is to destroy any illusions she may have about her mother:

She never loved you, Capitol. In fact, she hated your guts because your real father left her because she was pregnant with you and she just wanted to fuck, she didn't want a kid.

Capitol's response: "Maybe I make up my mother in my head and what I make up keeps me alive" (197). Her decision to run away, though she has no idea where she will go, is simultaneously a leap for freedom from the "slavery" Jason has in mind for her, and an escape from the death wish that permeates the culture, and especially the family, she is in:
"all there is to be scared of in this world is that one of your relatives will get you" (211). Capitol, like Quentin Jr. in The Sound and the Fury, has many questions about her mother; and, by making her Quentin figure a continuation of Caddy, Acker foregrounds the identity questions facing the women in this particular world: "I want to know who I am and I don't know what's real" (190).

In this novel, Acker pulls together most of the motifs of her earlier work in a skilful rendering of Faulkner's work. She does not necessarily introduce novelties into the deeper meanings of the text, but she does render those meanings very explicit, by speaking directly about the actual mechanics of sex, the physical parts, including genitalia, and the sexual desire that is largely presented in Faulkner's texts through symbolization. Acker's (post)modernizing move sheds light, then, on the relationships between the world of Faulkner's text, as well as on her own textual and actual worlds.

The technique of plagiarism that Acker develops over the course of the novels she has written to date renders her texts fully metaphoric. There are certainly political issues in these novels, especially overtly feminist deconstructions of patriarchy and male sexuality; but even these can be traced back to the source materials that she "puts together." In the case of Empire of the Senseless, for example, her revision of Neuromancer foregrounds the death instinct that is so clearly at the root of the "mind over matter" attitude of Case; and in
her use of *Huck Finn*, she simply takes the racism inherent in the treatment of Jim by Tom and Huck, and redeployes it in terms of the sexism of Mark and Thivai. These plagiarisms deconstruct, in both cases, the romance of adventure stories, but the source texts are themselves committed to a version of deconstruction to begin with. In *In Memoriam to Identity*, Acker makes even more explicit than does Faulkner the nature of the missing voice of Caddy, who inspires love in both Benjy and Quentin, but who has to leave her family before she is destroyed by them.

The Poetics of Plagiarism

In "Plagiarism," J.O. Urmson suggests that "we must all build with material partly derived from others and this is so obviously true that we scarcely need to name the maker of every brick in our edifice." This is a reference to intertextuality in general. When Barthelme, Pynchon, and Acker explicitly rework materials that they use as the base for their own narratives, this is not the same kind of "imitation" that was the groundwork of literary education--"classical writers were sent to their predecessors for more than inspiration; they were to get subjects and material as well" (Harold O. White 4)--but rather piracy, borrowing of a sort that is secret, perverse, servile, or superficial.12

Acker is, of course, in good company when she uses plagiarism. Certainly a strategy adopted by both Pynchon and
Barthelme, plagiarism has quite different effects in the sets of texts produced by these three writers. Barthelme’s adoption of particular fairytale or mythic structures, even the quotations from textbooks in *Snow White* are always overt, usually anachronistic, and deployed for metafictional purposes: they point quite explicitly to the constructed nature of narrative itself, and from there to the constructed nature of a reality organised by those same narrative structures. The sources—*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*—are very familiar to readers, and they are therefore always visible to us as we read Barthelme’s texts. This is similar to Acker’s approach to plagiarism in *Blood and Guts in High School* and *Don Quixote*, where familiar narratives are placed into modern settings with ironic, parodic, and diverse effects. They are signalled as "other texts," so we are aware that she is working with a ready-made narrative, often one to which we have some attachments. The highly personal flavour of Acker’s prose is deceptive, but it nevertheless contrasts with the detachment of Barthelme.

Pynchon uses "other texts" obliquely: it is a matter of extended research to discover the sources he weaves together in his labyrinthine narrative. In *Empire of the Senseless* and *In Memoriam to Identity*, Acker’s strategies have come to resemble those deployed by Pynchon, to the extent that the point of her plagiarism is not so much to foreground narrative
as an issue as to create narratives. Whereas in Pynchon the multiple plagiarisms are seamless, Acker deliberately reveals the story she is adopting. Her point, however, is hardly to steal other texts, but rather to pirate them out of their original context, to be recycled, by way of metaphor, into her own stories, as highly idiosyncratic readings: "I am a reader and take notes on what I read" (Friedman and Fuchs 36).
CHAPTER FIVE

SITUATING THE METAPHORIC NARRATIVE: SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Standing on your own feet, naturally, is as tiresome and dangerous as standing your ground; and when the wild dogs begin to circle grinning around you with their dripping tongues hanging out and you know that with mock servility they like to go for your toes first, why, then, you should stand on someone else's feet, or head if necessary. It is a point of faith for me never to be Hitler; he stood his ground in his own two shoes almost to the end, the fool. But I may disguise myself as any other animate or inanimate object in what follows.

(William T. Vollmann, You Bright and Risen Angels 4)

If metaphor functions in a radical manner in a text, this is bound to have consequences for interpretation. Indeed, I have suggested some approaches to interpretation in the preceding chapters that take seriously the idea that unpredictability and uncertainty are not simply themes, but are, rather, the very fibre of each text. Using Borges' labyrinth as a starting point for thinking about the construction of meaning in a thoroughly anti-foundational world of textuality and metaphor, we discover that these texts "make sense" in many different ways, even if they elude determinate readings. Read in this light, Barthenleme's dead
father appears, not as a "Godot-figure" out of Beckett who might offer salvation, but as outdated machinery that refuses to stop working; the enormous body of the dead father, with its confession cubicles, is therefore a literalized, or embodied metaphor. Or rather, he is a dead metaphor.

Keeping Borges's labyrinth in mind also helps elucidate the structures of texts by Pynchon and Acker, and suggests interpretive strategies which begin with metaphor. In Pynchon's case, the elaboration of any particular metaphor through his novels reveals a web of colliding and conflicting implications that refuse closure. Similarly, Acker's work becomes far more interesting when examined for its aesthetic engagement with other texts than when it is read for a kind of politics that I would argue is undermined in her mature texts. This is not to imply that there is a particular key to interpreting these experimental fictions, but I would suggest that metaphor is itself a good starting point, especially as Barthelme, Pynchon, and Acker construct texts that deliberately avoid being pinned to one determinate meaning or narrow ideology.

This returns me to the introductory chapter, in which I argued that many critics and theorists of postmodernist fiction conflate the Lyotardian and Jamesonian notions of postmodernism; the anti-foundationalism of the first and the political materialism of the second. I understand the impulse of this conflation: its attraction is that it offers both
uncertainty and mimesis. That is, one can simultaneously recognise the uncertainties and disruptions of difficult narrative surfaces, while nevertheless being able to place them into a particular cultural context and thus delimit meaning.

It is not my intention to argue against cultural contexts here: Barthelme, Pynchon, and Acker place themselves, in many ways, into American fiction and culture, and into contemporary technological culture. Rather, what I resist is the contemporary version of Northrop Frye’s "fallacy of existential projection" (Anatomy of Criticism 63), which is that a complicated world is rendered mimetically by a complicated text. That is, Jameson’s influential argument, which draws on Debord’s notion of "the society of the simulacrum," as well as on contemporary notions of signification, is that the senselessness of postmodernist fiction is a direct reflection, a mirror-image, of "only dimly perceivable" "present day multinational capitalism" ("Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" 226-7). Contemporary notions of "postmodern allegory" and "postmodern sublime" are the elaborations of such a viewpoint.\(^1\) This argument has its equivalent in the cognitivist argument about metaphor and narrative that I outlined in the first chapter; that argument holds that metaphor (or narrative) is how we make sense of the world; therefore, thinking metaphorically is "natural," and texts that have a metaphoric structure are actually realist or
mimetic, *metonymic*.

It is precisely to get away from this view of postmodernist fiction that I adopt Donald Davidson’s post-structuralist notion of metaphor as a starting point for interpretation throughout the thesis. My argument is that even when metaphors are presented as cognitive propositions in texts by Barthelme, Pynchon, and Acker, their multiple collisions generate limitless meanings, limitless insights. These three engage, to be sure, with "late capitalism," but they are not documenting, mirroring, or representing a stable external material reality. On the contrary, such a conceit is radically destabilized by these postmodern pirates.
Notes to Chapter One

1. American Romanticism, embodied in the work and thought of, among others, Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman, adapted the organicist and transcendentalist ideas of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Carlyle to the American context, with its ideals of democracy, freedom, and distance from what Emerson calls, in "The American Scholar," "the courtly muses of Europe." In the nineteenth century, the romance novelists par excellence are, of course, Hawthorne and Melville, who themselves try to define the nature of American Romance, Hawthorne in "The Custom House," (1850) and the prefaces to The Blithedale Romance (1852) and The Marble Faun (1860), and Melville in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850), in the context of nationalism. In the new Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism (1994), John Allison rehearses in some detail the rise and subsequent erosion of Romantic convictions in the face of the demand from such writers as William Dean Howells, in Criticism and Fiction (1891), and Hamlin Garland, in Crumbling Idols (1894), for what Garland calls "veritism."

2. There are many critics, notably Sacvan Bercovitch, in The Puritan Origins of the American Self, and Charles Feidelson, in Symbolism in American Literature, who discuss the way in which Puritan ideology, transplanted into the New World, becomes the basis of emerging American identity. In The American Adam, R.W.B. Lewis examines the connection between Puritan thought and the myth of the frontier, and the impact of their combination on the American mind, and, consequently,
Puritan thought and the myth of the frontier, and the impact of their combination on the American mind, and, consequently, on the novel. Lionel Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*, Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, Richard Poirier's *A World Elsewhere*, and Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* all engage with the impact of Puritan ideas and symbols on American culture. Each critic takes a different approach, but there is in all of them an interest in the combination of the myth of the frontier (freedom from constraint; new social structures; invention of culture) and Puritanism (symbolic structures, especially good and evil; idea of Elect; sexual phobias and restraints). In *The Unusable Past*, Russell Reising summarizes the history of critical approaches to the American canon, which he claims rest on three different sets of assumptions: historical theories which have "Puritan origins" as a central category (Bercovitch, Perry Miller, Yvor Winters); cultural theories which have complicated interactions with each other, but which tend to stress the distance between social and textual realities (Trilling, Lewis, Chase, Fiedler, and Marx); and what Reising calls "self-reflexive theories," which are searches for a distinctly American style (Feidelson, Poirier, F.O. Matthiessen). His own approach is to argue for literary criticism that has social, natural, and material contexts, rather than psychological explanations; and he points to Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, in which New Critical ideas of the texts
are combined with a deep belief in social responsibility, as a move towards this end.

3. Most critics recognize that the term romance is used for many purposes and in many contexts. This does not render the term useless, however. Michael Davitt Bell suggests, in fact, that the term is of particular interest to literary critics of Brown, Irving, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville—which Bell calls the experimental tradition of romance—because they themselves used it to describe their work. See The Development of Romance.

In American and English Fiction in the Nineteenth Century, Nicolaus Mills disputes the romance/novel split, and calls Lionel Trilling to account for starting this particular line of criticism, which he argues cannot help us determine the unique qualities of American fiction. However, despite his attack on Chase and other "genre critics," he ends up with a definition that echoes Chase’s notion of the American hybrid novel:

Stated in a nutshell, my argument is that distinguishing American from English fiction requires analysis of the total process by which certain qualities common to both traditions are given a different emphasis: specifically, the way nineteenth-century American fiction gives an ultimate importance (and textual dominance) to certain ideational or visionary concerns that finally makes these concerns superior to or situationally transcendent of the
social context in which they appear and the way nineteenth-century English fiction gives a qualified importance (and textual limitation) to such concerns that finally makes them coextensive with or subordinate to the social context in which they appear. (111)

Daniel Hoffman also engages with this problem, and comes up with a similar kind of definition:

I do not propose that our romances are barren of novelistic elements; in fact they are often a curious mixture of the mimetic representation of reality and their own peculiar characteristics as romances. These latter lead the imaginations of their authors and readers not toward the treatment of society as a complex interaction of classes and forces, but instead toward an ahistorical depiction of the individual's discovery of his own identity in a world where his essential self is inviolate and independent of such involvements in history. (Form and Fable in American Fiction x)

4. As with any generalization about a particular literary tradition, there are problems with the sweeping description Chase gives here of the English novel. At the same time, it is certainly the case that the nineteenth century English novel, especially as it gets taught in traditional literature courses, is often presented as a form in which the burgeoning middle classes are presented with a reflection of their society and its values. Furthermore, as Chase says:
It takes a group of people and sets them going about the business of life. . . . They are in explicable relation to nature, to each other, to their social class, to their own past. (12)

When we open one of the classic English novels—by Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, or Thomas Hardy—we expect that we will be present at the unfolding story of a particular set of characters in a recognizable environment, and more particularly, caught in a web of societal structures in the face of which the individual is quite insignificant. There are, of course, notable exceptions, such as the Brontës, whose works are so deeply immersed in psychological issues that the social panorama is very much in the background. The English novel to which Chase refers, then, falls into the first grouping. It is the social novel, which often has at its core the structure of the bildungsroman that, in most of these novels, leads to the individual’s self-knowledge coinciding with an acceptance of the truths of society; for example, Elizabeth in Pride and Prejudice, Pip in Great Expectations, Maggie in Mill on the Floss, or Tess in Tess of the D’Urbervilles.

5. Leslie Fiedler argues, in Love and Death in the American Novel, that "American literature is distinguished by the number of dangerous and disturbing books in its canon..." ix), primarily because:

The American writer . . . lives on the last horizon of an
endlessly retreating vision of innocence--on the "frontier," which is to say, the margin where the theory of original goodness and the fact of original sin come face to face. (xxii)

Ihab Hassan puts a different spin on this same idea when he suggests that American literature sings the song of Creation (Radical Innocence 326). The "romance" presumably emerges, then, from the irreconcilability of what Hassan calls "dream and fact" (330).

6. The melancholic Arthur Pym feels the vertiginous desire to fall into wild adventure. What he experiences, in practice, is not the heroic exploration of unknown geographical spots, but rather the darkest areas of the human psyche. In this regard, Pym, invented in 1838, seems remarkably similar to modern characters like Conrad’s Kurtz, and, indeed, like so many of Kathy Acker’s characters, who are quite explicitly attracted to whatever is most horrific, whatever is most extreme, not just in real life, but in the mind.

7. In most guides to literature and literary categories, Twain’s name appears under titles like "realism" and "satire." See, for example, the fifth edition of A Handbook to Literature (1986), by C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon. In The New Columbia Encyclopedia, which reports only the most accepted of literary categorizations, Huck Finn is described as "a masterpiece of humor, characterization, and realism . . . the first modern American novel" (2809), and, a little
later, the novel is said to have revolutionized "the language of American fiction" by its use of vernacular speech. On this understanding, Twain breaks with the traditions of the European inheritance, in order to strike out on a peculiarly American (and realist) adventure.

8. Lionel Trilling argues that *Huck Finn*, a book of "moral passion" (*Liberal Imagination* 102), is "one of the central documents of American culture" (101). In his view, it is a subversive novel, fully engaged with the possibilities and virtues of democracy: in fact, far from escaping society, "[Huck] is involved in civilization up to his ears" (104).

9. In his 1897 essay on Hawthorne, republished in Leon Edel’s *House of Fiction* (1957), Henry James suggests that Hawthorne’s fictions are an outgrowth of an imagination formed by "the spiritual contortion, the darkened outlook, of the ingrained sense of sin, of evil, and of responsibility" (Edel 177). In James’ view, Hawthorne lived entirely "in a world of things symbolic and allegoric" (Edel 178).

10. In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, Hardy’s (very reliable) narrator often speculates on "natural" as opposed to societal laws about sexuality. As far as Nature is concerned, he suggests, Tess has done nothing of which she needs to be ashamed; and when Angel Clare finds out that Tess is not a virgin, he thinks of Alec D’Urberville as Tess’s "natural" husband. Tess is "Nature’s Child" throughout this novel about a woman’s social ruin, but whose subtitle is "A Pure Woman."
Similarly, in Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, the attraction between Maggie and Stephen which "ruins" Maggie has to do with Nature's laws of attraction which, we are told by another very reliable omniscient narrator, supersede particular social mores. Neither Tess nor Maggie ever finds it possible to break free, in their own minds, from the societies in which they live, which can in both cases be explained by reference to their childhoods and families, about which we learn a great deal. In Hawthorne's text, we do not learn about the society, the backgrounds, or the families of the individual characters, and there is no over-arching frame which guides us into the book, telling us what we should think, and referring us to an objective reality in which things always work a certain way, for good or ill.

11. In *Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel*, Richard Brodhead, who uses Chase's arguments about American romance as his starting point, suggests:

Hawthorne and Melville do not simply include different literary modes in their works; they play them off against each other, and they do so in such a way that each mode reveals the imaginative basis of the others' fictions and tests their capacities as vehicles of truth. (23)

Brodhead discusses what he sees as the relationships between renaissance romance and the self-conscious romances created by Hawthorne and Melville.
12. In Modern American Novel, Malcolm Bradbury suggests that, in James’ mature work, "consciousness severs itself from the world’s materiality, changing the entire grammar of fiction" (8). Even if James thought he was achieving a new level of realism, then, it is nevertheless the case that his work breaks the social reference points so solid in more classically realist novels. As Bradbury puts it:

One effect of the complexity of James’s late method is that he left his public, as well as his literary successors, with two ways of reading his work. To some, his essential contribution was to the extension of realism and the development of the social and moral novel, which he helped to turn into a negotiable American form. To others the significant element was his contribution to modernism, his translation of realism into something quite other and quite new ... both his contributions--to the social novel of manners and morals, and to experimental modernism--were profitably to feed American writing. (40-41)

James himself argues, in "The Art of Fiction," that "impressions are experience" (House of Fiction 32), and, it turns out, his definition of "the real" has little to do with the critical use of the term realism:

It goes without saying that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality; but it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that
sense into being. Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms; the most one can affirm is that some of the flowers of fiction have the odour of it, and others have not; as for telling you in advance how your nosegay should be composed, that is another affair. (House 31)

If James writes "psychological realism," then, it means that he is exploring the felt reality of psychological impression. Where the novels of Hardy, or of Eliot (who James, confusingly, calls a "romancer" ("Middlemarch 1873," House 266), delineate character from the objective perspective of reliable and omniscient narration, James’s protagonists present their own subjective and unreliable impressions.

13. Current debates about "the canon" sometimes speak as if it is a fixed set of works, whose forms and concerns then determine which other works will enter it. This is, like most generalizations, a half-truth. The discipline of English Literature has a well-established literary history in which certain texts are to be studied for their historical value: these items--Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Beowulf, and so on--belong to "the" literary canon, if that word is to be understood in a semi-religious sense. But even this part of the literary canon is, like all knowledge bases, in process. It is not as though, once a text is valued and discussed, and declared important, it will always and inevitably be so. The test of time, which adjudicates whether or not a particular work is too rooted in its own context to speak to other generations in
other places, is ongoing. Current debates about Plato, Aristotle, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and so on, especially in the United States, are arguments between the competing claims of immediate social relevance and the lessons of history, and it is now much harder to find out what is actually in this canon. One thing is sure: the texts that manage to be counted as important over years, decades, centuries, inside or outside departments of English Literature, are those that manage to meet changing definitions of literary importance, and which can be re-read by each new generation in the light of their experiences, their theories, or their interests. Even items on syllabuses that are there to provide "essential" literary history will not be read unless they are given readings that can link them with current interests.

The canon of nineteenth century American fiction is, of course, in debate; in fact, according to surveys of English teachers, many of the texts I discuss here simply do not make it onto lists of "most important American novels." At the same time, it is fair to say that English Departments structure their American offerings according to the categories of romance and realism; and that these writers would at least be under consideration for a course on the American novel. Certainly, my experience as a student of American literature, is that there are certain texts I assume other Americanists know and discuss. Furthermore, it is fair to say that these novels, and the discussions around them, have a continuing
influence over more contemporary American writing. The ongoing debate about which texts should be taught on courses is an argument, not so much about the past, but about the future; not so much about what writing has been, but about what it should be.

14. One of the most notable "exclusions" is Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Critics such as Judith Fetterley in *The Resisting Reader*, Nina Baym in "Melodramas of Beset Manhood," and Jane Tompkins in "Sentimental Power," argue that definitions of American literature exclude sentimental novels such as Stowe's. In fact, Baym argues, woman, representing the civilizing impulse, enters American fiction (as currently defined) as its enemy. This formula is, in my view, too sweeping; but it is an interesting fact that, while the nineteenth century British novel is dominated by women, the American tradition is mostly male writers. This remains true today.

15. This term is sometimes criticized for its totalizing vision of a period. Stein’s comment, most surely directed at the work being produced at the time by Hemingway, that this generation of writers was "lost," however, suggests that there was a perception of futility and meaninglessness pervading post-war Europe, which found its way into all the value structures of life and love. The fact that writers who fall into this category are to be found in "the canon" means that we organise our understanding of the period around these
particular literary expressions (among other things). The Zeitgeist, like the canon, is, to some extent, formulated after the fact, with the benefit of hindsight. At the same time, some art, some books, some songs express for particular generations how they feel at the time about their culture and themselves. Fitzgerald and Hemingway both appealed to their own generation, and to those of us who continue to read their writings, as spokesmen for that "lost generation."

16. In Postmodernist Fiction, Brian McHale makes the debatable point that "postmodernist fiction differs from modernist fiction just as a poetics dominated by ontological issues differs from one dominated by epistemological issues" (xii). He suggests that Absalom, Absalom is the paradigm text for modernist writing:

Absalom foregrounds such epistemological themes as the accessibility and circulation of knowledge, the different structuring imposed on the "same" knowledge by different minds, and the problem of "unknowability" or the limits of knowledge. And it foregrounds these themes through the use of characteristically modernist (epistemological) devices: the multiplication and juxtaposition of perspectives, the focalization of all evidence through a single "center of consciousness" (the character Quentin), virtuoso variants on interior monologue (especially in the case of Miss Rosa), and so on. Finally, in a typically modernist move, Absalom transfers the
epistemological difficulties of its characters to its readers. . . . (9)

17. In "Beyond Postmodernism?" Ihab Hassan lists the features he thinks we find in postmodernist literature as follows: indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, selflessness, unpresentability, irony, hybridization, carnivalization, performance, construction, immanence (semiotic). It is obvious, I think, that these stylistic and thematic effects can be found in other kinds of literature, but especially in modernist literature. Of course, elsewhere, Hassan suggests:

Modernism and postmodernism are not separated by an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall, for history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future. We are all, I suspect, a little Victorian, Modern, and Postmodern, at once. (Hassan, Garvin 120)

18. Jameson's view that postmodernism is the superstructure to a "late capitalist," economic base, is very influential. Even Brian McHale, whose discussions of postmodernist fiction are so nuanced and complicated, says that "postmodernist fiction does hold the mirror up to reality; but that reality, now more than ever before, is plural" (39).

In "Regarding Postmodernism -- A Conversation with Fredric Jameson," Jameson makes this quite clear:

The aim . . . is to provide something that can face in two directions: a principle for the analysis of cultural texts, which is at the same time a working system that
can show the general ideological function of all these features taken together (3).

19. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon performs precisely this typical elision of the two paradigms. She argues that postmodernism is "fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political" (14). Furthermore, there is a "postmodern ideology" that just happens to have the project of revealing the constructed nature of history from the viewpoint of marginalized groups. But surely if postmodernist texts reveal history's incoherence, then history cannot simply be re-written from the perspective of the oppressed groups Hutcheon mentions, which happen to be the groups most often associated with the new tribalism of contemporary identity politics.

Similarly, in *Universal Abandon: The Politics of Postmodernism*, Andrew Ross suggests:

This politics of appropriation, for so long exclusively the discursive preserve of the colonizer, has more recently been crucial to groups on the social margins who have preferred, under certain circumstances, to struggle for recognition and legitimacy on established "metropolitan" political ground rather than run the risk of ghettoization by insisting on the "authenticity" of their respective group identities, ethnic, sexual, or otherwise." (xi)

In other words, postmodernism embodies a politics in which
marginalized groups are given voices against the "dominant" group. This particular us-them formula is rather too narrow, in my view, to be very useful in discussing postmodernist fiction.

20. For a pertinent examination of this "satisfaction," see Jonathan Culler's essay, "Fabula and Sjuzhet in the Analysis of Narrative," in which he discusses what he calls "the demands of signification," whereby:

Oedipus becomes the murderer of his father not by a violent act that is brought to light, but by deeming this act to have taken place, by bowing to the demands of narrative coherence. (30)

White's argument about narrative as it is used in history is that the demands of narrative coherence pre-empt other kinds of inquiry about historical evidence.

21. In "The Telling and the Told," Nelson Goodman insists that . . . when I speak of several versions of the same or virtually the same story, I am by no means conceding that there is some underlying story, some deep structure, that is not itself a version." (801)

In other words, there is nothing to ground the story, except more stories. Barbara Herrnstein Smith pushes this line of thought in the direction of speech-act theory, but she nevertheless agrees with Goodman that there is no privileged position from which to speak:

My point . . . is that what narratologists refer to as
the basic stories or deep-plot structures of narratives are often not abstract, disembodied, or subsumed entities but quite manifest, material, and particular retellings--and thus versions--of those narratives, constructed, as all versions are, by someone in particular, on some occasion, for some purpose, and in accord with some relevant set of principles. ("Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories" 218)

22. See Paul de Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," and Mark Johnson's Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor, for the ontological and epistemological implications of this new (interactive) theory of metaphor.

23. Umberto Eco suggests, in The Semantics of Metaphor, that the traditional conception of metaphor inevitably rests on the tautology "a metaphor allows you to speak metaphorically," which implies that metaphor is a rule-governed mechanism that plays on the margins of language, but cannot construct it. The conception of metaphor developed by Richards, Black, Eco, and Ricoeur (to name only a few theorists) assumes, by contrast, that language is by nature metaphorical.

24. The volume of writings about the theory of metaphor that appeared in the late 1970s and early 1980s, coincident with and often influenced by narratology, is interesting, not only for the contents of individual essays, but also for the growing consensus it reveals about the interactive relationship between metaphor, cognition, and reality. See
the collections edited by Sheldon Sacks, Warren Shibles, Andrew Ortony, and Mark Johnson, and the monographs by Umberto Eco, Nelson Goodman, and Samuel Levin for discussions, and some disagreements about the implications of this new view for literary theory, philosophy, linguistics, and psychology.

25. An interesting example that Lakoff and Johnson examine in some detail is the spatial metaphor that provides us with a whole set of terms, such as far or near, up and down, high and low, and so on, which we use without having to recognize the original metaphor. As for etymological studies, these have experienced a literary revival with the arrival of deconstructionism, which foregrounds metaphoric connections between different domains: see Derrida's famous "play" with difference, differance, defer, and differ, in "Structure, Sign, and Play."

26. The Ubiquity of Metaphor, edited by Wolf Paprotte and René Dirven, is an examination of the growing interest in metaphor to be found generally in what, elsewhere, Yeshayahu Shen, calls those disciplines "inside the 'cognitive science' paradigm, namely, linguistics, philosophy, psychology, artificial intelligence, and literary theory, as well as related disciplines, such as education, psychotherapy, and so on" (567), but more particularly in psycho-linguistics, where metaphor "is recognized as one of the deepest, and most persistent phenomena of theory building and thinking" (Wolf and Paprotte vii).
27. We can see the implications of this duality for literary criticism in the following quotation:

postmodernist writing seeks to foreground the ontological duality of metaphor, its participation in two frames of reference with different ontological statuses. (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 134)

28. Umberto Eco talks about the differences between inevitable and self-conscious versions of intertextuality:

There are imperceptible quotations, of which not even the author is aware, that are the normal effect of the game of artistic influence. There are also quotations of which the author is aware but which should remain ungraspable by the consumer. In these cases we are usually in the presence of a banal case of plagiarism. What is more interesting is when the quotation is explicit and recognizable, as happens in postmodern literature and art, which blatantly and ironically play on the intertextuality. . . . (The Limits of Interpretation 88)

Notes to Chapter Two

1. There are more than three novels by Barthelme. *Sam's Bar*, which is called a novel, however, is more cartoon than anything else, and *Paradise* is simply not as interesting, from the viewpoint of postmodernist poetics, as the three I mention. More like a series of short stories, *Paradise* is
Barthelme's *Witches of Eastwick*, but without the witchcraft.

2. Beckett was hailed in all quarters as a genuinely radical artist. One of the more surprising sources of praise is Theodor Adorno, who argues that Beckett's work is more radically political than the work of Bertolt Brecht. In his view, Beckett's plays "deal with a highly concrete historical reality: the abdication of the subject" (Adorno 190).

3. Perhaps the most extraordinary testimonial to what is generally recognized as the integrity of Beckett's dark vision comes from Harold Pinter, the English playwright who used to send every play he wrote to Beckett before anyone else saw it, and in whose work Beckett's influence is ubiquitous:

> The farther he goes the more good it does me. I don't want philosophies, tracts, dogmas, creeds, ways out, truths, answers, nothing from the bargain basement. He is the most courageous, remorseless writer going and the more he grinds my nose in the shit the more I am grateful to him. He's not fucking me about, he's not leading me up any garden, he's not slipping me any wink, he's not flogging me a remedy or a path or a revelation or a basinful of breadcrumbs, he's not selling me anything I don't want to buy, he doesn't give a bollock whether I buy or not, he hasn't got his hand over his heart. Well, I'll buy his goods, hook, line and sinker, because he leaves no stone unturned and no maggot lonely. He brings forth a body of beauty. His work is beautiful. (quoted
Pinter's appreciation of Beckett is specifically of his absurdism, of his refusal to substitute "bargain basement truths" to cover up the lost truth of God.

4. See Anything Can Happen: Interviews with Contemporary American Novelists, edited by Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery. Beckett's name comes up as an important influence on John Barth and William Gass, as well as on Barthelme.

5. Existentialist critics have suggested that Beckett's fallen world is a depiction of the human condition, as though it has no specific space-time locus; and Beckett's work certainly echoes other kinds of falls in the (written) history of humankind, such as Milton's Paradise Lost, Shakespeare's The Tempest, ubi sunt literature, as well as a more generalized extra-literary loss of faith at different points in history. Ruby Cohn insists, by contrast, that Beckett's creations are situated in the twentieth century, and that the "fall" can only be understood in terms of the ontological, epistemological, spiritual, cultural, and political complexities of our own century (See Cohn, Gamut 3).

6. There is something fascinating and positive about the stream of consciousness technique, which reveals the complexity of inner life, and the ways in which the psyche tries to make sense of what Virginia Woolf thinks of as the "myriad impressions" ("Modern Novels") the mind receives. The ways in which images, sounds, smells can trigger memory,
insight, or even epiphany in the works of (at least) Proust, Joyce, and Woolf allow them to position the artist as God-like Creator, organizing and shaping meaning. Beckett reverses this reverence for the artist by creating a world of logic from which there is no escape.

7. This avoidance (of identity and memory) takes many forms in Beckett's work. It is perhaps most clearly expressed in Film, the movie Beckett made with Buster Keaton, in which a small man with a patch scurries along a wall, trying to avoid eye-contact with others, pursued by a camera, held, it turns out, by himself. The protagonist, who performs a vaudevillian physical comedy throughout the film, systematically rids himself of all possible surveillance, not only by people, but by his animals, pictures, eye-like images in his furniture, mirrors, and windows—all the objects and images that can be associated with "seeing" in any way. Beckett's set of instructions for this piece includes the warning: esse est percipi, to be is to be seen.

Keaton's task is to escape "being," then, at least as being is construed by the camera lens, and by his own Self. That is, if the camera is held by himself, then what he has to escape is self-perception, being self-seen. At the level of content, Film examines the attempt to escape oneself, one's perceiving eye, one's memories (captured, in this instance, in the photograph). This attempt is obviously doomed to failure because, as soon as one tries to escape the eye/I of the
camera, that I takes control. Put differently, the attempt to escape self-consciousness only renders that consciousness more powerful; just as the attempt, at the level of form, to break with form, reinforces the form itself, simply because its rubric becomes the subject, rather than the invisible medium.

8. Perhaps the most notable existential mystic is Martin Buber, whose *I/Thou* endorses a highly spiritual relationship with others, and with the outside world in general. In fact, life is fully meaningful, action is significant, and what we might call the religious impulse can be satisfied through action and attitude.

9. In *Endgame*, Hamm tells this story:

   I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter--and engraver. I had a great fondness for him. I used to go and see him, in the asylum. I'd take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness.

   He'd snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes.

   He alone had been spared.

   Forgotten.

   It appears the case is . . . was not so . . . so unusual.

   (*Endgame* 44)

When Beckett's characters look at the "cluttered complexity"
of this planet, then, what they see is only the wasteland depicted also in T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*.

10. John Barth's contribution to the discussion of the distinction between modernist and postmodernist literature--"The Literature of Exhaustion"--is to argue that postmodernist literature "replenishes," by creating new forms out of the "exhaustion" of language in modernist texts. While this idea helps to foreground the extent to which language becomes problematic in both Beckett's and Barthelme's texts, it does not help to clearly delineate the functioning of similar technical devices in two different kinds of texts. Brian McHale, who calls Barth's exhaustion theory just another "postmodernist story," points out that the attempt to group writers into late-modernist (exhaustion) and post-modernist (replenishment) categories is not always helpful:

his categories create groupings of texts which are in important ways less like others in the same group than they are like texts in another group. Family resemblances have been obscured rather than enhanced. There would seem to be something askew in Barth's version of the story. (Constructing *Postmodernism* 32)

Of course, any attempt to make the distinction between modernist and postmodernist texts is problematic: McHale's own assertion in *Postmodernist Fiction* that modernist fiction is epistemological and postmodernist fiction is ontological, has
not been without its critics. In *Constructing Postmodernism* McHale attempts to re-draw the balance between what he thinks of as the constructivist and essentialist aspects of his formula.

11. It is interesting that Borges and Derrida, two quintessential postmodernists, would both use the game of chess as a means of examining what Vincent Leitch calls "the fall from logocentrism" (*Deconstructive Criticism* 60). In "Différance," Derrida refers to "the bottomless chessboard where being is set in play" (141). There is no centre to a chessboard, especially if the board is bottomless, and yet there are within it constantly changing patterns, structures, emerging formations, and future combinations. Attempts to find a stabilizing centre or origin to this board, or to Borges' ubiquitous labyrinth, would, of course, be fruitless.

12. In "What Is An Author?" Michel Foucault discusses the operation of the "author-function" for interpretation:

the author provides the basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in a work, but also their transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications (through his biography, the determination of his individual perspective, the analysis of his social position, and the revelation of his basic design). The author is also the principle of a certain unity of writing--all differences having to be resolved, at least in part, by the principles of evolution, maturation, or
influence. The author also serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts; there must be--at a certain level of his thought or desire, of his consciousness or unconscious--a point where contradictions are resolved, where incompatible elements are at last tied together or organized around a fundamental or originating contradiction." (Harari, Textual Strategies 151)

It is always of prime importance, then, who is speaking, because, like Borges' librarians, we need to know how to catalogue the work.

13. Roland Barthes might well argue that the "Menard" transforms Don Quixote from a "work" to a "text," from an object of consumption to one of collaboration:

... reading in the sense of consuming is not playing with the text. Here, "playing" must be understood in all its polysemy. The text itself plays (like a door on its hinges, like a device in which there is some "play"); and the reader himself plays twice over: playing the Text as one plays a game, he searches for a practice that will re-produce the Text; but, to keep that practice from being reduced to a passive, inner mimesis (the Text being precisely what resists such a reduction), he also plays the Text in the musical sense of the term. ("From Work to Text, Harari 79)

Barthes argues that the replacement of the "Work" by the
"Text" is part of an epistemological shift; presumably something akin to the shift (rather than break) from modernism to postmodernism, from structuralism to post-structuralism.

14. In Stanley Fish's view, this "creative process" is not entirely free, as some post-structuralist theory would argue. In (indirect) answer to E.D. Hirsch's anxiety that there can be no validity in interpretation unless we recognize that "meaning is an affair of consciousness, not of words" (Validity in Interpretation 4), he argues:

... determinacy and decidability are always available, not, however, because of the constraints imposed by the language or the world--that is, by entities independent of context--but because of the constraints built into the context or contexts in which we find ourselves operating. I want to argue for, not against, the normal, the ordinary, the literal, the straightforward, and so on, but I want to argue for them as products of contextual or interpretive circumstances and not as the property of an acontextual language or an independent world. (Is There A Text In This Class 268)

15. McLuhan suggests:

The method of our time is to use not a single but multiple models for exploration--the technique of the suspended judgement is the discovery of the twentieth century as the technique of invention was the discovery of the nineteenth. (McLuhan 69)
Derrida makes the same point when he discusses the *bricoleur*: the critic becomes a sort of jack (or Jill?)-of-all-trades, using whatever is handy to effect interpretation and understanding.

16. I was intrigued recently to hear a song from the album *Document* by R.E.M. called "It’s the end of the world as we know it (and I feel fine)." This is just one of several songs to appear in the last decade that engages in making lists, that attempts to document, the extraordinary range of reference points that we have access to, as well as the changes to human life brought into being by the technological developments of this century. Two other songs of this sort are Billy Joel’s "We didn’t start the fire," which simply names a number of events and names to evoke the zeitgeist of the last three or four decades in American culture, and Paul Simon’s "The Boy in the Bubble," which refers to such things as "lasers in the jungle" and "the baby with the baboon heart," to explore these "days of miracle and wonder." If "I feel fine" as the world as I know it ends, it is because I can still make it meaningful to myself, even if it is incomprehensible.

One of the best descriptions of the acceptance of uncertainties peculiar to postmodernism is to be found in John Fekete’s introduction to *Life After Postmodernism: Essays on Value and Culture*, an anthology of "postmodern probings" into new anti-foundational paradigms for value inquiry. He argues
that:

. . . we can identify as post-modern a certain value-rational opening to the human world--inclusively, to all of it, and to everything related to it--as home, though a home whose plan we do not have and which we have never quite (and will never quite) finish building and fitting to ourselves, just as we who build it and for whom it is to be fit change with every alteration of it, with every bit of construction and deconstruction. (xi)

In Fekete's view, it is not necessary to see as nihilistic the "committal to do without foundational, asituational, representational, and hypostatizing-stabilising closures, objectivist or subjectivist" (Life x).

17. In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida claims that "language invaded the universal problematic" in this century, undermining the metaphysics of presence (Macksey and Donato 249). His argument is that, in Western metaphysics, Being has been primordial, but that "Being" must be preceded by the possibility of both Being and non-Being. As Vincent Leitch puts it in Deconstructive Criticism, "the expressive energies of primordial differentiation animate and produce being and presence" (58?). These energies or forces of primordial differentiation, which set in play the very possibility of signification itself, constitute what Derrida calls différence, "the structured and differing origin of differences" (Différance 141), the
deferral of meaning, the play of differences: "Every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or system within which it refers to another and other concepts, by the systematic play of differences" (140). Every word, every concept, bears the history, or the traces, of its prior uses, its possible future uses, and its ambiguities; furthermore, it can only be understood in the first place as a system of relations and differences, a system invented by us, but which we then live inside.

Fredric Jameson refers to the deconstructionist (inter)textualization of reality as "the prison-house of language," and Gerald Graff argues that, in this kind of thinking, "unreality threatens to become a new kind of absolute" (Literature Against Itself 9). It is certainly somewhat problematic that every text becomes the same text under the direction of Derrida's methodologies of différence: "infinite meanings are broadcast across textual surfaces" (Leitch 99). As John Fekete argues,

Derrida's move to theorizing fundamentals in the notion of différence comes to produce just as much a transcendent(al) first principle and prime mover as any first principle of his logocentric adversaries, and ultimately ontotheologizes the language paradigm itself. Critical rationalism here problematically generates its own nihilist metaphysics which, at its limits, takes us from the entropy of logocentrism to the entropy of
randomness. In spite of itself, it invites an additional theory of boundaries." ("Modernity in the Literary Institution," Structural Allegory 236)

My own, relatively pragmatic approach to literary interpretation is that some textual surfaces limit potential meanings, possible interpretations, more than others do; and that some texts participate in the metaphysics of presence while others bring it into question.

18. In Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49, Oedipa Maas imagines herself as at Rapunzel, trapped in a tower, waiting for her prince to rescue her. Whereas this motif is, in Snow White, used for comedic effect, it is almost lyrical in The Crying of Lot 49. In fact, the use of fairy-tale scripts is in Pynchon's work, and particularly in Gravity's Rainbow, evocative rather than comic:

Mothers and fathers are conditioned into deliberately dying in certain preferred ways: giving themselves cancer and heart attacks, getting into motor accidents, going off to fight in the War--leaving their children alone in the forest. (Gravity's Rainbow 176)

19. Barthelme commented on his use of the Snow White story:

. . . . the usefulness of the Snow White story is that everybody knows it and it can be played against. . . . Every small change in the story is momentous when everybody knows the story backward; possibly I wasn't as bold in making these changes as I should have been.
Elsewhere, McCaffery compares Barthelme's use of *Snow White* and Joyce's use of the *Odyssey*:

in many respects *Snow White* seems to be deliberately mocking Joyce's painstaking efforts at creating mythic parallels, suggesting perhaps that the conditions of both language and reality make such devices available to the modern writer. ("Aesthetics of Trash" 139)

I disagree with this assessment at both ends, although it is an interesting argument, and it echoes Barth's notion of the literature of exhaustion. In my view, Joyce's myth-making, far from being highly earnest, as McCaffery's use of the word painstaking would indicate, has a hard ironic edge to it; as for Barthelme, it could be argued that "the conditions of language" are always such that the "mythic parallels" are inevitable.

20. In the introduction to *City of Words*, Tony Tanner suggests that:

there is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is still possible in which your movements and your stillnesses are all your own; and . . . there is also an abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous. (15)
It is not clear, however, that this myth of freedom is so attractive to the characters in *Snow White*. Freedom is all very well if you know what you want, but what happens in the case of radical freedom to those who do not really want anything? Bron, the main character in Samuel Delany's *Triton* is just one of the many characters in American fiction who embodies this problem.

21. Tom Wilhelmus calls *The King* "a dazzling display of the past reinvented as a mobilized metaphor the likes of which we will not see again." He is referring here to Nietzsche's pronouncement that truth is the product of "a mobile army of metaphors," which constitutes our current reality, textual or otherwise.

22. In a short review of *The King*, Robert Carver reports that the book performs a "comic historical dislocation of chivalry." For a more extended discussion of the relationships between this novel, the literary tradition, and popular culture, however, see Barry Levin's examination of the connections between Barthelme's *The King*, Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* and the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

Jay Parini reviews *The King* in terms of the myth of chivalry, and its interpolation into an alien universe of discourse; and he suggests that, "chivalry and modern warfare jostle for primacy, with chivalry on the run." I would argue, however, that Barthelme allows chivalry to triumph when Arthur tears up the formula for the bomb, even in the face of the
knowledge that his enemies will not do the same thing.

23. Although the two worlds of chivalry and modern warfare clash in this novel, it is not because they have nothing in common. In fact, as Molesworth points out:

"... wars seem never to be concluded, since they express mythic longings and are thus constantly reenacted as tragedies... romance also never ends because of the same mythic longing; and these two ever-renewed sources of action are what keep history from being merely an unshapeable succession of events." (106)

The values of Arthur and Launcelot are embodied, then, in contemporary conflicts, as ideals of both action and intent, because, as Tom Wilhelmus reminds us, "written history reinvents the past to meet the needs of the present."

Notes to Chapter Three

1. There is a tendency in some recent criticism to treat Pynchon's work, especially *Gravity's Rainbow*, as a kind of encyclopedia of western culture. In Clerc's volume, *Approaches*, each critic discusses one aspect of *Gravity's Rainbow*—film, science, technology, history, etc.—without putting forward an interpretation of the novel as a whole. This does not mean there is no macro-interpretation: in fact, Clerc calls the novel "a liberal education," which means that the novel is looked on as a cultural resource as well as a fictional, and often ironic, construct. When I use the term
"encyclopedic," I simply mean that there is an enormous range of issues, styles, and references in *V.* and in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and not that these novels should be read as sources. For other views on this issue, see Mendelson's argument that *Gravity's Rainbow* is "encyclopedic narrative," and Tölölyan's suggestion that it is a "cosmography."

2. Cooper suggests that there are a number of contemporary writers, including Heller, Kesey, Hawkes, Pynchon, Barthelme, and Vonnegut, who work from a shared temperament which he describes as follows:

   . . . a general uncertainty about the reality and hospitableness of the world, a fascination (sometimes horrified) with epistemological dilemmas, a recognition for fictional versions of reality, and a simultaneous apprehension of their dangers and insufficiencies that leads to narrative disruptions and self-parody. (Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World 40)

If the structure of the conventional realist novel suggests that, as Jerome Klinkowitz puts it, "life has leading characters, plots, morals to be pointed, lessons to be learned, and most of all, beginnings, middles, and ends" (Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction 3), counter-realist fiction deliberately undermines "the reader's usual habits of reading, organizing, and synthesizing" (Cooper 35).
3. According to the critics, for example, *Gravity's Rainbow* is about one, some, or all of the following highly serious topics: the inevitable (and entropic) decline of Western civilization (Thomas Schaub); the dehumanization of man in an administered and technological society (Scott Sanders, Tony Tanner); the loss of a sacred dimension--a sense of mystery and surprise--in this culture (Joseph Slade); the chaos from which a new culture may be born (Mark Siegel, George Levine); the betrayal of the American Dream (Richard Poirier); the emergence of a new consciousness in western culture (Raymond Olderman); nihilism, demonology, and apocalypse (Josephine Hendin); the paracinematic nature of history and of our own lives (Charles Clerc, David Cowart, Sherrill Grace); conspiracy and paranoia (everyone); the liberating aspects and the limitations of the post-modern aesthetic (Charles Russell); the ultimate nothingness hidden by an absolutized reality (Tanner); the outdated nature of traditional literary assumptions about the world (Tanner, Edward Mendelson); language as a colonizing as well as an emancipatory force (William Plater); narrativity and the acts of reading and writing (Clerc).

5. Perhaps the best example of the imputing of a doctrine to Pynchon is the very common assumption among critics that Pynchon’s worldview is one of entropy. In any book-length study of Pynchon’s works, one can find references to, and uses of, the term entropy. One of Pynchon’s short stories has the term as a title, and there are several discussions of its meaning in The Crying of Lot 49. Although there is no use of this term in Gravity’s Rainbow, some critics, such as Tony Tanner, argue that it is the single most important concept in the universe of Pynchon’s works; and they insist on applying the term to almost every level—cultural, literary, historical, psychological, scientific, linguistic—of Gravity’s Rainbow. My contention is that a global fixation on entropy, which removes it from its metaphoric use in Pynchon’s earlier work, reduces the complexities of Gravity’s Rainbow to an overly narrow doctrine.

metaphor, it remains science, but with the full knowledge that science is, after all, a hypothetical construction of reality involving metaphor" (Siegel 82). Cowart, in a much more simple vein, suggests, in The Art of Allusion, that science is the "junior partner" in Pynchon's fiction-making enterprise (Cowart 132).

6. Zachary Leader praises Vineland when he comments, "we know where he's at," meaning that the very specific references to the drug wars, the problems of "selling out" one's ideals, and of Reaganomics generally show us Pynchon's politics far more clearly than in the previous novels. My point is that this is precisely the problem with Vineland: the texture of Vineland is thin and superficial, while the other novels are rich, allusive, and deeply symbolic.

In a defence of Pynchon's narrative strategies in Vineland, Judith Chambers, in Thomas Pynchon, suggests that:

Rather than give us the food of complex allusions and poetry, Vineland takes the perhaps riskier step of providing postmodern baloney; writing in the language and allusions of the diminished world we all inhabit. (202)

I am in disagreement with this, of course, but Chambers is just one of many critics who wish to defend this latest book, including Salman Rushdie, who wrote a positive review in the New York Times Book Review called "Still Crazy After All These Years," where he says Vineland is "the most readily accessible piece of writing the old Invisible Man ever came up with."
Terrence Rafferty suggests that, in *Vineland*, Pynchon "comes back to haunt us with an urgent purpose—has amplified his means so we won't be able to mistake what he's saying." I think, with Brad Leithauser, that "we do no favor to Pynchon when we allow him to live in a critical vacuum."

7. The idea of the stencil or etching re-appears again in *Vineland*, when Prairie, frustrated with her father's bad memory, says to him: "Sheez, all that shit you smoke, your brain must be like a Etch-a-Sketch." (45) The Etch-a-Sketch is a child's game, which consists of a screen, and two knobs, modelled, of course, on the television. The turning of one knob "draws" a vertical line on the screen, while the other makes the line move horizontally. It is only possible to turn corners or draw curves by performing manoeuvres with both knobs. Even a skilful player finds it difficult to produce something that looks like an accurate or mimetic drawing. As any attempts at representation tend to have a childish "stick-figure" feel about the, it encourages more abstract patterns. Any particular etching can be wiped out by shaking the whole contraption; but very faint traces of all previous drawings remain. Stencil's piecing together of his father's answer to the question, "What is V.?" can be metaphorically related to the image of the etch-a-sketch that Pynchon introduces thirty years after publishing *V.*

8. Mucho reappears in *Vineland* as a very successful music producer, who used to be friends with Zoyd Wheeler in the 60s.
We do not meet Oedipa, but we are told that she and Mucho parted in a very amicable divorce. This tantalizing little tidbit of information, which leaves us still ignorant of what happens to the Tristero quest, is a typically Pynchonesque trick: he acknowledges his loyal readers, but without giving anything away.

9. Although there is a general recognition among Pynchon's critics that Pynchon's work defies easy resolution, many of them assert that Mexico embodies Pynchon's own view of the world as a place of uncertainty. For example, Joseph Slade suggests Pynchon's central idea is:

- that individuals should not exclude middles, should try instead to occupy the domain of Oedipa Maas and Roger Mexico, the realm between the one and the zero: between absolute freedom and total control, between the void and the labyrinth, between anonymity and solipsism. (Slade, Thomas Pynchon 246)

The interesting point here is that Mexico's position could well be one that embodies "the void" and "anonymity," because it is potentially "zero," rather than something between zero and one.

One of the best responses to this point of view comes from Molly Hite, who suggests that:

By allowing each of his novels to entertain the polarized theses that the world is either a rigid, preordained order or else a concatenation of random, unrelated
details, Pynchon dramatizes the vacuity of conceiving experience as plotted and of meaning as resulting only from a culminating synthesis. (Hite 20)

In other words, theories are only metaphorical hypotheses that allow us to talk about the world, but which do not map it objectively.

10. Leo Bersani, discussing Gravity's Rainbow, suggests that, 'Pynchon is less interested in vindicating his characters' suspicions of plots than in universalizing and, in a sense, depathologizing the paranoid structure of thought.' (101)

Pynchon is not the only contemporary writer to show that paranoia can be a sane response to a given situation: perhaps the most obvious example of a character whose paranoia may end up saving him from real and imminent danger is Yossarian, from Heller's Catch 22.

11. The psychological term of "projection" is one often used in discussions of modern and contemporary novels, though it is usually placed under the heading of point-of-view: discussions of Henry James' Turn of the Screw revolve around the question of whether this is a real ghost story or whether the governess is mad; Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury quite explicitly examines the different worlds inhabited by the three Compson brothers. In more recent texts, such as Nabokov's Pale Fire and Coover's Universal Baseball Association, the two protagonists project fictional worlds quite separate from reality.
12. The Rapunzel motif—the maiden waiting in the tower for a prince who will climb her hair, rescue her from her prison, and live with her happily ever after—is introduced in the first chapter of The Crying of Lot 49, and there are oblique references to it through the book. As I have already pointed out, this motif is also very explicitly invoked and enacted in Snow White. One of the things Barthelme and Pynchon have in common is the use of familiar narratives, whether fairy-tale, myth, or film, as scripts in their characters’ lives. In Gravity’s Rainbow, for example, motifs from the Hansel and Gretel fairy-tale are woven into several of the story-lines.

13. There is an ongoing debate about the extent to which the text of Gravity’s Rainbow can or should be read as a film. Charles Clerc argues, for example, that the novel is a film, and others conflate film and reality—see Alex McHoul and David Wills, Writing Pynchon. Hanjo Berressem is right, in my view, to reject this idea, even while he acknowledges, in Pynchon’s Poetics, that “film is arguably the semantic field most often exploited” in Gravity’s Rainbow (160). He makes the argument that the reason there is so little reference to the holocaust is that the picture of WWII that emerges in Gravity’s Rainbow is drawn from conventions in the movies (161-62).

14. David Cowart has written an interesting article on the King Kong theme in Gravity’s Rainbow. See “Sacrificial Ape: King Kong and the Antitypes in Gravity’s Rainbow” Literature

15. This scene is inspired, at least in part, by Malcolm X's autobiography. David Thorburn comments that the effect of imputing to Slothrop these racist tendencies seems inconsistent with the democratic impulses in his character, and that Pynchon thereby reduces Slothrop to a mere symbol of American prejudices. I mention this because it is in complete contrast to my own reading of this scene, which, whatever its source may be, is a brilliant exploration of largely unconscious prejudices and desires. See "A Dissent on Pynchon."

16. Paul Fussell, analyzing this scene, suggests that "obscenity is appropriate to the memory of World War I." See "The Brigadier Remembers." Fussell defends this episode against its critics by claiming that Pynchon's motivation in writing it was to show what the military mind becomes when it is senile. I would argue, however, that this scene does not require that kind of defence in order to be "acceptable." It is an intriguing exploration of deep-seated desires and fantasies, and Pudding does not need to be either military or senile to have these particular needs.

Notes to Chapter Four

1. Ten years younger than Pynchon, Kathy Acker is his polar opposite, at least in terms of personality: far from being reclusive, Acker has given many interviews, and weaves aspects
of her own life, such as her own mother's suicide and her experience of abortion, into her texts. Providing her critics with the biographical and philosophical materials that can serve to limit and direct interpretation. She appears thereby to co-operate in what Foucault calls "the author function." One of the points I make in the chapter, however, is that, despite the repeated appearance of Acker on her own book jackets, and despite the confessional interviews, Acker remains just as mysterious a figure as Pynchon, and her texts are as elusive of determinate meaning.

2. Acker is a subject of debate among feminist readers, some of whom claim her as a feminist writer. Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, for example, place her in the tradition of women's experimental fiction running from Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, H.D., and Anais Nin, to Jean Rhys. Like these, they argue, Acker is a "literary outlaw." I would not dispute that she takes up feminist themes, and that her interest in female sexuality is highly political; at the same time, even if she is didactic in interviews, she is right when she says that she does not write as a feminist. The way that she processes her materials, particularly in *Empire* and *Memoriam*, eschews narrowly doctrinal readings; and much of what she says is disruptive of contemporary feminism.

3. The influence of William Burroughs is pervasive in Acker's work, not only in the cut-up techniques, but also in the grittiness of the sexual relationships, and the emphasis on
homo-eroticism and sado-masochism.

4. For an interesting discussion of the "sexual and scatological taint" on everything in Janey's world, see Jack Byrne's 1987 review of Blood and Guts. We have to keep in mind that the jumbled narrative is told from the perspective of the disease-ridden and socially deviant runaway, Janey. She jumps from the notion that her society is fucked-up to the idea that there has been progress; from a criticism of capitalism to a recognition of what it allows, sanctions, opens up. Janey's view that "this" is hell is something that runs through the minds of all Acker's protagonists; and it is possible that despite the created, self-conscious, and creative distance between Acker the writer, and her characters, there is some kind of overall and nihilistic message in her work. That is, while Pynchon's work is radically undecidable, and the worldviews he explores remain metaphoric, Acker's work, especially in the earlier books, is too much in the same key to dismiss the sense that one gets of over-riding negativity.

5. In The World According to Garp, Garp tells his children different versions of similar stories according to what moral point he wishes to make. When his wife, Helen, asks for the real story, Garp simply tries to discover from her what works best, what would be in the interest of the narrative. This is also the case with Acker. It is quite impossible to pin her to an authentic version of what really happened, because it is
not the details that matter but, rather, what it means in different contexts.

6. In an interview with Ellen Friedman, Acker claims that her early interest in identity changed to an interest in plagiarism (15). For my part, I am not sure that the one precludes the other; and, in fact, she combines both interests in Memoriam.

7. There is an obvious connection between Henry Miller’s Tropic of Cancer, set in Paris, and Acker’s Empire. Both books have an "underground" quality to them; both foreground explicit sexuality; and both use disease—Cancer and AIDS—for metaphoric purposes.

8. See Larry McCaffery’s Storming the Reality Studio (1991), and the volume edited by George Slusser and Tom Shippey called Future 2000 (1992) for analyses of the cyberpunk "Movement" in science fiction. McCaffery provocatively charts the connections between postmodernist fiction in what is generally called mainstream fiction and cyberpunk fiction, which appears to employ postmodernist techniques; Bruce Sterling, known by other writers as "Chairman Bruce" for his leadership in marketing cyberpunk fiction, coined the term "slipstream fiction" to describe the comparisons McCaffery discusses; and it is notable that Pynchon and Burroughs are often cited as important influences on cyberpunk writers alongside the "hard-boiled" style of Raymond Chandler detective fictions, and the more "respectable" or "serious" writers like Philip K. Dick
and Samuel Delany inside science fiction itself. Slusser and Shippey investigate what cyberpunk might imply about the future of fiction in the age of what Slusser calls the "electronic den."

Cyberpunk often combines a devotion to technological realities of the late 20th century, and an evocation of street culture; the combination of popular or low culture and high-tech culture. The crucial invention of cyberpunk is cyberspace, which we know as virtual reality, the simulated spaces created by computer programs: just as "mainstream" fictions often explore the impact of new media, new technologies, and other historical changes on human organization and psychology, cyberpunk writers investigate the new worlds created for us by computer technology.

9. Brian McHale thinks that perhaps the aspect of Gibson’s text that drew Acker’s attention in the first place was an episode in which Case accesses, through the use of "simstim" technology, Molly’s sensory processes. The fact that Acker never uses that scene in Empire leads him to suggest, in Constructing Postmodernism, that much of Acker’s usage of Neuromancer is "blank parody," or "pointless," "apart from . . . producing the ‘sampling’ effect itself" (234). I disagree with this assessment.

10. Discussing this section of Empire, Acker suggests how her narrative strategy should be understood: "Twain was obsessed with racism; me with sexism. I am a reader and take notes on
what I read." (Friedman and Fuchs 36)
11. In Phil Baker's review of *Memoriam*, he comments: "Acker suggests that a lack of fixed identity may be particularly a part of women's experience and links writing to a deliberate escape from painful selfhood." In this novel, it is clear that Capitol's promiscuity is a manifestation of her longing for life, independence, and identity.
12. For a discussion of the concept of originality, especially as it relates to an eighteenth century aesthetics of imitation, see Marilyn Randall's "Appropriate(d) Discourse: Plagiarism and Decolonization."

Perhaps the most intriguing comment about plagiarism comes from Harold Bloom who, in his contribution to "Plagiarism: A Symposium," suggests that plagiarism, properly speaking, demonstrates a reverence that is part of the idolatry of literature. This is a particularly interesting point to bear in mind when reading Acker.
13. One of the features of Pynchon Notes, as of Internet discussions about Pynchon, is an ongoing hunt for sources of the names, events, places, and characters in all of Pynchon's texts. Steven Weisenburger recently produced his *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel* (1988), which is devoted to an examination of a number of scenes whose sources he has tracked down.
Notes to Chapter Five

In *The Postmodern Allegories of Thomas Pynchon*, Deborah Madsen spells out the meaning of the term "postmodern allegory" for the metaphoric narratives I discuss in the thesis:

... individual allegoric texts are able to present a self-conscious account of the way cultural discourses seek social validations and also the way in which these cultural discourses authorize certain configurations of cultural power. (Madsen 3)

While there is no doubt that Pynchon and Acker both address power as a theme in their novels, the notion of postmodern allegory implies a direct and political engagement that seems to me to be quite elusive in the texts themselves.
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