Abstract

This study examines the revival of didactic narrative in exemplary antirealist American novels of the last forty years. In chapters on Don DeLillo, William H. Gass, William Gaddis, and Richard Powers, I trace the ways in which these writers deploy antirealist literary practices of ontological destabilization, metafictional digression, and deliberate textual difficulty as ways of revisiting the proposition, rejected by many among their cohort, that fiction may have pedagogical value. These novelists attempt to reconcile their commitment to formal innovation with the belief that fiction offers cognitive gains, beholden though it is to humanistic values of the sort that avant-garde principles ostensibly repudiate. As such, these novelists grapple with an ambivalent conception of the novel as both a self-enclosed aesthetic object and a culturally promiscuous text that samples from—and speaks back to—a range of nonfictional discourses. In reading these works, I consider the epistemological potency of literature within a tradition of antirealist experimentation that has typically disavowed any affiliations with the didactic, and in particular its pejorative connotations with rigid, authoritarian moralizing.

Drawing upon Jacques Rancière’s model of the ignorant schoolmaster, I argue that these novelists reject the mantle of encyclopedic mastery, deploying instead a “pedagogy of
failure” that encourages an autodidactic mode of verification among readers. In exploring scenes of failed instruction, these novels reconfigure postmodern authorship in terms of a reluctant teacher addressing an audience of recalcitrant students. These works thus acclimatize readers to a mode of attention that encourages a continual revision of one’s beliefs and attitudes in the wake of failure and misunderstanding. In so doing, these authors attempt—with varying success—to avoid the self-imposed cultural marginalization that comes with adhering to antirealism’s more ludic, oppositional strictures.
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Introduction

Inimical Muses: Antirealist Revolt and The Didactic Imperative in Postmodern American Fiction

And to the extent that novels have tried to compete in [the entertainment industry], the two halves of the old imperative “to instruct and delight” have begun to seem inimical programs, whereas they ought to be more or less identical. What greater pleasure could there be than the exploration of where we are?

— Richard Powers

Can postmodern fiction heed the old imperative to “instruct and delight” while maintaining its commitment to formal innovation and epistemological skepticism? The question itself may seem unwarranted, given the moribund state of the postmodern aesthetic itself. Furthermore, perennial debates about the future of the novel seem little more than rote exercises in hand wringing given that fiction’s cultural centrality as an agent of delight has largely been ceded to television, the internet, and other agents of distraction. Belief in the novel’s instructive function, meanwhile, is upheld most faithfully by a number of readers outside the academy who continue to regard literary texts as a means of self-improvement. Such readers, as Aubry notes, “have not surrendered their piety” towards the novel as a source of nutritive instruction: “Audiences on Oprah, customers on Amazon, professional book reviewers, and authors themselves continue to treat great works of literature as quasi-sacred repositories of wisdom, containing truths about humanity relatively untainted by local
prejudices or political biases” (16). For such readers, questions about the varying paths the novel might take in the wake of shopworn postmodern experimentation have little bearing on what motivates them to indulge in a practice that not only offers escapist pleasure but promises, if one affords the text due reverence and attention, to convey salutary knowledge that would otherwise have proved elusive.

If one were to use Amazon rankings and Oprah’s reading lists as a casual rubric to evaluate the North American public’s taste for fiction, it would appear that few among Aubrey’s pious audiences remain enthralled by the kind of ambitious experimental American fiction—as practiced by the likes of John Barth, Robert Coover, and Thomas Pynchon—that was once in vogue in the 1960s and 70s. These writers produced ludic, capacious texts which have, varyingly, been classified as encyclopedic, maximalist, and “systems” novels.¹ These novels typically spurned realist tenets of mimesis and, just as often, adherence to the conventions of the readable page-turner. Given the typically limited audience for so-called literary, as opposed to genre or “middlebrow” fiction, it appears unlikely that the kind of fiction these writers produced can offer their audience insights about the nature of contemporary life, let alone suggest how one might best navigate its often overwhelming caprices. While a shrinking coterie of committed readers may continue to find such texts a reliable source of delight, they hold little expectation of drawing from them an equal amount of instruction.

Avant-garde or otherwise, the waning of the novel’s epistemological authority seems

¹ Both Mendelson (1975) and Clark (1990) have proposed various taxonomies of the encyclopedic narrative. In *The Art of Excess* (1989), LeClair examines the polydisciplinary intertextuality of what, drawing on the theories of biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, he dubs the “systems novel,” arguing that the excessive nature of such texts—typified by their use of information overload and redundancy—both represents and provides a means of critiquing “the master ideologies of American and multinational culture” (15-6). As a way of distinguishing them from other postmodern texts, LeClair suggests that systems novels seek to “deform the conventions of the realistic novel in order to defamiliarize the world, not just…the text” and, further, to demonstrate how “orders and forms in the world…can arise out of seeming chaos” (21).
to have been assured, at least in part, by encyclopedic novelists who cultivated a devil-may-care aesthetic of insular difficulty. Weary of the constraints of conventional realism, and sympathetic to the aims of Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman*, a more programmatic faction of these writers deliberately eschewed both the tenets of easy readability and conventional characterization. One of them—John Hawkes—infamously decreed that “the true enemies of the novel [are] plot, character, setting and theme” (qtd. in Bradbury, *The Novel Today*, 7). But my purpose is not to defend the usual suspects of American postmodernism from the kind of pantomime outrage and easy vilification to which they had once been subject. As Jonathan Lethem trenchantly observes, “To go on potshotting at these gentlemen is not so much shooting fish in a barrel as it is shooting novelists who rode a barrel over Niagara Falls twenty or thirty years ago” (*The Believer*). The critical rehabilitation of now passé literary daredevils is no longer as pressing a task as examining how their postmodern aesthetic inheritance may be enlisted in guiding readers through what Richard Powers, in an interview with Jim Neilson, describes as “the exploration of where we are” (23)—or, in other words, teaching them.

For David Porush, writing with an eye towards a looming “final transformation of postmodernism” (38), the emergence of cyberspace as a locus of increasing cultural and academic attention in the early 1990s promised a tantalizing new avenue for liberating imaginative writing from what he identified as its epistemological shackles:

> In my view, the advent of this virtual reality, a thoroughly simulated experience inside the computer, will signal the end of the novel, the end, happy or not, or a logocentric epistemology, and the end of the delusion that rationality can explain all corners of the universe,
including the cognitive human mind... It will signal the beginning of
a new epistemological contract between word and thing, in which the
pure constructivism fashionable in poststructuralist interpretation and
postmodern literature gives way to an acknowledgement of the
epistemological potency of literature, and the pure rationalism of
science gives way to a new appreciation of interpretation, metaphor,
and irrationality. The site for the evolution of this post-rational
discourse is the mind, or rather, we should say, discourses about the
mind. (39)

In retrospect, of course, Porush’s pronouncements about cyberspace seem overly effusive, if
not almost certainly premature. The intertwined relationship he posits between the novel and
“logocentric epistemology,” as well as his prediction of their impending demise, may also
seem dubious to those who are skeptical about fiction’s ability to produce truth claims in the
first place. What I find valuable in Porush’s vision, however, is a conception of the
imaginative power available to us through “a marriage of the discourses of a rational
cognitive science and the discourses of irrational cognitive art,” a matrimonial allegiance of
fact and fancy he calls Eudoxia after one of the fantastic locales Italo Calvino describes in his
novel Invisible Cities and which, like cyberspace, “represents an alternative reality” (39).²
While cyberspace may not have rushed in to fill the cognitive void left by the novel’s
supposed end (or not, at least, in quite the intellectually nourishing way Porush hoped for), it

² Calvino’s name for the city puns both on the Greek mathematician Eudoxus of Cnidus, who played an
important role in the discovery of irrational numbers, and the Greek word itself, which translates as “good
discourse” (Porush 46-7). Eudoxia contains a special carpet in which, as Calvino describes it, the city’s true
form may be observed. This mise-en-abîme has important implications for Porush’s discussion of what he calls
cybernetic fiction, as it suggests that “the fictional text is a self-referential simulation game of the deep and
elusive mental processes of creation” (45). I would extend this contention to consider, as well, the ways a self-
referential fictional text might simulate the equally elusive processes of learning.
is still vital to consider the ways in which the novel *in extremis*—specifically its variously “postmodern” American iterations—may enact the eudoxic shift in how we view the epistemological potency of literature.

The novels I examine in this dissertation engage in the kinds of “discourses about the mind” Porush discusses—specifically, the minds of the student and teacher. They assert their epistemological potency with characteristics similar to those Porush identifies in (or projects onto) the concept of cyberspace: they attempt to reconcile the kinds of unverifiable humanistic truths available to us through interpretation, metaphor, and the irrational with an underlying appreciation of the “pure rationalism of science.” (By “science” here I include not only the investigative practices defined by the scientific method of positivistic experimentation, but also their presiding belief in a knowable world.) These writers are concerned with exploring the epistemological potency of literature within a tradition of antirealist experimentation that has typically disavowed any affiliations with the didactic, and in particular its pejorative connotations with rigid, authoritarian moralizing.

In these novels, which chronologically both prefigure and follow upon Porush’s eudoxic vision, I contend that it is not necessarily the computer that may best “play the role of *l*’entremetteur for this transformation of discourse after postmodernism” (38) but, rather, the reemerging and often vexing conception of the author as teacher. In the works I examine, allegorical explorations of readers-as-students circle around an ambivalent conception of the novel as both a self-enclosed aesthetic object and a culturally promiscuous text that samples from—and speaks back to—a range of nonfictional discourses in its exploration of “where we are.” While working within the postmodern tradition, these novelists reconcile their commitment to formal innovation with a desire to reassert the novel’s cognitive value, and to
reexamine humanistic values of the sort that avant-garde principles have ostensibly surrendered in their pursuit of the inviolate, purely aesthetic literary text. In so doing, these novelists may take on the role of the kind of philosopher whom Richard Rorty describes as “the informed dilettante, the polypragmatic, Socratic intermediary between various discourses,” in whose “salon, so to speak, hermetic thinkers are charmed out of their self-enclosed practices. Disagreements between disciplines and discourses are compromised or transcended in the course of the conversation” (317). No longer the aloof, Olympian figure presiding over an encyclopedic cultural archive, the novelist is now free to make assertions about the world while simultaneously acknowledging the limits of his own didactic authority.

The central project of this dissertation is to reconsider the instructive potential of antirealist fiction by examining discourses of learning and autodidacticism as represented in the work of four American novelists whose work spans the last half century: William Gaddis, William Gass, Don DeLillo and Richard Powers. These novelists, working within a broadly defined tradition of postmodern fiction, struggle to address this instructive imperative when it feels inherently inimical to the cause of “antirealist revolt”—as Nash (1987) has it—to which their work owes an unmistakable aesthetic debt. I argue that these writers, in depicting scholars attempting to orient themselves among epistemic systems that refuse to yield satisfying insights into the nature of reality, challenge the postmodernist doxa of constructivist, relativistic knowledge. In exploring and staging failures of instruction—both on the part of their characters and their authorial personas—these writers suggest that retrospective evaluations of the American novel’s postmodern turn would do well to reconsider the cognitive value of fiction, a belief in which is conventionally taken to be at odds with postmodernism’s reputation for political quietism or purely self-indulgent
wordplay.³

The often bleak subject matter, however, and occasionally alienating formal features of much antirealist fiction suggests that readers may be dubious about investing their time and effort for what, in the estimation of some skeptics, is little promise of either pleasure or instruction. Donald Barthelme ventriloquizes these misgivings about whom he calls “the alleged Postmodernists—let’s say John Barth, William Gass, John Hawkes, Robert Coover, William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, and myself in this country”:

The criticisms run roughly as follows: that this kind of writing has turned its back on the world, is in some sense not about the world but about its own premises, that it is masturbatory, certainly chilly, that is excludes readers by design, speaks only to the already tenured, or that it does not speak at all, but instead, like Frost’s secret, sits in the center of a ring and Knows. (“Not-Knowing” 15)

Some of the writers I examine herein make a virtue of this kind of antiseptic separation. Others have been accused of cultivating this chilly withdrawal from the world and sowing the seeds of their own irrelevance by their obstinate insistence on an “experimental” or “difficult” style. However, these same writers are often eager to explore the extent to which the lessons one may learn from self-enclosed aesthetic artifacts like the novel, realist or otherwise, are commensurate with the lessons of lived experience. In this way, the questionable future of postmodern aesthetics meets the larger, seemingly intractable “crisis” faced by fiction at large, chewed over by humanists determined to defend its relevance in an increasingly mercenary academic marketplace: what larger good is served by reading novels, anyway?

³ A reputation not entirely deserved, as Maltby argues in Dissident Postmodernists.
One answer immediately presents itself: none. Certainly, readers have always been drawn to novels for a variety of reasons. Some simply want an escape from workaday life available to them during the hours spent engrossed in what John Gardner called fiction’s “vivid and continuous dream in the reader’s mind” (39). Others hope to return from this imaginative sojourn with fresh insights they can apply to their lives. Either way, the idea that novels have something to teach is a tenacious one. Indeed, Fredric Jameson has claimed that “good literature” always has a didactic function (qtd. in Varsava, “Totality Lost” 192). But certain iterations of the postmodern aesthetic appear incompatible with, if not hostile to, this didactic function. Kuehl, for instance, asserts that “‘teach’ is a word all antirealists would reject…They focus instead on creating finely wrought artifacts. Beyond this, objective reality, so-called, appears hopelessly terrifying” (294). However, for some of these antirealist writers, this supposed rejection of a didactic role often manifests as more of a coy ambivalence.

The novels I examine trace an evolving relationship between postmodern American writers and their attempts to rehabilitate a humanistic intuition about the cognitive value of literature: namely, that it exists, and is both unique and non-trivial. These works engage with the inheritance of (post)modernist difficulty and antirealist experimentation in exploring the pedagogical value of fiction against a cultural backdrop in which “[t]he question of what literature tells us about life has disappeared from the forefront of our concerns” and “in some cases…has receded entirely” (Roche 84). Even writers like William Gass who have explicitly dismissed the cognitive aspirations of fiction find it nevertheless exerts a kind of gravitational pull on their respective aesthetic projects. As such, their work depicts a familiar conflict. The will to demonstrate mastery over an ambitiously complex range of material, as
in the case of the “encyclopedic” novelist, is repeatedly thwarted by repeated failures to bring this project to fruition. Furthermore, their explicit focus on educational themes—and the twinned drives towards knowledge and invention that link the student and author—demonstrate an ambivalence about the antirealist tradition’s rejection of both teaching and attempts to make contact with the “terrifying” reality beyond the fictional text.

While what I am broadly referring to as the postmodern novel has self-consciously turned its back on the traditional markers of realist fiction, it is useful to remind ourselves that the norms it rejects are themselves products of a specific cultural moment, and by no means constitute a transhistorical and normative conception of fiction proper. In The Novel: An Alternative History, Steven Moore suggests that what one values in the kind of innovative narrative he prizes, and whose long tradition he traces, is a kind of linguistic exuberance in whose service plot and character have always played secondary roles, a sentiment to which John Hawkes would assent. Furthermore, Moore suggests that any sort of cognitive enrichment is, at best, an occasional epiphenomenon of reading fiction, not one of its guaranteed effects. As he astutely points out, “novelists are not necessarily wiser than anyone else, and if fiction were truly enlightening, then literature professors would be veritable buddhas of wisdom and equanimity” (Moore 15). To make matters worse, there is always the possibility that any knowledge novels impart may be spurious, or even dangerous. Intellectually hungry readers should instead content themselves with the illusory pleasures of fiction’s waking dream. “Sure,” Moore concludes, “fiction can wise you up, although it can

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4 I am arguing that many of these writers use antirealist strategies not to thumb their nose at tradition and “naïve” faith in realist fiction—whose tenets are themselves, after all, artful constructions—but to call for a renewed imaginative commitment to the world. Lillian Furst’s All is True helpfully explores the simplifications and distortions that surround the much more complex project undertaken by the realist writers of the nineteenth century.
also trick you into thinking the world is other than it is, as in *Don Quixote*. Rather, the novel is essentially a delivery system for aesthetic bliss” (15). But to what extent can the instructive and aesthetic imperatives remain inimical in novels which seem bent on pursuing—and, at times, perversely undermining—both?

While they may foreground rhetorical exuberance over traditional conventions of realist narrative, these novelists remain as intent on re-examining fiction’s potential as a unique source of knowledge as they are on emancipating the novel from the restrictive parameters of conventional realism. In so doing, they attempt—at times unsuccessfully—to avoid stamping their work with the self-imposed inconsequentiality that comes with adhering to a more purely ludic aestheticism. In exploring scenes of failed instruction, they suggest ways in which postmodern authorship may be reconfigured in terms of a reluctant teacher addressing an inattentive audience of recalcitrant students. The formal difficulties of their texts may present an immediate impediment to understanding, but in such a manner that these initial misreadings or misunderstandings can later be seen as cognitively valuable. Fiction can expose readers to a series of misunderstandings, acclimatizing them to a mode of attention that demands one be prepared to constantly revise one’s beliefs and attitudes. Bound up with their commitment to re-evaluating the novelist’s pedagogical role in this way, however, is the constant acknowledgement that this project may fail.

If the novelists I examine here intend to wise anyone up, they do so by exploring what I call a pedagogy of failure. I offer this conception in response to an obvious question: what does it mean to suggest that novels, which ostensibly have teaching as one of their goals, are so often interested in cultivating confusion, disorientation, or misunderstanding? Don DeLillo, William Gaddis, William Gass, and Richard Powers depict characters
enmeshed in dramas of failed understanding and seemingly fruitless scholarly or creative pursuits. Their resulting frustration is a natural consequence of the Cartesian intellect’s running up against its own limitations, namely its inability to rationally cognize its way out of misunderstandings when crucial information is not ready at hand. However, these misunderstandings, rather than being impediments to achieving some grand model of complete understanding, are to be courted rather than sidestepped. The novels produce a kind of productive frustration, both by way of their often demanding form and their cognitive content, which makes implicit claims to being true reflections of “the way things are.” The ultimate failure of the novels’ characters—often avatars of the would-be encyclopedic novelist—suggest that the text itself is not the final outgrowth and finished product of the commanding intellect’s compilation of worldly knowledge. Rather, the attempt to conceive of knowledge in tandem with obstacles and interpretive pitfalls inherent to its pursuit is the very imaginative exercise for which the novel was designed. Antirealist literary practices associated with a disavowal of the literary text’s responsibility to mirror or comment on the world are here tempered with the hard-to-shake intuition that these narratives, contrived by fancy and non-referential though they might be, can contribute to a genuine kind of knowledge.

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Jacques Rancière explores a method of instruction based on the methods of the 19th century schoolteacher Joseph Jacotot, who demonstrated how students may be emancipated from the traditional didactic relationship between teacher and student in which traditional methods of explication reinforce the former’s superior intelligence and authority. Jacotot, for example, instructed a group of Flemish students to

5 The prototype for the encyclopedic novel which satirizes the totalizing claims of rational knowledge is, of course, Flaubert’s *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (1881), whose titular characters’ dilettantish attempts to master varied intellectual disciplines repeatedly end in failure.
read French despite his inability to converse with them in their native tongue. Like Rancière’s ignorant schoolmaster, the didactic novelist must abandon the claim to mastery that leads, in the classroom, to what Rancière and his schoolmaster called stultification. The novels I read herein engage in an exploration of both specialized non-fictional discourses and a self-reflexive interrogation of fiction as mode of knowledge production. In so doing, they endorse the cultivation of a “continuous vigilance,” in Rancière’s terms, for readers who look to the text for instructional cues. Contra the often-forbidding reputation of these authors as inscrutable polymaths, their texts do not engage in a dynamic of didactic mastery but suggest a more democratic interpretive vision, one characterized by shared exuberance in the face of incomplete knowledge. As Rancière’s translator clarifies, “The very act of storytelling, an act that presumes in its interlocutor an equality of intelligence rather than an inequality of knowledge, posits equality, just as the act of explication posits inequality” (Ross xxii). These novels posit an equality of sorts by staging failures of instruction, in which disorder, misunderstanding and incompletion are re-envisioned as the prerequisites for a more fruitful engagement with reality. The literary text may serve as a catalyst for this kind of productive frustration, promoting a particular attitude one should cultivate toward misunderstanding and confusion—a receptivity to not-knowing in the face of pressures, externally or internally imposed, which insist on mastering the necessary knowledge before being able to move forward. Both the novels’ characters and its readers must learn to surrender to this sense of disorientation. The primary lesson common to these fictional texts is not one that emerges from assimilating the kind of piecemeal knowledge our conventional frameworks of cognitive value prioritize. Rather, it is the endorsement of an attitude of receptivity in which we regard our ever-waxing and waning state of ignorance with equanimity as opposed to
frustration.

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Cognitivist approaches to evaluating fiction trace their roots as early as Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which recognizes that art’s cognitive value—its contributions to the reader’s insight, knowledge, or understanding—“counts towards artistic value” (Kieran and Lopes xii). But my intention is not to rehearse this argument, as I concur with those who maintain that literature need not contribute to knowledge in order to be judged successful. While a work of fiction may allow its reader some cognitive gains, it does not follow that this is a property that all works of fiction share, or that it should factor into how one evaluates its success or failure as a work of art. Rather, the writers I examine suggest that fictions are cognitively valuable to the extent that they are ultimately transformative.

The shift among textual relations that the antirealist novel enacts may trigger a similar shift—intellectual, affective, or both—within the reader, due in part to the power of what Bernard Harrison attributes to non-referential, or what Merleau-Ponty termed “constitutive,” language. This kind of language is “occupied solely with itself” and does not [function] to inform” (Harrison 49), and as such possesses the ability to threaten the reader’s notions of selfhood by undermining the notions of truth and referentiality that undergird what the “critical humanist” has long maintained as guaranteeing language’s relationship to Reality (Harrison 52). In order to justify the cognitive value of literature, Harrison hopes to reconcile critical humanism of this sort with the insights of deconstruction, suggesting such a reconciliation “must involve a double movement, on the one hand divesting humanism of its traditional logocentric commitments, on the other hand drawing out the humanistic implications of deconstruction” (53). In turn, he suggests, a rejection of logocentrism does
not require a wholesale embracing of formalism. A novelist who takes on the provisional mindset of a “non-logocentric anti-formalist” (37) may, then, be best suited to the project of rehabilitating the didactic potential of so-called experimental, postmodern fiction.

One might say that readers of the didactic antirealist novel do not gain knowledge, but rather knowledge of—of what it is like to be a certain way, of what the consequences of a particularly blinkered view of looking at the world might be, and of how they may be living their own lives with similarly limiting or damaging conceptual constraints. The interdependence of the word and the world is brought back to the forefront for the reader to consider. In this sense, the writer is always teaching, even when he claims no mastery over his imaginative materials. The novels defend, indeed demonstrate, the validity of the cognitivist view that fiction has the potential to teach its readers something of value. The difference here is that this “something of value” may be an attitude and not a concept—the paradoxical ability to countenance and celebrate the state of mind that Donald Barthelme characterized as one of not-knowing.

Barthelme attributes the difficult style of his alleged postmodernists to “the pressure on language from contemporary culture in the broadest sense—I mean our devouring commercial culture—which results in a double impoverishment: theft of complexity from the reader, theft of the reader from the writer” (15). He continues:

> [h]owever much the writer might long to be, in his work, simple, honest, and straightforward, these virtues are no longer available to him. He discovers that in being simple, honest, and straightforward nothing much happens: he speaks the speakable, whereas what we are looking for is the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken. (15)
Barthelme thus justifies the postmodernists’ embrace of difficult style as “both a response to a constraint and a seizing of opportunity” (22), a response to the contamination of language by political and commercial interests, and a continuation of “art’s own project[…] of restoring freshness to a much-handled language” that he traces back to Mallarmé’s attempts to establish the poem as an ontological object independent of the world, as opposed to a mere description of it (16).

While the novels I treat in this dissertation share certain hallmarks of this postmodern mode, including this embrace of complex linguistic play as a means of opposing the deadening encroachments of contemporary life into the independence of the artwork, they also evince an awareness of the dangers of too far a retreat into such difficult aesthetic enclosures. With this in mind, they attempt to balance their dissident linguistic play with a renewed interest in teaching readers something about the nature of the contemporary world against which they are reacting. These novels, aware of their own provisional incursions into worldly “relevance” and the fundamental incompleteness of their knowledge-building projects, nevertheless retain a conception of the encyclopedic text as one from which something can be learned, even if this knowledge does not, being avowedly “fictional,” come with the imprimatur of authority. Such guarantees of singular, objective truth, after all, have long been thrown into disrepute by paradigm-shifting discoveries in physics and mathematics such as Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle and Gödel’s incompleteness theorem:

Put crudely, as Heisenberg’s and Gödel’s evidence (and that of the many in both fields who worked in their wake) would have it, it looks as though both our powers of empirical perception and our powers of pure logical conception are logically incapable by any rational means at any one time of ever making
“total” sense of—or even of observing—all the facts that make up “the truth.”

(Nash 38)

Heisenberg’s insight that the observer influences the phenomena under observation quickly found a foothold among disciplines far removed from the scientific context in which it had originally been produced. This new awareness of the interrelatedness of observer and observed coincided with the emergence of relativistic paradigms that would challenge the notion of objective truth: a view is always a view from somewhere. So not only can one not attain the kind of objective view from nowhere that science had held as its ideal, but now the very act of observation itself was found to influence the object of attention. Clearly, the postmodern incredulity towards any kind of metanarrative would be a compatible outgrowth of this new insight, such that, “As Jean-François Chassay has said, ‘everything is verifiable, nothing is true’” (Bruce 8).

Metafiction was one reaction to postmodernism’s incredulity towards grand narratives, including epistemic systems that made truth claims about the world. If all such explanatory systems were now subject to scrutiny, this skeptical eye could be turned inwards to examine and make explicit the workings and motivations of the author him or herself. And it usually was a him: as Barbara Schwerdtfeger points out, the purveyors of the kind of postmodern experimentalism in vogue in the 1960s and 70s were almost exclusively white males, a cultural dispensation which gave them tacit license to exempt their fiction from social obligations or otherwise engage with the extra-literary world (2). Antirealist play became the order of the day for many of these writers, including, for some, a hard line theoretical stance that bolstered their fictional project with strong disavowals, per John Hawkes, of the necessity of cultivating plot and character. Under this theoretical banner,
fiction becomes a textual artifact concerned only with exploring the consequences of its own formal rules. Gamesmanship came to replace, or at least eclipse, the didactic element once considered integral to fiction, if only implicitly so. It remains an open question whether delight, itself, was also a casualty of this new movement.

For some novelists, science’s legitimation of a radical epistemological skepticism suggested fresh ways of engaging with the raw materials of everyday life. Susan Strehle argues that a group of contemporary writers who are particularly well apprised of these developments, including Pynchon, Gaddis, Atwood and Barthelme, cannot be accurately described as either pure metafictionalists or neorealists:

In contrast to the theoreticians of self-reflexivity, they want fiction to comment on a lived reality through the pane of art. In contrast to the neorealists, they believe art cannot efface itself or become pure transparency, unconscious of its status as created language. They affirm both art (self-consciously aware of its processes and of aesthetic traditions) and the real world (specifically, the postmodern world, with a detailed awareness of its nature and history). (5)

Strehle explores these writers’ affirmation of aesthetic process and the postmodern “real world” through the framework of scientifically derived insights about the nature of our “quantum universe.” While the novelists I examine here are also often fascinated with contemporary science and its repercussions for both habits of perception and fictional narrative, I instead read their reconciliatory gesture as primarily informed by a desire to rekindle a pedagogical relationship between authors and readers.

The interdisciplinary dissemination of the relativistic paradigm Strehle discusses
certainly allowed many writers to breathe a sigh of relief in one sense, as they would no longer find themselves beholden to invest their fictions with even the semblance of nutritive value. But, of course, for some, the kind of triviality associated with pure aesthetic play presupposes that such play is neither inherently valuable nor a suitable vehicle for delivering cognitive gains. This is reflected in claims that writers of an antirealist bent like William Gass “tacitly [assume] the truth of the deconstructivist claim of Derrida and others that language does not, because it cannot, refer to a real world,” which in turn can lead us to identify “a form of cognitive atheism [that] underlies the antiworlds of some contemporary antirealists” (Tuttleton 3). While the “representational function” of their fiction may remain “secondary,” per Tuttleton, the writers I examine nonetheless feel compelled to take up the challenge of revitalizing the purposive function of the novel, and refuse to accept that their heretical aesthetic is incapable of teaching readers about the real world.

If postmodern narratives have troubled the question of stable external meaning—an antirealist severance of the self-contained text from its responsibility to maintain representational fidelity to the extra-textual world—writers like Don DeLillo and Richard Powers adopt the rhetorical and philosophical strategies of anti-realism but cannot shake free from the intuition that fiction bears some undeniable link, if not responsibility, to the truth. They evince a return to a modernist concern with ways of knowing, per McHale’s distinction (Postmodernist Fiction 9), one that is transformed—or informed—with a view of the novelist as teacher. These novelists self-reflexively position their work between two seemingly opposed projects, which once found expression in Horace’s old saw about literature’s dual roles of providing instruction and delight: 1) the exercise of linguistic exuberance which ostensibly differentiates literature from the purposiveness of instrumental forms of writing
and grants it its singular status (even if defining that singularity has continually proved
difficult); and 2), a responsibility to reveal or teach something about the nontextual world to
its readers. In disavowing both grand narratives (Lyotard) and modernism’s quest for
knowledge (McHale), postmodern fiction embraced a spirit of ludic play and formal
inventiveness that rejects these responsibilities to express truths about our consensual
definitions of reality, or to weigh in on moral issues that lay beyond the jurisdiction of its
own self-enclosed imaginative worlds. This is where critics of antirealistic work find
opportunity to dismiss swaths of contemporary writing as value-free, tainted by an empty
nihilism and sullied by their association (in academic discourse, at least) with the taint of
poststructuralist theory.

The novelists I read in this dissertation use their work to address anxieties about the
increasingly marginalized audience for the literary novel, as well as the limitations of the
encyclopedic form in light of today’s ever-proliferating avenues of information. They
highlight the changing role of artistic representation in a culture increasingly beholden to the
venal pursuit of profit, a conception of knowledge as purely a means to instrumental ends,
and a democratization of the arts that reduces them to trivial diversions. In pushing the
maximalist form to its limits, they suggest that the novel can engage with the reader and their
world in a more collaborative way. Such novels can serve to delight readers, satisfying their
desire for aesthetic pleasure and linguistic novelty while exerting an influence on them
beyond simply evoking a range of emotional responses. Such texts may help us to revise our
representations, as Richard Powers suggests to Neilson, while refusing to accept that
representations are all we have (“An Interview” 16). The sterility of self-absorbed solipsism,
rhetorical navel gazing, or indulgence in pure invective is tempered by a faith in fiction as an
ameliorative project, along with a refusal to surrender the novel’s ability to teach—or, at least, a refusal to acquiesce to the pejorative connotations of “the didactic” as it applies to imaginative literature. Paradoxically, these novels use their authority to promote an auto-didacticism rooted in experiencing the world outside our own limiting constructions.

Some antirealists embraced their freedom from responsibility to the extra-textual world by indulging in the kind of linguistic play that courts charges of “unreadability.” Their work often fails to conform to the conventional strictures of the realist narrative that had come to dominate popular conceptions of what a “readable” novel looks like. But, barring complete illegibility, what makes a text, especially a novelistic one, “unreadable”? It may be that its difficulty—an apparent lack of formal structure, for instance, to use Gaddis’s fiction as an example—makes the cost-benefit analysis of reading it most unattractive. Why punish oneself with a text that apparently fights all one’s efforts to enter into the kind of sustained illusion good fiction has always offered? Novelists of Gaddis’s maximalist persuasion must harbour, it seems, a hubris beyond the kind required of all writers, consisting not only of confidence in their ability to meet the challenges of the formal aims they have set for themselves, but a faith that these punishing works will find an audience. The mastery on display in encyclopedic novels, then, could easily be interpreted as a way for the writers to show that they alone are equipped to harmonize a symphony of competing discourses, that their role in reflecting the culture’s complexity back to it is a unique and indispensable one. Of course, there is something to be said for the fallacy of imitative form: representing the culture’s ostensible disorder and skewed noise-to-signal ratio back to readers in an indigestible text may not, in itself, be evidence of any particularly refined aesthetic sensibility or privileged insight into reality.
By pushing certain formal features to excessive, even annoying limits—including an indulgence in prolixity, the privileging of rhetorical experimentation over the development of traditional plot and character, or metafictional navel-gazing about the authorship of the work the reader holds in her hands—these kinds of texts open themselves up to charges of formal failure. The novels may teach readers something in the sense of weaving a series of bald facts about, say, mathematics or biology amidst the bare thread of their narrative, but they fail to make them feel (feel anything, that is, apart from boredom, annoyance, or confusion). For Robert Boyers, fiction of this stripe is remarkable primarily for these stylistic defects: “One cannot get away from the fact that failure, boredom, emotional limitation, and linguistic excess are often inherent in the very enterprise and intention of avant-garde fiction” (731-2). For those who speak of the “difficulty” of such avant-garde texts, this is typically what they have in mind. “Difficulty,” like “fiction,” is a term whose definition, seemingly self-evident in most everyday usage, requires some clarification here. Specifically, how does one distinguish between the difficulty of, say, a problem with a clear solution—such as a math equation or a crossword puzzle—and the quintessential Modernist literary text, like Eliot’s *The Waste Land*? For works like this, John Carey suggests a more accurate word would be “unintelligibility” (47). Difficulty, as a formal feature of texts in this high Modernist tradition, serves as a kind of initiation rite for the would-be reader, or pupil. For instance, in order to reap any aesthetic or cognitive rewards on offer in novels like *Ratner’s Star* or *J R*, the reader must occasionally be willing to submit herself to a work of great length, wide-ranging allusion, typographical eccentricity, rhetorical excess, and minimal emphasis on narrative and character development. In this way, presumably, the novel exercises its authority over the reader by making her nod in acquiescence, if not bow in submission, to the
price of entry set by its formal standards. What remains unsatisfying about such attempts to enumerate experience in all its richness and complexity is that they will always be incomplete. Unless the novel itself were to never end, it cannot capture the wide sweep of knowledge it holds within its purview.

Furthermore, the pursuit of a kind of Nabokovian aesthetic bliss seems opposed to the author’s desire to teach his reader. The moral seriousness supposedly necessary for didacticism to take root is incompatible with the strictures of pure aestheticism, which maintains that readers can take pleasure in even the most repugnant imaginative exercises. By this measure, the literary, then, is to be evaluated purely on the joy it affords the reader, even if that joy comes from luxuriating in the rhetorical flourishes of pederasts and murderers, as Barbara Schwerdtfeger suggests:

If the expressive use of language renders a work of fiction morally valuable, then even a text which negates all human rights, propagates the law of the jungle or pleads for the brutal slaughter of innocent babies could be considered affirmative provided the reader enjoys the text for its formal qualities and/or it widens the reader’s consciousness. To state it broadly, as long as one has fun reading a text, it cannot be unethical, independent of what it states. (Schwerdtfeger 67)

It seems reasonable that a good number of pious readers might express unease about the kind of declaration of aesthetic independence that would subordinate morality to ludic pleasure, a reflexive response whose limits William Gass tests in *The Tunnel*. Is the expressive use of language alone what renders a work morally valuable if the book’s aim is to unsettle our convictions about our own unassailable moral fiber? If not, the novelist must exert some kind
of didactic influence if he is to sway the reader towards a particular stance about the utility of a text that demands we interrogate our habitual responses to fine language that espouses abhorrent sentiments.

Authors of these Eudoxic texts must walk a line between two roles: the master synthesizer, a Joycean artist with full control over his narrative universe, paring his nails and bragging about keeping the professors busy for years, and the author who affects the stance of ignorance cultivated by Rancière’s schoolmaster. The latter role often encompasses a confessional desire to admit one’s own intellectual impediments and ethical shortcomings which, for the novels’ narrators or authorial proxies, is as much connected to their failures to heed the calling of the creative will as their inability to live up to a social contract with the reader. What remains unclear at this point is the relationship between the purely invented fictions of the narrative and its incorporation of nonfictional discourses and real-world “facts.” In other words, given that these texts are billed as works of fiction, what is it, exactly, that they would teach their readers?

First, it might be useful to enumerate the multitude of distinct ways in which the term “fiction” has been used, as Dorritt Cohn does in *The Distinction of Fiction*. Cohn helpfully elects to describe fiction as “nonreferential narrative,” which she opposes to narrative of the purely referential variety:

Another way of expressing this opposition is to say that referential narratives are verifiable and incomplete, whereas non-referential narratives are unverifiable and incomplete. We can check on the accuracy of a Thomas Mann biography, point out factual errors, and write a new one based on newly discovered evidence; but no competent novel reader would be inclined to
check on the accuracy of Hans Castorp’s life as told in *The Magic Mountain* or consult the archives to find out whether he was killed on the World War I battlefield where his fictional life ends. (16)

The works I examine traffic in what Don DeLillo’s *Ratner’s Star* calls “verifiable fictions”: texts that are, per Cohn, incomplete, but that incorporate assertions about the extra-textual world into their narrative in a more explicitly didactic manner than either traditional realist or antirealist novels. In so doing, they call on readers to provisionally acquiesce to the authority of the text until they can themselves verify its assertions. They are concerned with reexamining assumptions about the link between the literary text and the external world, particularly the responsibilities the former has to the latter. In particular, these novelists bristle against the degree to which postmodernism’s emancipation from the strictures of realist fiction has carried with it a diminishment in the import, readership, and use-value of the novel. Indeed, the use value of the novel is the central issue with which these writers struggle. Their stated aims—Gass and Powers, in particular, have been prolific commentators on both their own work and their views on fiction in general—and their novelistic output trace an ongoing ambivalence about the supposedly inviolate independence of the literary text, a view rooted in an aestheticism whose lineage runs from Wilde to Nabokov and his assertion, in *Lolita*, that the main purpose of fiction is the pursuit of “aesthetic bliss.” These two tensions—the antirealist commitment to linguistic play and ontological novelty, the creation of alternate worlds, versus the humanist commitment to use fiction as a means of conveying valuable equipment for living in the only world there is—are brought together in the theme of learning, and the figure of the author as teacher.

The antirealists’ rejection of humanist assumptions about the utility of fiction has had
the unfortunate side effect of rendering their work—or at least the popular impression of it—self-indulgent, uninterested in the world and questions of how we might best live in it. The “verifiable fictions” I examine seek to negotiate a faith in epistemic certainty with the antirealist representational strategies of postmodern novels which, while acknowledging their self-enclosed artificiality as imaginative texts, nevertheless insist on aligning themselves with the givens of the external world. The texts avow the value of, for instance, scientific discourses which presume an objective view of reality as knowable: they are willing to grant a legitimacy, if only a provisional one, to the epistemological frameworks strongly relativistic versions of postmodernism have repudiated. These writers envisage, as Richard Powers calls it, a “two-way flow” of discourse between C.P. Snow’s so-called two cultures. Their work enacts a struggle between the artist’s desire to craft an autonomous world of words and the teacher’s call to use his rhetorical powers to instruct, influence, or shape the attitudes and actions of their audience. Alongside these authors’ statements about their artistic motives and the nature of fiction stands the often antithetical evidence of their work, which simultaneously gestures in two directions: towards the exhaustion of a kind of epistemologically promiscuous, postmodern novel of ideas and its reinvigoration as a pedagogical tool predicated on admitting one’s ignorance.

Interdisciplinary conceptions of how the novel might justify its existence are increasingly ready-at-hand. Some propose a view of knowledge in which fiction may admittedly fail to produce unique or non-trivial insights, but can referee contests between the kind of information produced by other disciplines. Fiction, in this view, offers readers a safe sphere of imaginative experimentation in which successive viewpoints alien to their own may be tried on. The authority of the text, then, derives less from an implicit boast of
encyclopedic comprehensiveness but rather an invitation to have its own truth claims checked. Knowledge of the sort offered up by these fictions, then, is both fact-based in the conventional sense—offering information parcelled out in discrete units—and experiential, in that they argue that certain indispensable kinds of knowledge are only available in the world of bodies and the extra-textual material of life.

John Gibson has argued that the linguistic turn in twentieth-century philosophy shifted the terms of critical and academic discussion in the humanities to “the semantic and referential features of literary language rather than on its power of cultural articulation,” and so diminished the humanist conception of literature as capable of articulating insights about how to live well and find meaning in a world often seemingly not amenable to it (“Literature and Knowledge” 473). This unwelcome “wedge” between literature and truth has resulted in a present state of affairs in which “literature is made mute about the stirrings of extraliterary reality” (474). In addressing the problem of what could make literature’s pronouncements about an extra-literary reality unique, or even valuable, Gibson sidesteps conventional methods of identifying cognitive value:

Literary works do not embody conceptual knowledge, if by this we mean that they offer an elaboration of the nature of some aspect of our world, delivered, as it were, in a propositional package. Nor need they, if they are to have cognitive value. If they embody a form of understanding, it will consist in a more literal act of embodiment, namely, in the capacity of a literary narrative to give shape, form, and structure to the range of value, concerns, and experiences that define human reality. (482)

In opposition to asserting that literary works can offer these kinds of propositional packages,
Gibson is committed to making what he calls the “basic humanist claim”: for some aspect of a work of literature, we can assert of it that “this is θ,” where θ stands for an instance of human emotion or an affective response—jealousy, anger, suffering, and so on. Literature, Gibson claims, can best be thought of as an archive for such instances of cultural representations (Fiction and the Weave of Life 70-71). In light of what he terms the cognitive skeptic’s modified position—which, while conceding that “literature may not be isolated from the world,” nonetheless maintains that “the connection it offers to the world is cognitively trivial” (84)—Gibson proposes that the humanist must forfeit traditionally used terms like “truth” and “knowledge” in her discussion of literary cognitivism. Literature, Gibson writes, “[weaves] the knowledge it assumes into the fabric of the social. . . [It] gives testament to the bond between our words, our concepts, and the concrete body of our culture” (Weave 12). Readers receive not truth, but “the bestowal of sense, of meaning, upon those regions of human circumstance that literature invites us to explore” (Weave 141-2).

If antirealist novels about failures of instruction offer instantiations of any particular cultural phenomenon, it may be the entrenched skeptical attitudes that postmodern perspectives on the relationship between art and truth have engendered. Bound up in the novels this dissertation takes up are representations of the struggle to grasp truths in the face of skepticism about the very notion of truth itself. “Literature,” per Gibson, “does not treat the world as an object of knowledge but as a subject of human concern. And this itself is a cognitive accomplishment, a way of bearing witness to the world” (“Literature and Knowledge” 483). Furthermore, he asserts that literature “offers worlds, not words” (Weave 132), a belief antithetical to the stance of hardline antirealists like William Gass. Fictions that assert the primacy of the word have typically had to muffle antithetical claims to comment
upon the extra-textual world.

Mourning such a “loss of reference” concomitant with the “ferocious appropriation of high culture by commercial culture,” Donald Barthelme suggests writers faced with this state of affairs will naturally begin to “appreciate the seductions of science” (17). It is to the seductions of science, and the foreign beauty of its vocabularies and conceptual geographies, to which writers like Don DeLillo and Richard Powers have turned for the kind of lexical re-invigoration Barthelme describes. However, while Barthelme urges readers to revel in the fact that “much of the most exquisite description of the world, discourse about the world, is now being carried on in [obscure] mathematical languages,” he also warns that these potentially liberatory discourses are typically “now available only to specialists” (17). The novelist, then, in addition to merely scavenging fresh metaphors from these obscure languages, may also serve as their ambassador of sorts to the humanities, using fiction as a means of smuggling science’s exquisite descriptions of the world across C.P. Snow’s increasingly dubious disciplinary divide.

This kind of didactic project is, however, often inimical to the kind of oppositional antirealist aesthetic writers like Barthelme and his cohort embrace, and as such must contend with both the likelihood of communicative failure and the radical skepticism that is typically commensurate with postmodernist thought. In Chapter One, I examine the strategy of courting productive failure alongside the seductions of science in Don DeLillo’s *Ratner’s Star* (1976). The interdependent relationship between symbolic systems and extra-textual reality is key to DeLillo’s fiction, for only in acknowledging it can one reconcile the numinous power of language with its real-world correlates—a kind of somatic knowledge *Ratner’s Star* argues for. Its scientist characters attempt to sidestep the cognitive and
perceptual limitations of embodiment in their quest for an epistemological vantage point unsullied by subjectivity, a hunt for a “view from nowhere” that exerts a strong attraction in spite of—or perhaps because of—its ultimate unattainability. DeLillo reminds us that the teleological narrative of progress on which positivistic science has set its foundation is itself the kind of intractable fiction that the unpredictable disasters of the non-theoretical world will happily overturn with fresh and disturbing evidence to the contrary. In so doing, the novel also offers a parallel commentary on the similar crisis of imaginative fiction’s cognitive legitimacy.

DeLillo offers the text as a course of instruction meant to encourage readers to evaluate and then reject successive epistemological frameworks. It suggests that science and art can both succumb to similarly detrimental isolationist tendencies, despite the former’s claim to be engaged in a dispassionate description of the physical workings of the world. While the novel has long been acknowledged as the privileged medium for sustained explorations of consciousness and interiority, DeLillo’s work suggests that it must also retain a desire to maintain contact with the world if it is to forego its status as hermetic textual object and redefine itself as what Richard Powers calls a “node in a connectionist network” (qtd. in Burn 169).

I suggest that Ratner’s Star offers a qualified endorsement of a constructivist view of knowledge, while simultaneously sending up science’s hubristic confidence in itself as our most authoritative means of knowledge. While Ratner’s Star acknowledges that all symbolic systems are, in one degree or another, “verifiable fictions,” ways of assuaging our anxieties about death, it offers an alternative vision of the practical, life-enriching roles mathematics and language can play beyond the walls of the scientists’ (or writer’s) highly-controlled
environment. These purely symbolic systems, DeLillo suggests, can find a purchase on reality in spite of their amorphous nature. DeLillo is committed to a view that simultaneously respects the mysteries of the unsayable. Unlike Wittgenstein, who counseled silence when confronted with the inscrutable, we can, and must, still speak of things we do not know. The provisional nature of speech and language can only gesture towards the extra-linguistic nature of lived experience, and while it alone may on occasion approach the numinous, it must respect the independence of the real world, as must the mathematician and novelist alike. Any pursuit of scientific truth abstracted from the somatic and political realities that shape living conditions for large swaths of the world leads to madness, sterility, and ineffectually recursive attempts to construct yet another metalanguage with which one can authoritatively describe reality.

Chapter Two examines William Gass’s revolt against his own anti-cognitivist stance in *The Tunnel*, a monumental novel begun in the sixties and finally published in 1995. William Gass has long insisted on the primacy of the word over the world, but I argue that even his aggressively doctrinaire essays belie the more ambivalent claims his novel makes about how the attitude it fosters among its readers may shape their responses to the extra-literary world. In *The Tunnel*, Gass exhausts the navel-gazing potentialities of Modernist form, cultivating a logorrhoeic, at times tedious “dictionary style” with which his narrator, the embittered history professor William Kohler, enumerates his deep self-loathing and petty grievances. In so doing, he also attempts to reassert the didactic authority he never had in the classroom by enlisting the reader in his “Party of Disappointed People” and inculcating in them the hateful attitudes to which he attributes his singular, privileged insight. Here, tedium not only coexists with transcendence but, rather, threatens to blot it out entirely. Both Gass
and Kohler share the kind of rhetorical felicity that allows them to catalogue their grievances and bigotries in characteristically ornate prose. Gass continues to unsettle the intuition many humanists share about the interconnectedness of truth and form, one which avers that “[a]n insightful work that has no sensuous dimension fails to be beautiful, and a sensuously attractive work that has no substantive ideational moment also fails to satisfy the conditions of beauty” (Roche 30). Kohler exposes lurid details about his private prejudices and secret perversions, but their ultimate banality seems to confirm that neither the finely-wrought rhetoric of the text, or the authorial persona it cultivates, are worth preserving. Kohler’s disappointment about the trajectory of his misspent “blackboard life” matches the disappointment of many readers, who, in finishing the long awaited novel, may find not the Modernist masterpiece they were promised but an extended demonstration of the shortcomings of any attempt to assiduously commit the workings of a loathsome individual’s mind to the page. Where Gass succeeds is in forging a kind of negative empathic link between the figure of Kohler and his readers, which may account for unlikely cognitive enrichment. An immersion in finely wrought rhetorical invective gives us practice in taking on sustained states of intense attention with which we may be otherwise unacquainted.

William Gaddis’s work is also structured around a notion of failure as a productive enterprise. In his first novel, *The Recognitions*, Gaddis’s repeated refrain of “the self who could do more,” a line from a madrigal by Michelangelo, alludes to the unrealistic ambitions of the artist-scholar who attempts to master his discipline (and several others besides) but, in doing so, unmasters himself. This, Gaddis’s texts reaffirm, is a waste of creative energy, and ultimately self-destructive in that the kind of isolation it promotes kills agapê, a communal, selfless love at odds with the overambitious artist’s chilly self-remove. Gaddis’s fiction
documents the gradual renunciation of his position of authorial privilege and mastery that critics ascribed to him in the wake of his encyclopedic debut novel, *The Recognitions*. However, Gaddis’s second novel, *J R* (1975)—presented almost entirely in the form of unbroken, unattributed dialogue—is often cited as evidence not of a more modest aesthetic ambition but, rather, an increasingly self-indulgent obscurantism.

In Chapter Three I trace William Gaddis’s growing repudiation of authorial mastery from *J R* to his posthumously published novel *Agapē Agape* (2002), a sparse jeremiad about the novelist’s cultural irrelevancy. While *J R* retains some of the encyclopedic hallmarks of his previous novel, *The Recognitions*—in terms, for instance, of its length and allusiveness—it also heralds a shift in his attitude about the novelist’s jurisdiction over his topics and readers alike. *J R* focuses on pedagogical relationships that typically founder on misunderstanding and illegibility, but, crucially, also gestures towards a recuperative vision in which the failure of totalizing intellectual or artistic enterprises can instruct us in the virtues of awe and humility. This notion of productive failure is, however, reluctantly abandoned in his final, posthumous novel, *Agapē Agape*, a run-on monologue of a dying narrator who bemoans the loss of aesthetic integrity that has come about with a growing democratization of the arts, instantiated, in his view, by the do-it-yourself ethos of the player piano. Here, Gaddis ventriloquizes a range of elitist complaints about the degradation of the novelist’s social status and the ascendance of a herd mentality in which “everybody [is] his own artist” (2). Gaddis’s narrator appropriates an elitist stance in his screed against the democratizing instinct that has flattened distinctions between high and low art, and between the privileged cultural producer (the artist) and the once passive audience who now deign to produce their own inferior simulacra of artworks. If the novelist has been relegated to
irrelevant scold, Gaddis’s narrator seems to revel in the role, producing a jeremiad in which his desperate urge to communicate to his reader the near apocalyptic urgency of his insights about disorder and entropy are hampered by the somatic illness that is reflected in the form of the text, which is fragmentary, breathless, repetitive, and constantly on the verge of collapsing in on itself. Where *JR* offers its characters the promise of an alternative standard of knowledge production and artistic ambition based on collaborative learning and a dismantling of elitist intellectual hierarchies, *Agape* is much more pessimistic about the pedagogical influence a genuinely committed artist can exert on an indifferent public. The Gaddis of *Agape* finally abandons not only his maximalist aesthetic but also, seemingly, his faith in the ameliorative potential of fiction as a didactic enterprise.

Chapter Four takes up the work of Richard Powers, who suggests that “the split between ‘factual’ writing and ‘fictional’ writing may be far less consequential than the split between writing that heightens our mindfulness of interdependence and writing that deadens or denies it” (qtd. in Kumar). *Three Farmers on their Way to a Dance* highlights the dangers of the kind of aesthetic, discursive, and interpersonal isolationism his fiction attempts to combat. Its characters are wary of the interdependent nature of both knowledge and lived experience, fearing that interconnectivity may not be distinguishable from engulfment. However, his novel argues that we can no more wall off our institutional discourses than we can claim an epistemological vantage point by quarantining ourselves from others. Fiction can be the site of a fruitful collaboration between the kind of knowledge about the material world unearthed by science and the greater exploration of interiority afforded by the novel’s exploration of individual consciousness. This kind of mutuality suggests that the supposedly inviolate, hermetic formalist text needs to make its borders more porous if it is to remain a
relevant player as what Powers has called a node in the connected network of knowledge. Powers invites readers to immerse themselves in its potentially arcane new discourses just as their autodidact characters do, and to carry the attitude of receptivity and wonder cultivated in this textual lesson into their experiences in the extra-textual world. I argue that *Three Farmers*, Powers’s first novel, instantiates his integrative vision of the cognitive potential of the postmodern novel, suggesting that a hybrid form of fiction that combines traditional mimetic narrative with essayistic precision can re-instruct readers in the kind of “reverent looking” without which any kind of cognitive gains will be hollow.

None of these texts, of course, explicitly endorse a view of novel-reading as inherently moral or intellectually salubrious, nor do they straightforwardly facilitate a reunion of the inimical impulses of pleasure and instruction that their postmodern predecessors worked so hard to uncouple. Rather, they suggest that, far from than having exhausted its potential for novelty or didactic power, novels in the postmodern grain may give way to a hybrid form more amenable to instructing readers in new modes of understanding. As Eldridge and Cohen argue, the forms of writing that may aid us to “concretely transfigure our self-understandings” will not come about “by being purely general and philosophical, and not by being purely particular and literary, but only by being both at once, therein both bearing a burden of difficulty that challenges our capacities of engagement and reception, and rewarding that challenge, rather than offering us only the gratifications of escape from the dominant marketplace” (43). If these texts do proffer a form of bibliotherapy, it is of a profoundly ambivalent kind, complicated by their effort to depict characters in the grip of misunderstandings which may be transferred to the reader. In eliminating or undermining a stable arranging presence as a narrative centre or locus of
authority, these novels grant the reader the freedom to luxuriate in the same kind of misunderstanding encountered by their characters. As readers, however, we are granted an important advantage over their overwhelmed narrators and bewildered protagonists: given the chance to see how their efforts to master the world end in failure, we may at least attempt to turn this failure to our advantage.
Chapter One

“Readers Strewn Along The Margins”: The Difficult Lessons of *Ratner’s Star*

Don DeLillo’s *Ratner’s Star* (1976) is a satirical critique of positivistic science as a vehicle for gaining knowledge about the world. It depicts the enterprise of scientific investigation as hobbled by its overreliance on brute fact and its privileging of pattern and order over the more significant question of what values they may endorse. The novel combines the tropes of science fiction and the *Bildungsroman* in telling the story of teenaged math prodigy Billy Twillig and his interactions with a series of eccentric thinkers—intellectual mentors and potential versions of his adult self—who fail to provide him with useful instruction or exhibit conduct worth emulating. In so doing, it is a novel that employs scenes of unsuccessful instruction as part of its own pedagogical strategy, one in which misunderstanding and an equanimous state of ignorance are posited as correctives to methods of knowledge-building that reject the value of terrifying embodiment.

In this early work, DeLillo offers a qualified endorsement of humanist values that is somewhat at odds with the self-indulgent textual play and political quietism often ascribed to postmodern fiction. In depicting failures of instruction across scientific and aesthetic contexts, *Ratner’s Star* moves towards affirming that, as Osteen has argued, “accepting the fictional, provisional quality of symbol systems is more liberating than imprisoning” (85). The novel takes as its starting point the position that scientific and mathematical models of the world traffic not in bedrock truths about the external world but offer instead a series of “verifiable fictions” (195) that help assuage our anxieties about living in a state of perpetual epistemological uncertainty—the state of not-knowing whence creative and intellectual
endeavours spring. In this sense, DeLillo identifies both science and literature as imaginative responses to existence less concerned with describing the way things are than with countering existential terror by celebrating our ability to impose order upon the apparent chaos of lived experience. The novel asks its readers to attend to its own incipient structural and thematic order by engaging them in a didactic narrative that is often both mischievously ludic and deliberately frustrating. Its characteristically postmodern self-reflexivity and antirealist tropes often undermine not only its attempts to instruct the reader in the history of mathematics, but also its endorsement of the value of cultivating awe towards intractable mysteries—an attitude that is, in DeLillo’s cosmology, typically commensurate with confusion and misunderstanding.

In tracing out a “covert history of mathematics” (Osteen 62), *Ratner’s Star* demands of its reader a substantial immersion in the concepts it elaborates, and as such is, at least superficially, a novel that might have the side effect of “teaching” them something about numbers and humankind’s enduring fascination with them. Readers of the novel may thus come to learn a great deal about the history of mathematics but comparatively little about its value from characters who privilege the aesthetic harmony of self-contained symbolic systems over their applicability to real life. However, imparting such knowledge is secondary to the novel’s self-reflexive interrogation of the use value of various modes of knowledge production, including both those of science and the literary text. The text solicits the reader’s trust in its didactic authority, only to undermine it with suggestions that this authority is derived from epistemic structures that have no stable, reputable antecedents. Billy’s typically frustrating conversations with his older peers serve as analogues to the reader’s engagement with the narrative: the novel’s characters promise to grant their interlocutors the gift of
understanding, only to rescind the offer by carrying their respective belief systems to absurd conclusions.

While *Ratner’s Star* does not reject the explanatory power of the scientific method, it does acknowledge that it is a product of human beings handicapped by the frailties of corporeal desire and the limitations of language. It stops short, however, of endorsing a postmodern relativism in which all our efforts to conceive of the world are cubbyholed as “mere” linguistic constructions. DeLillo’s fiction instead proposes that verification of the kind pursued by characters like Rob Softly, the leader of a research project dedicated to inventing a purely objective language, is subordinate to awe, the cultivation of which is linked to what Dewey calls DeLillo’s “visionary sensibility” (“DeLillo’s Apocalyptic Satires” 55). This sensibility manifests itself in *Ratner’s Star*’s outré and occasionally absurd evocations of mystical thought. Mysticism, though weighted with its own conceptual shortcomings, provides a needed corrective to the “decidedly suspect” (Dewey 55) Cartesian rationalism of science. However, beyond merely courting indeterminacy in its vacillation from certainty to mystery, DeLillo’s text affirms that we learn because of errors and misunderstandings, not in spite of them. These misunderstandings can identify entrenched conceptual habits that endorse holding reality at arm’s length out of a misguided attempt to claim a chimerical vantage point of disinterested neutrality. According to one of the novel’s mystical heretics, the scientific method has, to its detriment, become so moored in abstraction that it is now predicated on “deny[ing] the evidence of our senses” (87). The novel’s scenes of instruction—the various speeches, catechisms, and lectures in which Billy is, varyingly, participant and auditor—typically end in failure because those involved often fail to account for their indebtedness to the somatic, and because they are too in thrall to the purely rational
logic of positivism.

Readers of the novel, for whom Billy serves as a kind of surrogate, are prompted to appraise characters who privilege the aesthetic harmony of self-contained symbolic systems, like mathematics and literary texts, against those who counsel a return to a more direct experience of the world. In this way, the novel demands a response to the fundamentally unanswerable question it poses: “What is the universe as it exists beyond the human brain?” (432). While the inborn limits of embodied perception may forever limit or confine our statements about existence to the unverifiable and speculative, in Ratner’s Star, DeLillo suggests that acknowledging the universe as it exists beyond the postmodern text is a more attainable goal. The aesthetic isolationism associated with antirealist gamesmanship may be countered with the guidance of a didactic authorial voice, even though trusting it may be problematic.

Its decidedly antirealist cast, however, presents a challenge to the argument that Ratner’s Star satisfies more than its own prerogatives for ludic play. Ratner’s Star’s formal indebtedness to metaphors drawn from mathematical fields both real and invented weighs it down with conceptual detritus that, like the signal from the eponymous star itself, courts undecodability. This, his “most theoretically sophisticated and intellectually demanding book,” leads Tom LeClair to declare the novel as “the monster that hulks at the center of [DeLillo’s] career” (113). This monstrousness is partly a byproduct of the text’s recalcitrance in presenting its recondite subject matter. Jean Venable, a journalist who appears in the latter half of the novel, contrasts her own creative process with the kind of work in which she is a character:

[T]here's a whole class of writers who don't want their books to be read. This
to some extent explains their crazed prose. To express what is expressible isn't why you write if you’re in this class of writers. To be understood is faintly embarrassing. What you want to stress is the violence of your desire not to be read. The fiction of an audience is what drives writers crazy. These people are going to read what you write. The more they understand, the crazier you get. You can’t let them know what you're writing about. Once they know, you’re finished. If you’re in this class, what you have to do is either not publish or make absolutely sure your work leaves readers strewn along the margins.

(410)

This passage pithily encapsulates what some see as DeLillo’s own lapses into the kind of willful obscurantism on display in *Ratner’s Star*, in which a deliberate cultivation of difficulty and unreadability substantiates the novelist’s avant-garde bona fides and insouciant dismissal of the outmoded tenets of realist fiction. *Ratner’s Star* has been criticized for its reliance on flat characters who serve as little more than mouthpieces for DeLillo’s rhetorical set pieces, but its defenders contend that such criticism is misguided if one regards the text as primarily a novel of ideas. This overtly philosophical bent would thus excuse the novel from its rejection of conventional narrative and character development. Joseph Dewey, for instance, takes the position that *Ratner’s Star* is “perhaps best approached as [a novel] of idea[s]. . .with a central Everyman character who is exposed to but not educated by an assortment of flat characters. . .near-allegorical figures that advocate positions at odds with DeLillo’s visionary sensibility and that hence are decidedly suspect” (“DeLillo’s Apocalyptic Satires” 55). Responding to critics who attacked the novel for its poor character development, Keesey counters: “As a thesis fiction or novel of ideas, *Ratner’s Star*, like
many other works of science fiction, contains characters who stand for ideas or for positions on issues; in other words, the novel is part ‘allegory’” (Keesey 67). But DeLillo’s oblique admission that he, too, is tempted to leave his readers strewn along its margins threatens to dilute any pedagogical influence his novel sets out to exercise.

Dewey and Keesey highlight the allegorical qualities of DeLillo’s novel, but if one is to approach it from a cognitivist perspective, a consideration of its formal deficiencies or overindulgence in antirealist strategies must be subordinated to evaluating how successful it is in teaching its readers the lessons it ostensibly contains. While Ratner’s Star is neither pure science fiction nor pure thesis fiction, the ostensible difference between the two is not my focus. What Ratner’s Star pursues is not necessarily an allegory of external ideas separate from the reader, as Keesey suggests, but one that reframes the relationship between the reader and the postmodern author. I argue that the novel cultivates a series of misunderstandings meant to leave its readers “strewn along its margins” only to embrace them again with the integrative vision with which it concludes, transposing its antirealist appropriation of recondite mathematical knowledge into a humanistic context in which abstract reason and certainty are dislodged from their place of privilege by an embodied uncertainty more in touch with the material world. Its characters’ debates about the “purely imaginative” or “useless” nature of the field of mathematics in which Billy specializes have clear parallels to discussions about the extra-aesthetic value—cognitive or otherwise—of literature. While the formal beauty of such self-contained symbolic systems is to be celebrated as a value in itself, it is, DeLillo suggests, a mistake to do so at the expense of an overly rigid insistence on their independence from the external world. His co-option of the specialized vocabularies of science and mathematics serves to reinforce this
acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of art and the world. The novel’s failures of instruction—as experienced by both Billy and, potentially, the bewildered reader—prove productive in that they elicit the thwarted student and teacher alike to acknowledge how little of the world is receptive to the mastering intellect. In this way, the “useless” art object may prove cognitively valuable in that, through the intermingling of the awe and misunderstanding it evokes, it may provoke its audience to re-evaluate their relationship to the world that they believed they could master.

The prodigious Everyboy of the novel is Billy Twillig, a 14-year-old who has been awarded the Nobel Prize in mathematics for his development of “zorgs,” which he describes as imaginary numbers of no practical value. He is invited to join a team of eccentric researchers working at a remote facility known as Field Experiment Number One (FENO). His mathematical gifts are called upon to help decode a mysterious radio signal the scientists believe originates from a planet near Ratner’s Star, named after a famed scientist turned mystic. After a series of increasingly surprising discoveries in which the scientists’ hypotheses about the signal are undermined, they learn that its origins are not extraterrestrial but human, a warning from the past that predicts the solar eclipse that occurs at the novel’s end. The shock of this counterintuitive evidence of an earlier civilization more advanced than their own overturns the scientists’ belief in a teleological narrative of progress that undergirds their conception of science. The novel ends with the leadership of FENO in disarray, the final scene one of Billy “madly pedaling” a tricycle through the desert as he tries to outrace the pursuing shadow bands of the eclipse (438).

In this regard, the novel unsettles the Western cultural assumption, whose roots lie in the ambitions of Enlightenment thought, that the accumulation of knowledge through the
efforts of scientific inquiry is an inherently melioristic enterprise. This narrative of progress is notably challenged by FENO archeologist Maurice Wu, whose discovery of artifacts that increase in sophistication with successively deeper geological strata leads to the “revolutionary thesis” that “man [is] more advanced the deeper we dig” (321), an insight that prefigures the later discovery that the radio signal was in fact sent from Earth by an earlier civilization. The shadowy presence of various druidic earth mothers, Aboriginal dervishes, and other mystical acolytes within FENO’s halls pits ostensibly “primitive” spheres of language and ritual against a bloodless method of apprehending the world that, in its extreme forms, smothers capacity for wonderment with an unyielding adherence to rationalist thought.

In light of this recurring conflict between the rational and the mystical, Ratner’s Star has been read as a staging of structural and thematic oppositions. Keesey says the structure of Ratner’s Star “balances mind and body, separation and links, scientific illumination and the dim reaches of mystery” (83). For Boxall, Ratner’s Star “oscillates rapidly between two poles, between the enlightenment determination that the world is comprehensible, and the mystical conviction that its meaning is contained in secrets which remain hidden from us” (55). Tom LeClair sees this kind of schizophrenic oscillation as embedded in the novel’s experimental narrative strategies, wherein “[t]he presentation of setting, plot, character, structure, and style is initially concrete, then unexpectedly and aggressively abstract, only to become again unexpectedly and excessively concrete” (117). In this way, he argues, this quality of uneasy hybridity gives the novel its “sense of interlocking opposites, the paradox, the comedy, the fool’s rule of total radiance” (123). These oppositions carry through to the novel’s conclusion, which sees Billy involuntarily shrieking in madness or in joy as he races
his tricycle through “the reproductive dust of existence” (438). This ambiguous image suggests that a judgment on this confrontation between rational science and mysticism is being held in abeyance. However, the invocation of “reproductive dust” reminds us that the body remains an inescapable problem for the scientists of Ratner’s Star: neither a rationalist positivism nor a gauzy mysticism divorced from the realities of corporeal existence can have any legitimate purchase on the world which they both would purport to describe. Ratner’s Star insists that those who would retreat into abstract symbolic realms ignore at their peril the moral and political ramifications of any system of knowledge that purports to organize the world according to its own unexamined hierarchies of value. To this end, the novel vigorously examines its readers’ ability to discriminate between competing truth claims and epistemological systems, suggesting that they must be willing to work for this insight.

This balance of opposites, a pitting of the rational against the mystical, also finds its expression in the novel’s scenes of failed instruction. As a kind of scientific Bildungsroman, the novel asserts that the drive for intellectual mastery must be curbed with an acknowledgement that some mysteries exist outside the exacting scrutiny of scientific proof. Billy Twillig is initially unwilling to entertain the idea of comprehending the world provisionally, terrified by the loss of firm epistemological ground such a stance would entail. He associates this state of groundless uncertainty with the malleable nature of language and the physical transformations of adolescence, both of which threaten his notion of a discrete, purely intellectual self. DeLillo thus frames his examination of knowledge in terms of the perennial body-mind binary. In the novel, the physical threatens to contaminate, indeed even violate, the realm of pure thought to which Billy so closely hews. In comically depicting its scientists’ self-defeating thralldom to untenable investigative frameworks, the novel
“embodies the impurity of life, recognizes the creative potential of alien realms beyond and within us, and predicts the disastrous outcome of our inability to accept anything outside our narrow sense of order” (Keesey 68). I would clarify this further by identifying the way in which *Ratner’s Star* goes about this: namely, by demonstrating that FENO’s narrow sense of order is undergirded by a conception of knowledge production that relies on formulaic exchanges between master and student. In this sense, I read *Ratner’s Star* as a comedy about the failures of a pedagogical method that is founded on a stringently doctrinaire model of learning, one based on an unexamined privileging of rational thought over somatic experience. This model not only sequesters the student from ways knowledge may be applied, but also ignores the unpredictable consequences its application may have on embodied actors in the world beyond the laboratory or lecture hall. Fiction may introduce these two realms to each other, troubling the cocksure certainty of rational thought with the imaginative fecundity of misunderstanding and uncertainty.

Against the characters’ exhausting efforts to describe the universe by aggressively trying to prune their investigative methods of ambiguity, *Ratner’s Star* gives readers permission to rest in the aura of “not-knowing” when confronted with a world that refuses to be quantified, compartmentalized, and expressed in a purified language of mathematics. For most of the adults Billy encounters at FENO, the condition of not-knowing is a state to be resisted, beaten back by the instruments of rational scientific inquiry. The periodic intrusion of the irrational and the corporeal disturbs the scientists’ fantasy of a Platonic realm of pure thought. The text’s own increasingly self-conscious narrative fissures also rebut the logic of symmetry which Keesey identifies as the novel’s carefully wrought structural scaffolding. The novel demonstrates that the goal of achieving a totality of knowledge is hobbled by our
inescapable perceptual limits. Both the instabilities of language and the corporeality of lived experience delimit the reaches of the probing scientific intellect, thereby consistently frustrating its characters’ pursuit of an abstract scientific metalanguage uncontaminated by the cognitive limitations that embodiment places on us. The spectre of the world outside FENO’s enclosures, in tandem with the urges and frailties of the body, continually reasserts itself in ways that posit an embodied, experiential apprehension of knowledge as that which has been overlooked in the Western intellectual tradition, and which any didactic guide must incorporate into his lessons.

The novel insists on grounding its intellectual characters in the somatic realm. In particular, Billy’s aversion to the exigencies of the body are set in opposition to the workings of disembodied reason. DeLillo’s text demonstrates that, no matter how much explanatory authority we grant the epistemic systems to which reason gives rise, we cannot escape existential terror or flee from the indignities of embodied existence—aging, decay, desire—by putting our heads in the ground, a tactic several of Ratner’s characters pursue literally. DeLillo endorses a non-constructivist view of reality that is grounded in a belief that our increasingly refined systems of signification should never be pursued merely for their own ends. The symbolic or epistemic systems of mathematics and language, imaginative spaces whose history is one in which “nothing happens” (195), nevertheless are bound with the often “unnamable horror” (6-7) of the physical world and its processes of waste and decay. Embracing the uncertainty that is concomitant with embodied existence, the novel suggests, is superior to the sterile algorithms of verification and certainty. Learning to recognize this potentially painful truth while refusing to discount the instrumentality and aesthetic solace of language—mathematical or literary—is the primary lesson the novel imparts.
“Don’t They Teach Ignorance in School Anymore?”

In following Billy Twillig, a learned innocent, the novel presents his encounters with FENO’s adults as a comic series of pedagogical failures. These scenes of instruction typically end in failure because they depend on a rigidly doctrinaire model of knowledge, one predicated on the scientists’ unexamined assumptions of intellectual privilege and disavowals of social responsibility. FENO’s scientists mistakenly believe they can divorce knowledge from its powers of agency in the world outside their cloistered think tank. In this way, the novel not only stages a “darkly ironic reconciliation” of C.P. Snow’s “two cultures” (Cowart 151), but also turns upon an even earlier debate, hearkening back to Plato’s investigation about the relationship between knowledge and virtue. Boxall suggests that Paradise Lost is an important intertext, for in both works the quest for ultimate knowledge of the universe, once fulfilled, results in an impoverishing “dampening of the intellectual spirit” and the realization that “absolute knowledge becomes synonymous with a vast emptiness” (55). However, contrary to the heavenly injunction against forbidden knowledge that this Miltonic allusion suggests, Ratner’s Star does not equate the desire for knowledge itself as inherently “sinful.” The scientists’ ambition is wrongheaded only in that they are ultimately humbled by the greater intelligence of their supposedly primitive forebears, the ones who sent the signal forward as a kind of warning or “wake up call” (Boxall 58) to their future selves, suggesting the novel itself is intended to sound a similar alarm to its readers. As a result, embracing a state of ignorance or confusion can be nutritive in countering the persistent belief, encapsulated in DeLillo’s caricature of the extreme scientific mindset, that absolute knowledge is an attainable goal. DeLillo’s antirealist gamesmanship, and the attendant textual difficulty that risks strewing readers along the margins, is thus not just an elitist
expression of authorial posturing but a way of initiating his reader into the states of misunderstanding and frustration that prefigure awe, which the novel posits is a prerequisite to a more reverent relationship with the world.

In framing its allegory of authorial instruction, the text oscillates between making assertions of “fact” and undermining them with the suggestion of ontological uncertainty typical of antirealist work, such that the reader must cultivate an attitude of skeptical awareness and heightened attention even while trusting in the authority of the narrative voice. The novel begins, in the manner of geometric proofs, with a declaration of epistemological givens, the only things about which one may be certain:

Little Billy Twillig stepped aboard a Sony 747 bound for a distant land. This much is known for certain. He boarded the plane. The plane was a Sony 747, labeled as such, and it was scheduled to arrive at a designated point exactly so many hours after takeoff. This much is subject to verification, pebble-rubbed (khalix, calculus), real as the number one. But ahead was the somnolent horizon, pulsing in the dust and fumes, a fiction whose limits were determined by one’s perspective, not unlike those imaginary quantities (the square root of minus-one, for instance) that lead to fresh dimensions (1).

The opening suggests that, beyond an acknowledgement of certain facts, the adventures to follow are unverifiable and may be comprehensible only in the context of a dream. The passage tantalizingly promises to deliver Billy and the reader to “fresh dimensions” beyond “the somnolent horizon.” The horizon itself is referred to as a “fiction,” one whose somnolence promises to trouble the certainty of lucid wakefulness with the dream logic of continually shifting perspectives. In seeking out meaningful knowledge, both Billy and the
reader must be prepared to trade the safety of the known for the vitalizing possibilities of the undiscovered, and the neutrality of the external observer for the collaborative engagement of the active participant. Such a shift requires one to acknowledge the limited perspectives and barriers to total comprehension that are concordant with embodied existence. Paradoxically, DeLillo suggests that this awareness of perceptual limits may free us from the imaginative and spiritual limitations of a positivist epistemology.

As Michel Serres observes, the trope of the voyage is closely bound up with education: “No learning can avoid the voyage. . . . The voyage of children, that is the naked meaning of the Greek word pedagogy” (8). The aircraft Billy boards suggest his will be a voyage of ascent, in keeping with the cultural assumption that associates progress with an upward climb. Similarly, FENO’s scientists train their gaze upwards, studying the night sky hoping to pinpoint the location of the signal they believe originates from Ratner’s Star. But as the novel soon makes clear, it is the logic of descent that defines the pedagogical journeys its characters must take, a reversal of the teleological, forward-looking logic of science in which more literal descents into the earth—getting one’s perceptual appendages dirty, as it were—are the real instruments of progress. Descent and tunneling are figured, alternately, as both means of archeological investigation and reality-denying attempts at escape. One such formative episode in Billy’s life is an early scene of instruction with his father, “a third-rail inspector in the New York subway system,” who takes him into the subway depths when he is seven years old (4). What begins as an innocuous instance of taking one’s child to work becomes, for Billy, a visceral introduction to the idea that “existence tends to be nourished from below, from the fear level, the plane of awareness, the starkest tract of awareness” (4). On the way home, their train runs “into the rear of a stalled work train,” and Billy turns to
mathematics in this traumatic moment: “just before he started crying, he realized there is at least one prime between a given number and its double” (5). As his physical body is threatened, his flight response takes the form of retreat into compulsive mental tics. Billy learns an instrumental lesson about the omnipresent threat of death and the fundamental instability of the physical world, one which gives rise to his deep distrust of the body’s vulnerabilities. Billy’s desire to ascend to a safer plane of pure intellect eventually leads a classmate to exclaim that Billy is close to becoming “nothing but two eyes and a head” (136). When Billy later overhears his parents arguing about putting the family’s unruly puppy to sleep, he misunderstands, thinking that he is the one being discussed. What follows is a free-indirect transcription of his subsequent frantic thoughts, a sequence which ends with Billy attempting to ward off his panic with a ritual incantation of numbers: “Count to ten count to ten count to ten” (28). Here, Billy’s refuge in cognitive play becomes a learned response to the threat of physical harm, which proves to be a foundational template for the kind of escape methods Billy pursues throughout the novel. Readers seeking similar safety in the assurances of lucid prose and narrative flow are similarly thwarted, but their own parallel recourse to certainty lies in identifying thematic and narrative elements that hold out the promise of providing some structural coherence to DeLillo’s text.

Despite his unusually advanced intellect, the novel’s adults still treat Billy as a child and not as a peer. They feel obligated to interact with him accordingly, offering instruction or advice. On one level, this device allows Billy to serve as stand-in for the reader. Billy’s encounters with the bizarre inhabitants of FENO allow DeLillo to incorporate a shadow history of mathematics into his narrative, with specific characters either acting as avatars of notable mathematicians or articulating their central intellectual contributions. Billy’s
interaction with these adults is often awkward and stilted, a reminder that his precocious intellectual gifts are offset by the universally familiar pangs of adolescence. For Billy, however, this period of transition is even more fraught, as the growing and discomfiting awareness of his body threatens his idealized image of himself as a monad of pure intellect. The conventional trope of the precocious naïf who, like Huckleberry Finn, exposes the ignorance or moral blind spots of the adults around him is undermined, as there are no clear criteria against which we can measure the characters’ fidelity to standards of intellectual rigor or a particular code of ethics, since even their own definitions of knowledge and approaches to scientific inquiry are often wildly incompatible. The novel proffers no unambiguously trustworthy adult sources of authority, and those who do offer Billy potentially valuable insights into the limitations of scientific dogma are usually slandered as disturbed eccentrics by their rivals.

A further impediment to fruitful pedagogic exchanges lies in Billy’s distrust of language, which makes him reluctant to freely enter into the kind of reciprocal student-teacher relationship that has traditionally facilitated maieutic instruction. The novel’s scenes of instruction, such as they are, typically take the form of a call-and-response catechism, during which Billy often dutifully plays his part, acquiescing to what he sees as the adults’ self-indulgent whims. These scenes are empty rituals, rote rehearsals of instruction whose participants remain uncommitted to any values beyond the accumulation of greater stores of information. Billy’s teachers fail to impress upon him an awareness of both the limitations of the intellect and its responsibilities to the external world that Billy would shut out in favour of the spurious sanctuary of the intellect.

A desire to simultaneously genuflect to, and divert attention from, the central mystery
of the signal’s content suggests a shared embarrassment about being understood that links both scientists and the antirealist writer. Attempts to decipher the content of the message being sent from the vicinity of Ratner’s Star are eventually passed over in favour of pursuing the seemingly secondary question of its origins. Mohole reveals that Ratner’s Star is a binary dwarf: since the heat it emits would make any neighbouring planet uninhabitable, the message must have originated from an alternate location. Mohole informs Billy that, in light of this discovery, the emphasis of the investigation has shifted “from the message itself to the primary source of the message” (179). In other words, as Billy asks him, “You want to find out who sent it and from where but not what it says.” Mohole confirms that any inquiry into the signal’s meaning would only “beg” the unwelcome “question of an answer” (185). Furthermore, answers as they pertain to the ultimate significance of scientific inquiry are equally unwelcome.

Even as its characters expound their theories on the beautiful uselessness of imaginary mathematical concepts, *Ratner’s Star* evinces an uneasiness about its own indulgent, hermetic tendencies. The unwelcome spectre of instrumentality constantly threatens to menace the aesthetic self-sufficiency of the kind of mathematics Billy values, as do the self-interested industrialists who are eager to exploit Billy’s intellectual gifts. Billy’s brief encounter with a businessman on his flight to FENO prefigures later, more aggressive attempts by the mysterious industrialist Elux Troxl to stake his claims on the boy’s intellect for commercial gain: both see Billy’s brain as a storehouse of raw data waiting to be harvested. The suited businessman tells Billy that since “there is no commodity we’re shorter of than intellectual know-how,” he is eager to “use you people in my work” (12). Billy clings to his belief in “pure” knowledge, unsullied by the baggage of real-world correlates or
practical applications. While maintaining that “[h]is kind of mathematics was undertaken solely to advance the art,” he allows that “[i]n time to come, of course, what had been pure might finally be applied” (33). That pure knowledge may one day find an application is, for Billy, at best an afterthought, which shows not that he is naive to the fact that knowledge can be applied, but rather to the likelihood that it will be exploited.

Before they can consider these alternate epistemologies, the scientists intend to clarify the fundamental axioms and philosophical bedrocks of their own discipline. To learn something, one must first delimit the sphere of investigation. In *Ratner’s Star*, knowledge itself is taken up as an object of inquiry. The FENO scientist Byron Dunn offers an initial definition of knowledge: “The state or fact of knowing. That which is known. The human sum of known things” (19). This circular, dictionary definition is moot at best: it tells us nothing about the specific nature of this knowledge, nor does it suggest which, if any, of these “known things” is to be valued above others. In its non-specificity, along with its failure to consider the instrumental or ethical dimensions of its subject, Dunn’s definition is similar to Billy’s definition of zorgs: “A zorg is a kind of number. You can’t use zorgs for anything except in mathematics. Zorgs are useless. In other words they don’t apply” (20). Both Dunn and Billy are engaged in a pursuit of knowledge that purports to have explanatory power but is often cordoned off from the world which it describes. These definitions signal, early on, a tension between the pursuit of formal mathematical beauty for its own sake and the notion that it could yield any kind of use value.

“The human sum of known things” (19) must include things that fall outside the purview of science, itself a contested term in the novel. Cyril Kriakos is part of a FENO committee saddled with the task of defining “science,” a project that resists completion, to
say nothing of concision: the committee’s working definition runs to a length of over five hundred pages. At issue is the extent to which the definition of science should include the practices of mystical traditions: “such manifestations as herb concoctions, venerated emblems, sand-painting, legend-telling, ceremonial chants and so on” (30). What grants these occult algorithms provisional legitimacy as scientific endeavours, Kriakos argues, is the systematic nature of their investigative process. Like the scientific method, they too make use of “experimentation, observation, identification. Nature is systematically investigated, its data analyzed and applied” (30). Their shared systematic investigative approaches are, if nothing else, enough to place them on equal planes of legitimacy; science, as a consequence, loses its exclusive claims to explanatory authority. However, not all the denizens of FENO are receptive to embracing mysticism as an alternative epistemological method. Dyne mocks Mrs. Laudabur, a representative of the World Expeditionary Bible Co-Op who has come to hawk her wares in bulk, calling her a “totemist” and “prayer harpy” (21). Later, scientists desperate to make sense of the signal will turn to female mystics who are virtual caricatures of such “prayer harpies.”

Their attempts to define the term “science” suggest the artist’s corresponding struggles to define his own disciplinary boundaries and address the problem of aesthetic purposiveness. For the mathematician LoQuadro, delimiting science’s jurisdiction is a problem that “concerns the true nature of expansion”:

It used to be thought that the work of science would be completed in the very near future. This was, oh, the seventeenth century. It was just a matter of time before all knowledge was integrated and made available, all the inmost secrets pried open. This notion persisted for well over two hundred years. But the
thing continues to expand. It grows and grows. It curls into itself and thence back and then thrusts outward in a new direction. It refuses to be contained. Every time we make a breakthrough we think this is it: the breakthrough. But I think it’s pushing out. It breaks through the breakthrough. (65)

Knowledge of the world is always outpacing our efforts to contain it, for they are “one and the same, after all” (65). This would render teaching redundant, as it posits lived experience in and of the world as superior to curating ever-evolving, increasingly refined descriptions of it.

Dyne tells Billy that FENO’s goal is “the fulfillment of mankind’s oldest dream” of attaining complete knowledge. Knowledge of the universe will lead to knowledge of the self, a reconciliation of “outer and inner space” that both “[bend] into the other” (21). Probing the external world as a means of gaining self-knowledge is unattractive to Billy, if only because he wishes to avoid contending with the knowledge that the self includes a body subject to the indignities of restless desire, physical change, and ultimate decay. Scientists like Dyne pursuing this “dream” of complete knowledge overlook the possibility that, as yet another “somnolent horizon,” it is “a fiction whose limits [are] determined by one’s perspective” (1). In this case, the perspective is one of disinterested mastery which presumes that the intellectual colonization of outer space will lead to a more complete understanding of the self. The mystics would counter that the scientists have mistakenly reversed this investigative relationship. Self-knowledge must come first, including the insight that the division between inner and outer spaces may be an artificial one. Reconciling the two spaces is not required if they have always been entwined.

While its caricatures of non-dualistic thought might disqualify it as a legitimate
method of knowledge-building, the novel’s celebration of the kind of intractable mysteries that evoke awe speaks to mysticism’s superiority, in one sense, to the restrictive version of science depicted throughout. The novel’s courting of possible misunderstandings gestures toward similar evocations of the numinous, and so suggests that mystery and difficulty are intertwined, much like the inner space of subjective consciousness and the outer space of external reality. The only source of the numinous Dyne will brook is the secular mystery of “simple common ordinary whole numbers. How they work, how they interconnect, what they imply, what they’re made of. The tininess of mathematics, that’s another mystery.” Billy disagrees, drawing a distinction between mystery and difficulty. “There’s no mystery,” he says. “When you talk about difficulty, that’s one thing, the difficulty of simple arithmetic. But mystery, forget about, because that’s another subject” (22). Billy believes in the epistemological primacy of mathematics, but is not consciously willing to invest it with a Pythagorean aura of mystery or grant it any independence from the human minds which created it. The viewpoint that Billy subscribes to is given its most succinct statement by UFO Schwarz: “As I understand it, there is no reality more independent of our perception and more true to itself than mathematical reality” (48). Myriad, Cyril’s wife, believes in the “supernatural harmonies” of numbers: “They exist beyond human thought. Divine order through number. Number as absolute reality.” Billy takes the view that numbers are a human invention, not platonic superdivinities: “People invented numbers,” he maintains. “You don’t have numbers without people” (258). Billy has an intuitive understanding that numbers are man made, but the world whose workings they appear to describe with such elegance is independent of our descriptions. Acknowledging this entails a respect for mysteries that lie beyond the readily expressible.
When Cyril suggests that “[n]ourishment comes from unexpected places” (35), another character remarks “I hope it doesn’t mean Eastern mysticism and Western science,” anticipating the reader’s possible objection that the novel might take a predictable turn towards a facile synthesis of seemingly irreconcilable modes of knowledge. However, DeLillo is reluctant to make this syncretic move so easily. Cyril calls the matter a “[q]uestion of perspective,” suggesting that “we’ve got to admit the possibility that what we think of as obscure ritual and superstition may be perfectly legitimate scientific enterprises. Our own view of the past may be the only thing that needs adjusting. . . . Simply admit the possibility. That’s all I say. Primitive kinship systems are not necessarily unscientific” (36). He goes on to posit that “[n]o definition of science is complete without a reference to terror,” which is why the mystical may be a useful additive to the definition of science, as its “point of departure is awareness of death, a phenomenon that doesn’t occur to science except as the ultimate horrifying vision of objective inquiry” (36). Identifying death as the ultimate vision of objective inquiry suggests that life may be equated with a more subjective investigation of the world, an appreciation of the transience of material existence that mysticism takes as its starting point.

Systematic attempts to give expression to the inexpressible will entail some measure of difficulty. Billy is “[n]ever really seized by the need to calculate,” as he is “more apt to be aware of pattern than of brute enumeration” (72). This suggests that Billy has an intuitive understanding of mathematical relationships, and is thus more receptive to an intuitive, mystical understanding of the nature of numbers and of creative inspiration. Consciously, however, Billy has segregated mystery from his understanding of mathematics, believing that it is at least the one area of human enterprise in which the fear of the unknown is not a
permanent threat. Like the fifth century Greeks who, upon discovering that the diagonal of a square could not be expressed in natural numbers “had to confront the terror of the irrational,” Billy is forced to reconsider his beliefs as FENO’s investigations lead away from lucid articulations of scientific certitudes towards, instead, the “[s]creech and claw of the inexpressible” (22). Once again, the fundamentally inexpressible world unseats mathematical language from its vaunted position as queen of the sciences, much as the self-defeating desire towards incomprehensibility threatens to unseat the writer from his own position of mastery.

The novel’s characters struggle with reconciling explanatory symbolic systems with a mysterious natural world, in much the same way that the text cultivates similar confusion by offering glimpses of narrative and structural symmetries that refuse to fully resolve themselves. For the most part, FENO’s scientists believe that the irrational can be subsumed into a coherent vision of an orderly universe that will surrender its secrets only after being subjected to systematic prodding. Olin Nyquist, an astral engineer charged with studying radio signals, believes he can “find the pictorial link between the universe and our own senses of perception” (49). Nyquist believes that deciphering the signal from Ratner’s Star will help them form a pictorial representation of the universe. The inevitability of his project’s likely failure is underscored by the irony that Nyquist is blind. Nevertheless, he believes that “what we need at this stage of our development is an overarching symmetry. Something that constitutes what appears to be—even if it isn’t—a totally harmonious picture of the world system. Our naiveté, if nothing else, demands it. Our childlike trust in structural balance” (49). That the trust is “childlike” suggests that it has the quality of a child’s uncorrupted perception to recommend it. Indeed, if naiveté is to some extent concomitant with awe, the misunderstandings that DeLillo’s text cultivates may temporarily return readers
to this childlike state. Nyquist suggests that a naive state of trust is both perceptually and morally purer than the blasé world-weariness born of experience, and hence able to instinctively perceive the true nature of things without the distorting filters of habit and prejudice that humans accrue as they grow into adulthood. But returning to such a state is impossible without ignoring perceptual evidence that challenges this model of a structured universe. This willful naiveté, a credulous belief in the comfort of symmetries, is dangerously appealing to our innate predilection for seeking pattern, as it distorts the way we apprehend a universe that is characterized by entropy and asymmetry as much as it is by apparent intimations of underlying order. One must, in other words, take the universe as it is, not as one wishes it to be. The novel’s characters enforce their own explanatory regimes at the peril of misinterpreting the givens of embodied experience.

Nyquist acknowledges that looking to structural symmetry as the organizing principle of reality may be a comforting illusion: “there’s always the view that an ultimate symmetry is to be avoided rather than sought, the reason being that this structural balance represents not victory over chaos and death but death itself or what follows upon death” (50). We see such a testimony to the life-affirming nature of asymmetry in Billy’s nightly ritual of jiggling his testicles, an “earnest celebration” of his left testicle’s long-awaited emergence, “not only whole but reassuringly asymmetrical as well, the left drooping a bit lower than the right, as decreed by nature” (38). It is the one occasion where asymmetry is a source of comfort. Billy’s lopsided rhetorical interactions with his adult interlocutors are more typical examples of the novel’s asymmetries. Symmetry and pattern are imposed from without in the way it falls to readers to impose some kind of order on the text if they are to successfully place themselves within its system of didactic exchange.
One of the novel’s central didactic exchanges takes place between Billy and Armand Verbene, a Jesuit entomologist who subscribes to the doctrine that the external world is an imperfect manifestation of a divine ideal. Verbene boasts of the rigorous nature of his investigations and his conviction that studying the secretions of red ants reveals that “pattern, pattern, pattern is the foundational element by which the creatures of the physical world would reveal a perfect working model of the divine ideal” (158-9). He makes Billy repeat answers in the manner of a Jesuitical catechism—”Now can you tell me what it is that serves as the foundational element?” (“Pattern, pattern, pattern”), and “What kind of methods do I use?” (“Strict and empirical.”). Again, Billy is only compelled to cooperate in this game by a vague sense of propriety that demands he at least humour his elders: “I’m only answering you because you’re old. I know I don’t have to answer” (158). Billy’s easygoing pragmatism draws out the idealist Verbene’s commitment to a superficial identification of pattern as a universal structuring principle.

A propensity for pattern-making, however, is arguably as inherent to the way humans interact with the world as it is for the ants. The novel’s scientists and artists, in particular, are eager to attribute great significance to the patterns they identify—but often, it is suggested, for solipsistic or masturbatory reasons, and not in the pursuit of some fundamental truths that might provide either practical use or aesthetic delight. Verbène’s pattern ants serve no clear function: dubbed “the red ants of red ant metaphysics,” they are released from any obligation to the utilitarian (160). The ants are essentially functionless knowledge-workers, analogous to the novel’s scientists. As Osteen observes, the ants are “synecdoches of FENO,” who “self-reflexively create patterns for other ants to follow” (76). In defining himself primarily as a mathematician first and embodied human subject to the whims of somatic existence
second, Billy too asserts that he is “free from subjection to reality, free to impose his ideas and designs on his own test environment” (117). Herein lies the appeal of a platonic realm of pure ideas as an outlet into which Billy’s fears of embodied life may be redirected:

The only valid standard for his work, its critical points (zero or infinity), was the beauty it possessed, the deft strength of his mathematical reasoning. The work’s ultimate value was simply what it revealed about the nature of his intellect. What was at stake, in effect, was his own principle of intelligence or individual consciousness; his identity, in short. This was the infalling trap, the source of art’s private involvement with obsession and despair, neither more nor less than the artist’s self-containment, a mental state that led to storms of overwork and extended stretches of depression, that brought on indifference to life and at times the need to regurgitate it, to seek the level of expelled matter. Of course, the sense at the end of the serious effort, if the end is reached successfully, is one of lyrical exhilaration. There is air to breathe and a place to stand. The work gradually reveals its attachments to the charged particles of other minds, men now historical, the rediscovered dead; to the main structure of mathematical thought; perhaps even to reality itself, the so-called sum of things. It is possible to stand in Time’s Pine wood dust and admire one’s own veronicas and pavanes. (117)

The passage pits a narcissistic view of knowledge—in which the value of intellectual labour is to merely trumpet the (presumably superior) nature and “deft strength” of one’s own intellect—against the “lyrical exhilaration” of contributing to a tradition, of joining a pantheon of the “now historical” but perpetually re-discovered dead. By this logic, the
practice of creating “self-reflexive patterns” for others to follow is common to both the ant-like scientists and the artist. For both, the aesthetic of beauty not only becomes the true measure of the value of one’s work, but directly reinforces the pattern-maker’s identity by asserting the elegant curves and tangents of his intellect. But the primary stance of the passage is indebted to a model of scientific progress as a series of adversarial confrontations with the dead, a view that ignores the potential repercussions the product of one’s scientific or creative labours may have in the world of the living. A banner in one of FENO’s cubicles offers a wry condensation of this ethos of the knowledge-worker and pattern-maker: “BREATHE! GLEAN! VERBALIZE! DIE!” (303). These are the imperatives that guide scientific inquiry as it is practiced in the novel, reducing it to an assembly-line model of knowledge in which the scientist-ants are driven by dumb instinct to “glean and verbalize” their ultimately useless findings in the brief lifespan allotted to them.

DeLillo suggests that both the scientists being parodied and the antirealist novelist may, in stereotypical fashion, be driven by a narcissistic urge to admire the fruits of their own intellects. Beauty, as the only valid standard for their work, exempts it from any instrumental or ethical responsibility. It is here that the figure of the teacher, as one who can counter “the artist’s self-involvement” and occupational “indifference to life,” holds out the promise of reconciling beauty with utility. While such a figure remains conspicuously absent in Ratner’s Star, the text presents us with no shortage of potential candidates.

Billy’s first substantial interaction with a dissenting voice is with Henrik Endor, the once brilliant member of FENO who, having suffered a mental breakdown, now lives in a hole in the desert and subsists on larvae that he digs out of the earth. The exchange between the two reinforces Billy’s fear of the power of language to confuse him and distort his
perception of reality: Endor’s rhetorical felicity threatens to leave his student interlocutor “strewn along the margins” of understanding. Endor’s own marginal fate, however, suggests to Billy that a felicity with language may prove injurious even to those who attempt to harness its power against others. Endor’s squalid appearance, a visible signifier of his shocking fall from intellectual grace, repulses Billy, who remains on guard throughout their conversation, certain that the apparently insane scientist will attempt to drag him into his makeshift warren. He fears the more experienced man’s ability to “set a language trap, using scientific persuasiveness and his knowledge of large words and the spaces between such words” to lure Billy into the earth (86). Billy is wary of logical traps inherent in the nature of language, which is untrustworthy because of its odd admixture of referential malleability and unseemly instrumentality. One cannot disengage words from the daily activities of lived experience as easily as one can with numbers: “Words could not be separated from their use. This fact made logical traps easy to fall into and hard to get out of” (86). The abstractions of mathematics and the kind of metalanguage Softly hopes to engineer are themselves always implicated in a larger narrative. The novel repeatedly draws attention to the fact that writing and mathematics have always been intertwined, that “writing and calculating” are “tablehouses between two rivers” (7). Siba Isten-Esru reminds Billy that numbers as well as names tell stories: “Zahl and tale. One coils continuously into the other. Zahl, tal, talzian, tala, tale. Number, speech, teach, narration, story. Not uninteresting, eh? Whorls of a fingerprint. Convolutions of tree-ring chronology” (156). Endor goes somewhat farther in proclaiming that mathematics is “the only avant-garde remaining in the whole province of art. It’s pure art, lad. Art and science. Art, science and language. Art as much as the art we once called art” (85).
Endor’s desire to equate art with science, however, is problematic. His proclamation of mathematics as the new artistic “avant-garde” suggests either that he is confused about the purview of these once separate spheres of human creativity, or is disregarding them entirely. Endor loosens mathematics’ affiliate ties to practical science and suggests it take on the self-enclosed purposiveness of art. One could offer the corrective argument that art and science both provide views of reality, differing only in their method. However, for Billy, words and numbers remain irreconcilable entities on separate shores. When confronted with the manipulative power of language, Billy retreats to the safety of numbers, as the beauty of their unassailable rationality provides a corrective to the terrifying instabilities inherent in naming. The provisional, unstable nature of language violates the integrity of mathematical operators. Billy sees words as variables that have the ability to change their value mid-way through a linguistic operation, which is an impossible violation of mathematical logic. As a reader himself—of numbers, scientific evidence, and the mysterious social cues of the adult world—Billy fears being left strewn along the margins.

Endor believes that the slide towards pure abstraction has corrupted science, which has abandoned its origins in humankind’s direct engagement with the physical world. He tells Billy that he “didn’t know until recently what it means to be a scientist. It means the opposite of what people believe it to mean. We don’t extend the senses to probe microbe and universe. We deny the senses. We deny the evidence of our senses. A lifetime of such denial is what sends people into larva-eating rages” (87). Endor rejects science in favour of a naive faith in primitive folk explanations of natural phenomena, explanations which are derived from uncritical acceptance of sensory data: “I’m tired of denying such evidence. The earth doesn’t move. It’s the sun that moves around the earth. It’s maggots that are generated spontaneously
in rotten meat. It’s the wind that causes tides” (87). He challenges accepted scientific explanations by raising ludicrously unsophisticated objections and cross-examining them with simplistic childhood logic: “If the earth moved we’d get dizzy and fall off,” he offers. “If the moon and sun cause tides in oceans, why don’t they cause tides in swimming pools and glasses of water?” (79). As compared to the more complex and systematic investigative rational of the scientific method, Endor’s appeal to folk wisdom and childish logic will naturally be found wanting in terms of being able to yield a consensus of understanding. But the value of his unconventional didactic approach lies in challenging the sway towards “pure abstraction” that hobble both scientific and artistic efforts.

A self-proclaimed “genius” may readily lay claim to a didactic authority that licenses showy displays of erudition, cultivating a difficult mode of expression in the service of educating his audience. DeLillo’s own text is aware that it often comes close to embracing this attitude in its cultivation of an authorial ethic willing to strew readers along the margins in order to fulfill its own aesthetic ends, even if this strategy is incompatible with reclaiming the mantle of didactic usefulness. As a means of exploring this tension, Endor’s views are pitted against those of Timor Nut, a spokesperson for the scientific establishment who, recognizing Billy as a fellow mathematical genius, grandiosely describes the two of them as “colossi” “bestriding the mathematical firmament,” their “combined genius beggar[ing] everything, including description” (122). Nut challenges Billy to a battle of mathematical wits in the elevator, encouraging Billy to consider “layers of meaning” when giving his answers to Nut’s suspiciously easy questions (“Using no more than one hyphen, how would you characterize a geometry that is not Euclidean”? A: “Non-Euclidean.”) But Billy is thrown off balance by the question “Do your dreams exceed your grasp?” (125). Nut asserts
that if they do not, “all human life is futile,” and that “There is no future unless this is so” (125). Despite Nut’s delusional sense of importance, he espouses the humanistic view that values the pursuit of knowledge as its own good. His meeting with Nut allows Billy to indulge in a daydream about a future that corresponds to Nut’s self-aggrandizing view of the man of science, imagining, in an “interlude of austere self-veneration,” an older version of himself working diligently in a spartan room (127). The dangers of isolation for both the man of science and the writer are clear: scholarship and creativity require the long stretches of isolation necessary for insight to develop, but luxuriating in “austere self-veneration” will threaten to remove one’s work from meaningful interaction with the world outside the scholar’s hermitage. Envisioning the writer as teacher, then, is an imperfect but necessary reconfiguration of the relationship between author and audience that asserts the importance of the world to the text.

Nut sees scientific inquiry as a series of antagonistic intellectual encounters that, nevertheless, are ultimately collaborative in that they provide incremental additions to the storehouse of human knowledge. This traditional view, however, is challenged by Endor, for whom the history of science is not an infinite regress of great thinkers standing on the shoulders of their giant predecessors, but an “effete” narrative of patricidal negation:

The history of science is crosshatched with lines of additive and corrective thought. This is how we try to arrive at the truth. Truth accumulates. It can be borrowed and paid back. We correct our predecessors, an effete form of assassination, and then we wait either in this life or the next for the corrective dagger to be slipped twixt our own meatless ribs. Here it comes, zip, the end of an entire cosmology. (193)
The kind of truth arrived at through the accumulative and self-correcting scientific method is recast in monetary terms as a placeholder in an economy of exchange whose ethos of self-aggrandizement is at odds with a spirit of genuine inquiry. In opposition to models and theorems that can be revised or discarded based on fresh evidence, Endor urges Billy to “[n]ever dismiss the intuition of the ancients, who believe that number is the essence of all things.”

The whole history of mathematics is subterranean, taking place beneath history itself, misunderstood, ignored, ridiculed, unread, a shadow-world scarcely perceived even by the learned. Of adventure, greatness, insanity and suicide, it is nevertheless a history of nothing happening. Of nothing happening. . . . Statements are proved to be neither provable nor disprovable. Nothing has happened, yet everything is changed. Existence would be sheer dread without the verifiable fictions of mathematics. (195)

While mathematics, like poetry, may make nothing happen, Billy remains convinced that language inspires more dread than it can dispel. The novel’s flashbacks to Billy’s childhood in the Bronx depict him, even then, associating speech with danger and mystery. In the overheard school bus chatter of his classmates, Billy detects “an intricate knowingness to the voices, the ever tensile quality of street experience, something old and secret, possibly dangerous to hear” (135). DeLillo’s characteristic penchant for luxuriating in specialized jargon is balanced against his avowed commitment to eschew thinking of language in purely theoretical terms and instead, as he says in an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, “approach it at street level” (61). Street smarts are garnered though experience, a willingness to dirty one’s hands by engaging with the world that Endor, madly clawing tunnels in his hole, so
literally, if so fruitlessly, demonstrates. His apparent madness, though, made manifest in his squalid grub-eating appearance and disavowal of scientific rationale, doubly disqualifies him as a potential mentor for Billy.

The dangers of making oneself understood—to the outside world, or to the uninitiated layman—are associated with DeLillo’s ambivalence about adopting a more didactic authorial role. At one point, Billy finds himself reluctant to tell his colleague Hong Ting Toy that his pants are on fire, another comic manifestation of his fear of the effects language might have on the world:

Billy wondered whether it was all right to tell him. He didn't understand his own hesitation. Why wouldn't it be all right? Of course it was all right. It was his duty to say something. Nevertheless he stood there watching the tiny fire. Sometimes it was hard to say things. Things were so complicated. People might resent what you said. They might use your remarks against them. They might be indifferent to your remarks. They might take you seriously and act upon your words, actually do something. They might not even hear you, which perhaps was the only thing worth hoping for. But it was more complicated than that. The sheer effort of speaking. Easier to stay apart, leave things as they are, avoid responsibility for reflecting the world in all its great weight. (141)

The kind of textual play Ratner’s Star engages in is frequently at odds with the novelist’s desire to make himself understood. Far easier, then, for the writer to justify a retreat into self-enclosed antiworlds in order to avoid the responsibility that comes with the “sheer effort of speaking,” let alone speaking from a position of didactic authority. Even as Ratner’s Star
acknowledges the appeal of ludic difficulty as a safeguard against external constraints on creative or intellectual expression, the failures of its likeminded scientists suggest this tactic is unsustainable, as the irruption of the “world in all its great weight” insists on poking holes in FENO’s hermetic enclosure.

Billy’s encounter with Ratner is key to the novel’s reconfiguration of the didactic relationship because it introduces him to the mysticism that will slowly begin to inform his perspective in the second half of the novel, when he begins to work more closely with Robert Softly. In turning to the figure of Shazar Ratner, the novel’s Pythagorean avatar, DeLillo forwards an alternative hermeneutics that draws nourishment from the mystical and the occult, while simultaneously winking at their more outré manifestations. The Pythagorean Ratner serves as “the crucial meeting point of concrete experience and abstract speculation, precision and mystery, rationality and irrationality, science and religion” (LeClair 126), and counsels Billy to couple knowledge with piety. In this sense, Ratner encourages Billy to preserve the mystery of numbers and language, and gives both the child prodigy and readers of the novel permission to rest in the aura of “not-knowing” when confronted with a world that refuses to be quantified, dissected, and preserved in bloodless mathematical symbols.

Pitkin, Ratner’s priest-like spiritual advisor and custodian of a vaguely Kabbalistic set of “mystical writings” (205), prepares Billy for their encounter. Billy is to present a bouquet of roses to Ratner, the guest of honour at a formal procession recognizing FENO’s sizeable contingent of Nobel laureates. Ratner has made the unusual request of a private audience with Billy; the boy’s youth alone argues for the special privilege. Ratner’s desiccated body has left him too weakened to speak in public—or, given that he has grown “world-weary” and “turned his back on science,” is now unwilling to speak to former peers who still
subscribe to an epistemological framework he has tested and found wanting (206). Pitnik feels that Billy is unworthy of the honour, an insolent “peewee quiz kid” who needs to “learn some awe and fear,” a mantra which he makes Billy dutifully repeat (207). Though Billy is already intimately familiar with fear, what remains for him to learn is an attitude of awe, as Ratner will remind him when he returns to this noun in his speech to the boy.

Ratner forces Billy to confront at last his terror of the corporeal. He is the figure best equipped to do so, if only by virtue of his comically extreme bodily decrepitude. Billy, who is to present Ratner with a bouquet of roses, must sit on the “massive transparent tank” (213) that serves as his life-support system. Ratner, not unexpectedly, greets the boy with a question: “The universe, what is it?” (217). Ratner wants Billy to climb into the tank so he can whisper some words to him, urging him to get over his fear: “We’re all scared. . . . Who isn’t scared? You, me, the laureates. Terror is everywhere” (227). As in his encounter with Endor, Billy fears being dragged down into Ratner’s capsule and coming face-to-maw with the disintegrating body within. Ratner’s state of decomposition is such that his face requires regular injections of silicone to retain a semblance of its human shape, without which it threatens to collapse into another terrifying black hole for Billy to fall into. Billy’s fear of subterranean descent is here coupled with his terror of the corruptible body.

Ratner recalls his boyhood explorations of the night sky with a secondhand telescope, and how the knowledge he gained “made [him] punch [his] fists against the walls in awe and shame” (218). His father-in-law inducts him into mystical beliefs, from which he learns that “all things are present in all other things. Each in its opposite” (219). Billy, who was an incubator baby, shares with Ratner the experience of having lived in a tank. “Infancy,” says Ratner, is “the only nonmystical state where the opposites are joined.” Ratner claims he was
being “punished for knowledge without piety,” at which point the catechism is reversed, Ratner asking Billy to quiz him on the nature of opposites in order to “test [his] fading powers” (224).

Billy’s distrust of language reasserts itself as he anxiously waits to be summoned to the stage, fearing that “[t]he calling of his name might pre-empt him” (229). The ceremony reminds Billy that “to bear a name is both terrible and necessary. The child, emerging from the space-filling chaos of names, comes eventually to see that an escape from verbal designation is never complete, never more than a delay in meeting one’s substitute, that alphabetic shadow abstracted from its physical source” (19). Indeed, Ratner is able to divine the sense that Billy is somehow incomplete, telling the boy that he reminds him of a Golem, “an artificial person.” He goes on to explain that “[t]he first man was a golem before he gave names to things. . . . He was unformed matter waiting for a soul” (227). Ratner, in accordance with his pseudo-Kabbalistic beliefs, invests naming with great power, ascribing to it the power to invest the namer with a soul. One is no longer “unformed matter” once one uses language to give names to the constituents of the external world. Naming in this sense is a self-constituting act: one is shaped as much as one shapes. Ratner hopes to have some share in shaping Billy, but his warnings to the boy about his incomplete nature go unheeded. Billy remains, as he was with Endor, too repulsed by Ratner’s decrepit form to award his oracular ideas the weight of authority. However, Ratner manages to plant a seed of doubt about the explanatory inadequacies of symbolic language—alphabetic shadows—abstracted from their sequestered material sources.

In the second part of the novel, “Reflections,” Billy is invited to join a smaller, more exclusive research project, led by the man he looks to as a mathematical mentor, Robert
Softly. The new team will work to develop Logicon, “a logistic cosmic language based on mathematical principles,” an objective necessitated by Softly’s realization that, in the face of the signal’s unwillingness to surrender its secrets to their investigative attack, they now “have to seek a level deeper than pure number” (273). This “trans-galactic language” will be a piece of “[p]ure and perfect mathematical logic” with which they will at last be able to speak to the universe (274). Logicon seems to hold out the promise of stripping language of what, for Billy, are its frightening ambiguities. The project’s failure and the diminishment of Softly as a role model set Billy free to embark on a voyage of a self-education, a way of learning that is not predicated or dependent on either catechistic dynamics of rote indoctrination or the unquestioning acceptance of oracular pronouncements.

Prior to constructing Logicon, Softly declares that they will need to “submit our mathematics . . . to a searching self-examination”:

In the process we will discover what's true and what's false not only in the work before us but in the very structure of our reasoning. There's been no concerted attempt to limit slackness and ambiguity from the work you've done up to now. I got news for you, mister. The goddamn fun is over. (275)

Softly would deny the importance of play to both learning and discovery, to the detriment of both. The “slackness and ambiguity” he would excise from Billy’s work is necessary because ambiguity is what allows one the kind of intellectual wriggle room to allow for surprising new discoveries and the overthrow of long-standing intellectual dogmas. Precision needn’t entail the loss of imaginative flexibility upon which true scientific innovation is predicated. As in DeLillo’s fiction itself, intellectual rigor and ambiguity work in tandem to foster a productive confusion.
In recognition of the historic nature of this enterprise, Softly grants the writer Jean Venable access to FENO and its inhabitants so that she can gather material for a book about the LOGICON project. Her previous titles include *Eminent Stammerers*, and the *Gobbledygook Cook Book* (296), suggesting an expert familiarity with the kind of slackness in language Softly would eliminate from his system. As it happens, Softly has only allowed her free access to interview his researchers because he is determined to ensure that any resulting book will, like Billy’s zorgs, be “serviceably useless” (304). Venable’s primary role is instead to serve as Softly’s lover. “Reflections” includes a number of impressionistic descriptions of Robert Softly and Jean Venable making love, and a voyeuristic Billy’s attempts to make sense of them. Billy’s earlier furtive attempts to steal illicit glances at women of FENO in various states of undress were expressed in the idealized vocabulary of mathematics, one that allows him to frame his desire for the bathing Una Braun as “what Euclid might have danced to in the summer dark” (41). The exertions of Softly and Jean, however, prove more difficult for Billy to understand in his own familiar terms. Billy interprets the sounds of Softly and Jean’s lovemaking as "fabricated babble.” Their cries are “terrible for Billy to hear” because he associates them not with pleasure but “rather with an obliterati**on** of self-control and the onset of an emotional state that bordered on prophetic frenzy” (320). The adults speak a xenographic language that does not accord with what Billy understands to be the operations of scientific thought, thus rendering the spectacle of their lovemaking a “lesson” he is incapable of learning:

There was no sequential meaning to this, no real process of thought and repetition. The sex act did not have organized content. It was unrelated to past and future time. It was essentially unteachable. It did not represent anything or
lead necessarily to a conclusion, a sum, a recognition that someone or something has been part of a structured event. No one could’ve made this up if it hadn't actually been known to occur, whatever it was, whatever the body's need for this brief laboring void. (320)

For Billy, explanations of the more mysterious mechanics of life—those relating to birth and death—lack some unidentifiable element of the incantatory and ritual. The mechanisms of human reproduction as he has been led to understand them strike him as utterly too simplistic and pedestrian: “Ovulation, intercourse, fertilization, pregnancy, labor, delivery. It can’t be that simple. There must be more they aren’t telling us, a circling bird, a dream, a number whispered in the night” (74). He longs, then, for an explanation, for some instruction that will initiate him into the mysteries behind the too-obvious mechanics of reproduction. He wants to find a mystical, purifying element to redeem the act of lovemaking from the brute mechanics of the body, by whose workings he is both repulsed and fascinated.

The novel’s strongest rebuke to the bloodless ideal of disembodied knowledge comes together in the late “system interbreak” passage, which addresses an unspecified “you,” likely the ancient civilization responsible for sending forward the novel’s mysterious signal. The passage follows the eclipse’s path across the Asian continent, turning to the novel’s most specific vivid exhortation to move beyond “the theoretical ideal of n-space” (433) to “external reality” as it moves through a series of images of poverty, squalor, and human suffering: “children being sold in Madhya Pradesh, eating rats to live” and “old men in loincloths collecting the dust of a cycle rickshaw” (429). The “system interbreak” “warns the reader that mathematics—as well as other kinds of abstraction or transcendence, including fiction—can remove man from his ‘standing in the biosphere’ (307) and his responsibility to
the ecosystem” (LeClair 133). In this respect both science and fiction must maintain a scrupulous awareness of their potential effects upon, and responsibility to, the so-called real world.

The nature of existence the passage depicts is grim. Here, the repeated references to “human experience” are associated with death and suffering: “People surround the outdoor kitchens waiting for the gruel and milk, eating grass to live, bodies of the starved abandoned on tiled verandas, human experience, electric fan moving air across a room adorned with flapping pictures of the gods” (430); “Tourists photograph the corpses, human experience, scheduled collections made of bodies in the street” (433). The passage’s addressees are reminded that they found it necessary to abandon their “outgrown frame of logic and language,” a result of “having dismantled the handiwork of [our] own perceptions in order to solve reality” (431). One must, instead, acknowledge the unsolvable nature of an external reality in which suffering exists alongside mathematics: the text implores us to recognize that both undergird the nature of experience. Only in recognizing this can one begin to “perceive completely”:

You see the itinerant mystic’s dinner plate with its orderly dole of almonds, the real world, this man of sect marks and open sores. A student sits on a pallet repeating phrases from a textbook, his voice half prayerful with drowsiness, as everywhere, mathematics coinciding with the will to live. In cities built, the T-squared temporary cantonment, the practical means to survive, in oceans crossed (he reads) it is mathematics that makes the way for the whittler’s sleight, gives directional reference to the man at the bridge rail adjusting a small-boned instrument of navigation. At the contact line of nature
and mathematics thought is where things make sense, things accede to our view of them, things return to us in a propagating wave of reason. (431)

This, one of the novel’s most explicitly didactic addresses to the reader, is a call to attend to “the everydayness of the absolute”: only in “implicat[ing] ourselves in endless uncertainty” can we “experience once again some of the richness of inborn limits” (432-3). The passage celebrates mathematics and its embraidedness with the things we build, with use value, rebuking Softly and company with its vision of the union of the mystic and the student.

Softly’s rejection of inborn limits marks him, in a sense, as the ideal recipient of the signal’s message. Its correct prediction of the unanticipated solar eclipse disturbs Softly’s convictions about the rigors of scientific inquiry, stripping him of some fundamental faith: “It wasn’t his logic that had broken apart, or the world itself, but something more essential to the spiritual fact that bracketed his existence” (435). In a last-ditch effort to re-bracket his existence, Softly halfheartedly tries to convince himself that “we continue to lack basic evidence that an eclipse is indeed taking place. With no simple rigid structure of judgmental data, we can’t be sure it won’t turn out in the end to be nothing more than rumor.” He, or the text, immediately recognizes this for the delusion that it is with the refrain from Billy’s childhood: “Keep believing it, shit-for-brains” (435-6).

Desperately trying to escape facing the consequences of this blindsiding new paradigm, he claws his way deeper into Endor’s hole, following the example of the ancient Mesopotamians, who “translated the [celestial] event into the sweating arcs of their own bodies, perhaps trying to act beyond their fear, inventing games to fill the crevice in the heavens” (436). In choosing to escape the evidence of his own senses, to avoid acknowledging the failure of his epistemological paradigm, he literally buries his head in the
sand. Softly and Endor end up sharing the same hole, a fruitless attempt at escaping a reality that has refused to accommodate their best efforts to tame it through systematic description. The novel’s final tableau is certainly bleak if the shadow of the eclipse that pursues Billy betokens the drawing of apocalyptic night. The ambiguous final image contains its own opposites: Billy racing his tricycle through the “reproductive dust of existence” as both flight from the terrifying irrational and triumphant rush towards a new epistemological dispensation, a vivid example of FENO physicist Melcher’s hypothesized state of “frightening imminence” (197). The systems interbreak passage, as the most explicitly didactic of the novel, serves as a kind of corrective for FENO’s misguided epistemological frameworks. It reminds its double audience—both FENO’s inhabitants and DeLillo’s readers—that experience, particularly the experience of suffering, is a more valuable source of knowledge than the antiseptic parcels of information yielded by pure reason.

To the extent that it may guide both Billy and the reader to this conclusion, DeLillo’s text is not purely adversarial, nor designed only to strew the unworthy along its margins. As DeLillo tells LeClair, “no matter how pure [a writer’s] work is, it has to be responsive to the real world, one way or another, in order to keep its vitality and to cleanse itself of effeteness and self-absorption” (“An Interview” 89). As a purely self-enclosed aesthetic artifact, an edifice of self-sustaining patterns, fiction may be inviolate, but, like a catalyst, it can effect a change in the larger epistemological ecosystem in which it is a participant. In this way, by implicating its readers in the sort of endless uncertainty it describes, verifiable fictions like Ratner’s Star may impart the “imaginary quantities…that lead to fresh dimensions” (1).
“Hate,” says William Kohler, the narrator of William Gass’s *The Tunnel*, “has given force and purpose to my life. I’ve studied it. It’s studied me. . . Love, when it’s been permitted me, has nearly destroyed it, with visions, like a slut, of what might be” (41-55). Early critical responses to Gass’s novel were characterized along similarly visceral polarities of love and hate. The *LA Times* effusively described *The Tunnel* as “the most beautiful, most complex, most disturbing novel to be published” in the reviewer’s lifetime (Silverblatt). Conversely, another reader found it “a bloated monster of a book,” its provocative formal excesses “a consequence of sheer adipose verbosity and an unremitting condition of moral and intellectual flatulence” (Alter 29). *The Tunnel* invited such polarizing reactions in part because, after sporadic appearances in excerpt form over a period of thirty years, its publication in 1995 was attended with the sense, encouraged by Gass himself, that it was the work on which he wished to stake his literary reputation.

By this point in his career, Gass had already established a reputation as perhaps the most committed spokesperson for a purely “art for art’s sake” aesthetic in contemporary American letters. Gass’s own aesthetic theory, which he began to elaborate in the early essay collections *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1970) and *The World Within the Word* (1978), asserts that fiction is a self-enclosed formal structure that has no responsibility to reflect on the extra-textual world. He rejects the often under-examined assumption, itself a holdover of the conventions of the realist novel, that fiction must remain engaged with the external world by, for instance, explicitly addressing itself to timeless ethical concerns, proposing by way of
illustration how one might best live (or, by offering cautionary examples, how not to live). Literature, according to Gass, is a manifestly aesthetic pursuit that is accountable only to itself and the extent to which it is consonant with its rhetorical aims and internal harmonies. Any cognitive gains afforded the reader from his engagement with a literary text will pertain only to the formal qualities of the work itself. Gass explains in an interview with G.A.M. Janssens: “For me the only thing that the writer can discover is things about the art itself. . . . What you indeed discover in reading a book, I think, is basically what the art is, what the art can do about itself” (“An Interview” 59). In this sense, Gass often acts as a provocateur, obliging his readers to contend with the consequences of a theory of fiction which denies that fiction can have cognitive value. For Gass, the idea that one can learn things about the external world from a fictional narrative is self-evidently absurd, as is the expectation that a novel may somehow work to modify a reader’s knowledge, conduct, or moral disposition. “[A]rt,” Gass asserts, “is not a medicine and it teaches nothing” (Fiction and the Figures of Life 274). Furthermore, the answer to the question of fiction’s potential cognitive value is plain, as he tells Jan Garden Castro: “I don’t believe in the novel that teaches” (“An Interview” 71).

The Tunnel’s narrator is William Kohler, a Midwestern professor of history who has just completed the manuscript of his scholarly magnum opus entitled Guilt and Innocence in Hitler’s Germany. (The fact that Kohler and Gass share many biographical details suggests a convergence of intention of the part of the author and his character, though Gass has alluded to highlighting these biographical similarities as a means of flushing out less sophisticated readers). Kohler has a reputation as something of a Nazi apologist—he makes reference to an early book on the Nuremberg Trials that was greeted with some suspicion in the academic
community. The novel’s central conceit is that Kohler, attempting (and failing) to write the introduction to his book, turns instead to writing the autobiographical pages that comprise the text Gass’s readers now have before them. These pages have, we learn, been slipped in between the pages of Kohler’s scholarly manuscript. At one point, Kohler reveals that he may or may not have begun to secretly dig a tunnel underneath his house. In addition to this intermingling of two modes of knowledge production—the objective and historical mode which presumably structures Guilt and Innocence in Hitler’s Germany, and the subjective personal mode which characterizes the outpourings of that monograph’s shadow narrative—Kohler uses (the possible fantasy of) physical labour to supplant the life of the mind, the “print and paper-jacket life” which had come with its own occupational hazards: “After twenty-one years of talk, and tests... I have black lung, too” (41). Kohler imagines addressing an audience for whom his prurient fantasies and bigoted manifestos may be instructive, discouraging them from enlisting in what he dubs The Party of Disappointed People, which is comprised of those who have allowed the alluring power of rhetoric to divorce them from reality’s richer spheres of moral and aesthetic education.

The long-anticipated appearance of The Tunnel, seen by some critics as a tedious compendium of forty years of self-indulgent and outworn postmodern experimentation, closely coincided with yet another debate about the future of the contemporary novel. Deliberations on choosing a winner for 1997’s National Book Critics’ Circle Award for Fiction became, according to one of its judges, “an unwitting referendum on modernism” (Steiner 192). At issue was a rethinking of the viability—or desirability—of what Wendy Steiner describes as our avant-garde aesthetic inheritance. Steiner argues that, after having been shattered by the brutality of two world wars and the subsequent loss of stable
touchstones of meaning, artists in the modernist vanguard set out to march the public on relentlessly bleak tours through the social and cultural rubble of the twentieth century.

The avant-garde gave us wasteland works—the pained, nihilistic masterpieces of modernism and of postmodernism, too. Their extraordinary length is a sign of their life-rivaling scope; their difficulty is an initiation rite so demanding that the investment approaches that for living itself…The pleasure of such art is Sisyphean—the cold triumph of understanding devastation. (Steiner 193)

Steiner could easily be describing Gass’s recent novel. If The Tunnel is indeed “modernism's last gasp, and way too late” (Wolcott), its death rattle emphatically marks the obsolescence of the encyclopedic novel characterized by excess and difficulty. In place of the punishing pleasures of the wasteland work, Steiner calls on novelists to once more cultivate beauty in their writing. This virtue alone, she argues, can provide a much-needed corrective to nearly eighty years worth of punishing modernist (and postmodernist) pessimism.

While its extraordinary length may alone serve as the kind of demanding initiation rite Steiner describes, The Tunnel fails to deliver any triumphant understanding about devastation to either its readers or its narrator, save perhaps that it is the condition to which both the external world and the individual soul inevitably revert. Can there, then, be any rewards on offer for a reading of Gass’s wasteland work? Readers may be disappointed by The Tunnel’s failure to deliver cognitive or emotional rewards commensurate with the effort required to finish it. What could one hope to garner from a novel that makes such demands upon one’s time, attention, and ethical constitution? Can the kind of hatred for which The Tunnel serves as a particularly comprehensive repository only endorse falsehoods and bigotry? Gass suggests that the value of his narrator’s protracted philippics lies less in their
ideational content than in their demonstration of hatred’s highly charged pedagogical capacity, informed by what Colin McGinn identifies as the affinity between cruelty and rhetorical persuasion: “Sadism, seduction, and persuasion thus share a common abstract structure. They each involve power over the values of another person” (McGinn 78). Both Gass and Kohler (or Gass-as-Kohler) use their formidable linguistic talents to elicit readers’ sympathies, to persuade them to acquiesce, even if momentarily, to ideas many might otherwise find repellent. The Tunnel is less concerned with casting a heroic aura on a small-minded bigot than exploring the mechanisms by which any reader is brought around to new ways of thinking or transformed by the spell that fiction casts. In this sense, Gass employs the persuasive allure of cruel rhetoric to illustrate the didactic power that may be wielded by even the most doctrinaire literary aesthete. Whether or not he or she chooses to exercise it is another matter; in The Tunnel, it is a decision which Gass, contra his rejection of “the novel that teaches,” approaches with greater ambivalence than might be expected.

Although much of Gass’s fiction adheres to quintessentially postmodern views on the nature of authorship, his approach falls somewhere between that of the modernist arrangers, who synthesize vast swaths of knowledge and human experience, and that of the antirealists who insist, at times tediously, on foregrounding the opacity of the written word and the cardboard nature of fictional character. Certainly Gass, in his characteristically “confrontational” mode (Holloway 14), has railed against the ascendancy of psychological realism as one of the de facto protocols structuring both modern fiction and populist discourses about it. Yet in The Tunnel’s lengthy exhumation of a history professor’s sordid inner life, Gass’s earlier pronouncements about the didactic impotence of art are challenged by the novel’s mobilization of a seemingly contradictory agenda, in which soliciting the
reader’s empathy for a hateful narrator is put in the service of teaching uncomfortable lessons. Gass marries beautiful writing with hateful sentiments in order to evoke a response from readers that they may carry into their extra-textual lives.

Even before *The Tunnel*’s publication, incongruities were emerging between Gass’s pronouncements about the role of fiction and the actual aim of his work, a novel which is often more than the sum of its shopworn postmodern tropes. Arthur Saltzman, for example, maintains that “Even though he is a consummate stylist, Gass still redeems his work from the narrowness of style for style’s sake” (21), while John Unsworth suggests that “there is at least one sense. . .in which it would be accurate to associate Gass with realist practices of representation: Gass’s fiction not only refers to but actually relies on the extratextual reality of his theory, to an even greater degree than Gass himself admits.” *The Tunnel*’s apparent reversion to antirealist excess and its seemingly cavalier treatment of the extratextual realities to which it attends—among them racism, misogyny, and the Holocaust—may test any attempts to rehabilitate Gass’s image as a programmatic adherent to nihilistic postmodern gamesmanship. Saltzman and Unsworth are both correct in identifying Gass’s ambivalence in putting his theoretical stance about fiction into practice. However, I argue that this novel, the first-person confessional of a narrator who, like Gass himself, is a college professor, is concerned with more than just instructing us in its own rhetorical modes. On one hand, *The Tunnel* is a text that ostentatiously demonstrates Gass’s belief in the fundamental pleasures of playing with words. To be sure, in addressing the conflict between representation and reality, Gass’s critical work has solidly taken the side of the former, maintaining that fiction should be unencumbered by the need to accurately “represent” anything external to its hermetic confines. A self-proclaimed stylist, Gass has been vocal in his insistence that the true subject
of *The Tunnel*—and indeed the bulk of his oeuvre—is rhetoric, telling Tom LeClair: “it’s rhetoric the book is about, and the title is about rhetoric, too. It's more completely, more single-mindedly about rhetoric, about the movement of language and the beauty and terror of great speech” (“Interview” 172). But, as Saltzman also points out, this single-minded focus on rhetorical play is what makes Gass’s novel discomfiting to so many:

> Do *The Tunnel*’s sexual perversities and scatological obsessions, its typographical acrobatics and irrepressible wordplay, not to mention its many limericks composed on the tortured, in any sense redeem the moral sensibilities that have been raped by the Holocaust? Or is the author just raiding the graveyard for skulls to juggle?” (“Avid Monsters” 242)

Even if Gass’s formidable linguistic virtuosity were to justify his indecorous appropriation of traumatic history, the novel suggests that the “beauty and terror of great speech” alone are insufficient to give shape to either one’s life or one’s art if left unguided by the lodestar of didactic intent. The novelist and the teacher alike share the ability to not only marshal facts into a meaningful order, but to chaperone their respective auditors towards adopting a particular set of attitudes about these facts. In suggesting that hatred may be an underexplored resource for heightening one’s “awed appreciation of complexity” (423), *The Tunnel* evinces a didactic undercurrent in spite of both Gass and Kohler’s disavowal of any pedagogical intentions.

In discussing his aims for *The Tunnel*, Gass claimed that his “point of view in writing this book is less detached [. . .] than normal,” acknowledging to LeClair his greater investment in the effect his fiction has on its readers than his disinterested aestheticism would typically allow (“Interview” 170). This heightened investment is related to his stated aim of
eliciting readers’ empathy for an unapologetically bigoted narrator who holds forth on a number of highly charged topics, most notably the Holocaust:

I am deliberately taking on a subject that is highly charged—none more so, really—and one which has a lot of referential meaning. The challenge is to disarm that subject, to tame it, make it purr . . . Once I get the reader captured in the book, I really want to do things to him. Still, I can entice them in like a horror. And I hope to write about certain kinds of objectionable attitudes and feelings in such a way that the reader will accept them, will have them, while he's reading. In that sense the book is a progressive indictment of the reader, if it works . . . I want to get the reader to say yes to Kohler, although Kohler is a monster. That means that every reader in that moment has admitted to monstrousness. So my point of view in writing this book is less detached for me than normal. It does involve the manipulation of the reader, and I am not sure about it. Well, not exactly the manipulation of the reader, either. I want to give grandeur to a shit. (“Interview” 170)

Here, Gass sounds more interested in manipulating the reader into admitting to a shared monstrousness than he is in instructing them about the evils—or advantages—of the objectionable attitudes his narrator harbours. Both Gass and his narrator harbor misgivings about the role of the didactic in their respective work. The Tunnel serves as Kohler’s extended proclamation of his exhaustion and disillusionment with the intellectual labour that has structured his scholarly life, including the practice of teaching. Kohler is exhausted by the backbiting politics of the history department to which he belongs and filled with doubt about the relevance of the monograph he has produced, convinced his imposition of a
restrictive linear narrative on the senseless and disturbing facts of the Holocaust have necessarily diminished them. Despite Kohler’s cynicism about what goes on in the classroom and Gass’s own avowals to the contrary, *The Tunnel* remains didactic in its effects, even as it repeatedly demonstrates the failure of a certain kind of educational project. Kohler, like Gass, is reluctant to consign knowledge to the assortment of passive concepts that defines the members of Kohler’s imaginary Party of Disappointed People. “Three spaces matter in my life,” Kohler asserts; “they are my Trinity: the pane of the window, the white of the page, and the black of the board” (311). This trinity suggests *The Tunnel*’s competing perspectives on the role of fiction: as a window to the real world, a playground for language, or a space in which representation and pure invention may be brought together in the service of teaching. In *The Tunnel*, Gass conducts a test of the artificer’s ability to teach in spite of his strong renunciation of pedagogical agency.

Kohler’s own didacticism is meant to convince us of the veracity of his bitter views. As Noel Carroll points out, most didactic underpinnings of literary narrative are moralizing in character:

> Typically, the purpose of a narrative artwork is to absorb the reader, viewer, or listener. However, frequently the narrative may bequeath moral leaning to the audience while in pursuit of its goal of riveting audience attention and making the audience care about what happens next, by means of enlisting our moral understanding and emotions. That is, what the author explicitly seeks is to engage the audience. And engaging the audience’s moral understanding may be a means to an end. (“Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding” 154). Enlisting the audience’s moral understanding can be difficult when, as in *The Tunnel*, the
text’s sole narrating consciousness espouses sentiments ranging from the mildly distasteful to the outright reprehensible. This project is more difficult still when Kohler’s invective is often phrased so beautifully. Gass here attempts to uncouple the potential use value of literature from outright moralizing. In particular, an affiliation between fine rhetoric and fine feeling is one that Gass and other members of his metafictional cohort have attempted to shake off. In an essay entitled “On Paraguay,” Donald Barthelme explains how his distinctive style arises from his unintuitive desire to write “the ugly sentence”:

> Every writer in the country can write a beautiful sentence, or a hundred. What I am interested in is the ugly sentence that is also somehow beautiful. I agree that this is a highly specialized enterprise, akin to the manufacture of merkins, say—but it’s what I do. Probably I have missed the point of the literature business entirely. (57)

In Barthelme’s fiction, the banal and the pedestrian are aestheticized by placing them in the literary context of one of his distinctively “ugly” sentences. This strategy of re-enchanting the linguistic and cultural “dreck” of contemporary culture, as his 1967 novel *Snow White* calls it, a literary exercise akin to what Arthur Danto (1981) calls the “transfiguration of the commonplace.” Barthelme’s confession reflects his uneasiness about normative conventions concerning the nature of literary beauty and its established affiliation with the moral. By reminding readers of the value of beauty, these conventions imply that what fiction can teach us, above all, is how to be good.

Marrying an aesthetic of excess at the sentence level with the typically repugnant attitudes of its narrator, *The Tunnel* prompts readers to reconsider the traditional alliance between ethics and aesthetics. Gass’s lavish, baroque sentences, independent of the banal or
loathsome sentiments they express, are often beautiful. Gass aims to “give grandeur to a shit” so that readers may recognize in The Tunnel’s narrator a shared baseness of character, a predilection to bitterness and despondency that unites Kohler’s Party of Disappointed People. That tedium and transcendence exist side by side is not a particularly earth-shattering proposition; furthermore, some might suggest that there is nothing uniquely literary about the way this knowledge is conveyed to us here. However, The Tunnel makes this insight available to readers by attempting to dragoon them into Kohler’s party, making them co-conspirators to his illicit underground excavations. In this way, Kohler’s audience is forced to seriously consider his morbid assertions about life and to either acquiesce or mount their oppositional responses. The novel mirrors the process of learning as a two-way exchange by provoking its readers to respond to it—to recoil from, or grudgingly nod their assent to, its hateful sentiments.

These responses, no matter what form they take, demand a sustained scrutiny of both the text and one’s own habitual ways of thinking. In this respect, The Tunnel makes attentive students of its readers. Gass’s aesthetic stance, one that purports to be dismissive of extra-textual referentiality, uneasily sits alongside a narrative that is self-consciously at war with its own didactic impulses. Despite its alignment of rhetorical beauty with hatred, The Tunnel teases readers with the promise of the kinds of cognitive enrichment Gass dismisses in his statements on fiction even while, as Jim Barloon suggests, it remains a “novel that attempts, in a single coup, to complete the postmodern project of dethroning the logocentrism characteristic, some say, of Western thought” (10). Its regicidal impulses towards logocentrism notwithstanding (reason’s power is diminished, if not completely dethroned, by Kohler’s freewheeling, emotive ruminations), The Tunnel enjoins readers to acknowledge the
value of logocentric thought while recognizing that too long a sacrifice to its limiting
strictures—the requirements of the scholar’s “life in a chair”—can make a stone of what
Kohler comes to call his fascist heart. Seducing the reader into empathetic vibration with
Kohler’s grievances brings about some of these gains. Hatred may itself be a heightened state
of awareness; by focusing one’s cognitive and emotive capacities onto a specific object of
spite, it gives one practice in paying a fuller kind of attention. Hatred, like the experience of
love, can be all consuming, and may counteract the tedium and frustration of the reading
experience itself. Confronting and luxuriating in Kohler’s ugly inner monologue, then, gives
us practice in taking on states of mind and feeling we would normally avoid.

“The secret of life,” Kohler confides, “is paying absolute attention to what is going
on. The enemy of life is distraction. If you're not present in the present, where the hell are
you? Words of Wisdom No. 1” (448). This advice is surely ironic, given the length and depth
of time and feeling Kohler spends burrowing in the past. His illicit autobiographical musings
are, after all, the product of a desire to escape the uncomfortable feelings of the present. And
yet, Kohler’s exhortation for us to pay “absolute attention” is key. The novel shows that
paying absolute attention to anything is difficult if not impossible, even though it is a goal
worth pursuing.

Kohler escorts his readers through the most claustrophobic recesses of his
consciousness in order to impart his lessons for living, a tour which, if nothing else,
demonstrates his impressive ability to exercise the sustained acts of attention for which “life
in a chair” has prepared him. The novel demands the same of its readers, for whom Kohler’s
“dictionary mode” suggests a mode of attention worthy of emulation so long as it does not
turn “disinvolving” oneself from the referent’s presence into a self-defeating fetish. Kohler’s
dictionary style sustains itself throughout much of the novel’s pages, which draw the reader in with the allure of publicly airing an authority figure’s private, taboo thoughts. This, too, is a hallmark of Kohler’s pantomimic performance of the confessional mode, for this tedious cataloguing of his sordid inner life is sincere only to the extent that it betrays Kohler’s desire to conceal himself from an unsympathetic audience: his aim is, he claims, “to hide inside [his] work, which is, of course, a fortress also made of language: the castle of what comes between commas” (452). While we may recoil from the content of Kohler’s fulminations, his commitment to the relentless form of self-inventory it facilitates may cause us to reconsider the values on which we have erected our own, perhaps equally questionable, self-monuments. This kind of lesson suggests that meditating on disappointment is the first step towards rehabilitating one’s relationship to an external reality which members of The Party of Disappointed People may have characterized as fickle and unforgiving. Such a viewpoint is premature, only because those who maintain it have failed to cultivate the requisite state of appreciative awe that the dictionary mode can cultivate. For Kohler, however, this kind of heightened reflection easily curdles into sour rumination, and as such the novel’s conciliatory gestures towards extra-textual reality threaten to be withdrawn as soon as they are offered.

Gass rejects claims that moral and aesthetic values are often incompatible, maintaining that one can cultivate beauty in one’s sentences even if the ideas they express are abhorrent, as he explains to Castro:

There is a view that some ideas are so obnoxious that they can’t be put into a form that would be rather beautiful. Some believe there is a conflict between, for example, moral value and aesthetic value, such that viciousness can’t be beautiful. I claim it can be. One way of doing that is to demonstrate it. It is
perfectly possible, it seems to me, for there to be a beautiful anti-Semitic speech. . . . So the idea is to find contexts so integrated and interconnected that they have the beauty some mathematicians speak of. Everything fits. Everything’s functioning fully. You have a complete system. It’s sometimes a challenge to make that system out of things people find rather awful or objectionable. It’s careless to associate what the characters say with what the author thinks. I frequently don’t agree with what mine say. The challenge is, to me, to be able to say it as well as I can and represent and fit it into the larger scheme. It doesn’t matter whether what I’m saying is nice or true. (“An Interview” 76)

His challenge with The Tunnel is to present such an extended demonstration that morally objectionable sentiments can be rendered beautiful, so long as they are integrated into a self-sufficient narrative and linguistic system. In this respect it is an exercise in gamesmanship, in which Gass engages in procedural composition that flirts with formal consistency—seeking the self-sufficient purity associated with elegant mathematical equations—while simultaneously testing the limits of his readers’ willingness to empathize with an unrepentant “shit.”

According to Gass, the rhetorical beauty of finely formed sentences is to be valued above their transgressions of taste or ethics, as well as any critique of extra-textual reality the novel purports to mount. “My view,” Gass tells Kaposi, “is that you don’t judge a work to be beautiful because it's morally uplifting or tells the truth about things. And it's perfectly possible for a work to be beautiful and not tell the truth and in fact to be morally not a very nice thing. Ideally of course it would be all these things at once” (“A Talk” 122). The Tunnel
is a morally discomfiting work that has a narrator who may himself have a loose hold on the truth: indeed, the entire concept of truth as something that corresponds to the nontextual, that is not simply a product of the most convincing rhetoric, is the dangerous position he flirts with. Furthermore, for those who share Gass’s aesthetic inclinations, a work’s supposed immorality would not disqualify it from being a formally admirable, even beautiful text. As Barbara Schwerdtfeger writes:

If the expressive use of language renders a work of fiction morally valuable, then even a text which negates all human rights, propagates the law of the jungle or pleads for the brutal slaughter of innocent babies could be considered affirmative provided the reader enjoys the text for its formal qualities and/or it widens the reader’s consciousness. To state it broadly, as long as one has fun reading a text, it cannot be unethical, independent of what it states. (Schwerdtfeger 67)

When Gass proclaims that all he is concerned with is constructing a rhetorically beautiful structure, blind and insensate to the concerns of and its connections to the real world and its suffering, we must take pause, particularly with a work like *The Tunnel*, whose subject matter is often “gratuitously transgressive” in its tastelessness (Barloon 6).

*The Tunnel* boasts little in the way of plot progression or character development. Kohler’s pages are comprised of a collage-like series of ruminations on childhood memories of his family and growing up in the Midwest; complaints about his wife, children, and colleagues; meditations on his own bigotry; and other textual detritus including doodles, drawings, cartoon pennants, limericks, and the like: tricks, Gass reminds us, intended to foreground the personal nature of Kohler's private jottings while, at the same time, drawing
attention to the materiality of the text. As Christopher Nash reminds us, “Where in Realism book illustrations were presented to support and substantiate the illusion communicated by the language, now language and visual presentation mechanically collaborate to evince each other’s—and the fictional illusions’—fundamental non-substantiality” (97). But again, by the time The Tunnel had appeared in full, these tricks were already old hat. For readers of Gass most familiar with the antirealist tradition from which he draws, The Tunnel’s illustrations may not perform their original defamiliarizing function, but serve rather to remind them that the text is an artifact of a bygone literary moment that, in American letters, reached its pinnacle of experimental inventiveness in the 60s and 70s. To critics who share Robert Alter’s disdain for the novel, it is a quintessential example of stale experimentation, a remnant of the masturbatory gamesmanship that may have once seemed fresh in the 1960s, when the bulk of the novel was written. In an interview with Idiki Kaposi, Gass acknowledges the novel’s indebtedness to the adventurous spirit of morphed fiction, but from a different perspective:

Actually The Tunnel was attacked, among other reasons, for the fact that it was seen as a ‘60s book rewritten in the ‘90s. Because the ‘60s saw the last of the big books. The Latin-American big books and the Americans, The Sot-Weed Factor, and all those enormous things. The ambition to write big books or the willingness to take the time, that was rampant in the ‘60s. (“A Talk” 137)

In The Tunnel, the epistemologically promiscuous “big book” of wanting-to-know-it-all has morphed into the ethically blinkered novel that never shuts up. The Tunnel eschews the synoptic ambitions of the other novels I have been discussing, but it applies a similarly
obsessive attention to examining the contours of a particular and odious consciousness. What one might learn from the novel is less about the facts or givens of the world from which it ostensibly springs, but more about an individual’s idiosyncratic algorithms of coming-to-know—in this case, Kohler’s excavation of his personal history that produces the detritus of words comprising the novel. For Kohler, who scorns the petty revelations which might make a writer seem more likeable, “it is often easier to confess to a capital crime, so long as its sentences sing and its features rhyme” (21). To what extent, though, can readers realistically dissociate themselves from real-world referents and focus exclusively on Gass’s considerable rhetorical felicity when the novel goads us with its glib and unrelenting transgressions of moral propriety?

“To respond to these questions,” Eckford-Prossor suggests, “we must confront…Gass’s aesthetics of separation, composed of his theory of metaphor and his idea of fictional worlds as self-contained models of worlds. . . The kind of aesthetics of separation that Gass seeks to practice places the beautiful form of the sentence above all, especially above content” (Eckford-Prossor 2). The role of the aesthetic in The Tunnel, then, takes on crucial import, with Eckford-Prossor placing this debate about the relationship between fiction and its extra-textual references as central to The Tunnel. In particular, Kohler’s musings on history as both an academic endeavor and a type of culturally determined narrative that makes truth claims about the past “force the reader to decide how politics connects to history, and how the inclusion of extra-textual historical events change history’s—and the novel’s—claim to truth” (Eckford-Prossor 3). But as Gass continually reminds us, he is uninterested in making truth claims about the world. The encyclopedic impulse, shared by both the novelist and historian, is reconfigured in The Tunnel via a turn to
an autobiographical mode. Gass flaunts the artificiality of the confessional’s rhetorical conventions, but despite his cynicism, Kohler longs to reaffirm his faith in a collective vision of history and reality that both the unspeakable atrocities documented by his academic work, as well as a lifetime’s worth of personal disappointments, have rendered seemingly untenable.

If one is to read *The Tunnel* as a text that allows for learning, the challenges it then presents are twofold: in addition to the familiar objection that one could come by the same cognitive gains via a different literary text, or indeed through a non-literary one, *The Tunnel* poses the question of whether the unique aesthetic experience reading this “wasteland work” provides is worth the expenditure of effort. In this sense, to the extent that one wants to characterize *The Tunnel* as an unreadable novel, it might be more accurate to say that it is designed to be read by only a few. Gass acknowledges that the novel’s opacity is intentional, a challenge to all but the most committed readers. Why, then, is *The Tunnel* worth reading at all? Those who argue that it is not believe so primarily because they find its flippantly transgressive tone and luxuriation in morally repugnant states of mind beyond the ability of Gass’s inspired wordplay to redeem. Gass, again, describes the novel to LeClair as an outgrowth of specific formal challenges he has set himself:

> In *The Tunnel* I am going to use a lot of homemade material, but I am mainly interested in how I can transform that material until it will have the same status as that stuff found in an encyclopedia. Or newspaper. Or invented out of that fabulous whole cloth. It’s the true-confession I suspect . . . The so-called confessional mode has an immediate rhetorical power (is he/she really telling me that?). Which is fake, cheap. In these works, the subject matter does your
work for you, but the aesthetic qualities are all left out. So the problem is to get in the confessional mode, take away the confessional power, and reclaim that power in the language. (“Interview” 166).

The status Gass hopes to claim for his material, then, depends on the status one ascribes to the “stuff” found in an encyclopedia or newspaper: the patina of objectivity backed up by the authority of academic and journalistic institutions. One must not forget the third possibility, which he places on equal ground with the prior two—innovation out of whole cloth.

Ultimately, he is stripping language bare of the “cheap” aura of emotional authority or sincerity given it by the promise of the sincere, confessional mode, which is always a sham, the “opera death, rhetorical paucity, stage pain” he elsewhere ascribes to the kind of effect sought by photographers ostensibly in search of the authentic:

What a pleasant picture, though: the hay heaped neatly up, depiction of a job well done, with a little ruin of Roman wall leaning at the left for antique atmosphere. All those hotshot photojourneys who run after blood to take its likeness, or stand sharecroppers up in rows before the weatherbeaten boards of their shacks, or capture a grief-stricken face in the net of their lens: they pretend to be getting the real thing, don’t they? not the clap but the syph; when all the photograph is opera death, rhetorical paucity, stage pain. Who clicks the shutter for the rusted gutter, the shattered windowpane or scarified loading dock, or celebrates the weedification of the parking lot? who records the trash in the alley or the garbage on the shore? who gives glass brick what it deserves—a bash—or welcomes eye sores like honored guests? who is the Arbus of the broken sash? the Cecil Beaton of the humblest door? the Ansel
Adams of pigeon shit? (360)

In this passage, representation (and the motive behind it) itself is suspect. To Kohler’s cynical eye, the artfully arranged vignette, purporting to reveal some essential element of being or experience, is little more than a self-serving façade. Kohler attacks the hubris of the photographer who would conflate the carefully framed image with an unmediated window to reality, a glimpse of a truth—pleasant or otherwise—about the human condition or some otherwise significant state of affairs it purports to have frozen in time. For “opera death” and “stage pain” Kohler would offer the unaffected expression of ugly feelings that colour a life of disappointment. In musing about who might best serve as an artist of the humdrum, broken, and quotidian, Kohler goes on to nominate himself as one who could aestheticize the excretory. Yet Kohler cannot but be aware that his own tumorous, repetitive text could easily ossify into irrelevant invective.

Gass draws on two modes to structure his novel: history and the confessional. As scraps slipped in between the “official” manuscript pages of his Guilt and Innocence in Hitler’s Germany, Kohler’s words constitute an unofficial, personal history. This autobiographical impulse contains within it a desire for self-revelation, the act of an exhibitionist flaunting his worst qualities. Kohler assesses his desires for the kind of shadow work he wishes to write, the personal mode he suspects his faltering introduction will slip into, against his suspicion of texts which, in their desperation for approval, advertise themselves as sincere confessionals. He wants to reveal to “the complete, dishonest, and unwholesome truth,” to “expose himself” to what he calls his “unfeeling, unforgiving” eye (4). This kind of grandiose posturing itself may also traffic in the same kind of “rhetorical paucity” and “stage pain” he derides. But, as Kohler reminds his audience, the rhetorical
modes which have come to be identified with sincerity are as predicated on conventions as artificial as any other. Sincerity itself is suspect and takes great pains to conceal its true nature: it “shits in a paper sack to pretend it’s innocent of food.” In terms of the aesthetic pleasures of the text, it is obfuscation and its companions that “[put] pleasure in the punch” (21). They are artificial and distort the identity of the writer. Even those who have come to be associated with sincerity were indulging in rhetorical manipulation of the reader—this is what makes them who they are, what gives their prose its “sincere” characteristics: “thus Gide could not be Gide and be sincere” (22).

Kohler suggests that writers are more concerned with having their “sentences sing and [their] features rhyme” than they are with fidelity to the banal truths the “sincere” writer would ostensibly reveal. Gass-as-Kohler announces his aim, introduces the text to follow as a confessional, while warning, even justifying, that deceit and obfuscation will and must play a part in what follows. Both the historian and the novelist—Kohler and Gass—want to put pleasure in the punch.

As the novel begins, Kohler announces his intent to introduce a work on death by one who has “spent his life in a chair.” It is to this sedentary place of safety that he clings, he claims, because “loneliness is unendurable elsewhere”; at least here, within the strictures of the scholar’s study and its access to the imagination, this loneliness may be shaped. Kohler now turns to the confessional mode, suspect as it is, in an attempt to alter his life’s trajectory away from that of the career pedagogue who has grown weary of the “endless journey” that is “life in a schoolroom—life in a chair” (41-55). Part of what he wishes to confess, to himself as much as to others, is his now waning belief in his work’s relevance to anyone outside the narrow confines of academia. The self-indulgent nature of his task reproaches
him with its infantilizing nature. He plays with his words the way an infant plays with food: sentences “circle [him] like a toy train.” While he asserts his area of focus has been a worthwhile one—“the real arena”—he believes he has dishonoured his material by artfully arranging it into lengthy monograph, evidence of a hubristic need to impose order from on high that he now finds pathetically misguided. His book diminishes the experience it purports to document and explain. Kohler’s own guilt and innocence now come to the fore as he puts his motives on trial.

I have not, like my colleagues, overlooked the real arena, but haven’t I given my results the neat and compact body of a book? Haven’t I arranged my weeds like a court garden? Certainly I’ve not rescued God’s Great Blueprint from a pile of soggy discards. I’ve not done that. I can’t offer the reader Nature seen as a dump for divine signs. Only the foolish and the cruel can believe in Supreme Sovereigns now. I haven’t pasted up some poster showing a litho-nippled Providence grimly dicing us home as though we were counters on a board game—nothing so trivial or so grand. Yet, despite my care, my misgivings . . . I’m afraid that willy-nilly I’ve contrived for history a book’s sewn spine, a book’s soft closure, its comfortable oblong handweight, when it ought to be heavier than Hercules could heft. History is relentless, but now it has a volume’s uninsistent kind of time. And hasn’t the guilt and innocence I speak of there become a simple succession of paper pages? (33)

Kohler’s own view of himself as a scholar and writer is free of any romantic airs. Early on he confesses his unease about what he believes is his growing awareness of the inconsequentiality of his book, the finished product of a lifetime’s work which has only
reduced its unimaginably grim and, perhaps, fundamentally unknowable subject matter to “a simple succession of paper pages” (33). In wondering if “the great work” was worth the sacrifice, Kohler’s doubts self-reflexively anticipate Gass’s own public midwifing of The Tunnel and the hostile reception its uglier aspects would elicit: “the years, the words, the worries…all for what? A book of beasts?” (14).

As Gass acknowledges, one must not pretend that rhetoric is ever purely disinterested; it always intends to convince, coerce, or effect an attitudinal or behavioural shift in the audience to whom it is directed. Gass readily admits to employing rhetorical devices in order to dominate his readers, to lead them to acquiesce to abhorrent ideas through an insidious, Socratic progression—a “classroom device [that] works by taking a notion that students accept without thinking, and then by subjecting that belief to critical reasoning (that students have been taught to follow), the bias is either unseated or the reasons for accepting it are clarified” (Holloway 15). Teaching here is, in essence, always an exercise in domination, which is necessary if learning is to take root.

Instruction, however, at least its formalized academic instantiations, has left Kohler disillusioned, skeptical about the pedagogical value of the historian’s task, or indeed, about the legitimacy of history as a genre and practice itself. Kohler is perpetually asked to rationalize his commitment to such a distasteful project: “when Lou asked me the inevitable, always inane, question: why does this matter so? why do you write? on such a shitty subject? my reply chuckling out of me as easily as perspiration: I write to indict mankind” (457). Gass himself has suggested they share the same aim, but for some The Tunnel is rather an indictment of the excesses of postmodern experimentation. But Kohler’s flaunting of his moral (and physical) ugliness and his attempt to indict the reader is also an attempt to reach
out, to forge unlikely bonds of fellow-feeling. “If people disliked in me what I dislike in them, I wouldn't dislike them. We would have reached an understanding” (458). Reaching such an understanding between Kohler and his readers, whom he would draft into his Party of Disappointed People, reconfigures the relationship between student and teacher. By claiming that his auditors share his capacity to cultivate hateful attitudes, Kohler subordinates his pedagogical authority—all members of the PdP being equal in their claims upon peevishness and disillusionment—while simultaneously offering instruction that draws its legitimacy from his superior apprenticeship to failure. As readers, we may absorb Gass’s lessons even as we are indicted, and indict ourselves.

Kohler’s urge to scribble down the most sordid details of his inner life is the shadow side of the combination of ego and academic duty that urged him to produce his masterwork in *Guilt and Innocence*: “But then duty drove me forward like a soldier. I said it was time for ‘the Big Book,’ the long monument to my mind I repeatedly dreamed I had to have: a pyramid, a column tall enough to satisfy the sky” (4). The exigency of Kohler’s scholarly duty suggests an Ozymandian hubris that is sure to be self-defeating. Kohler’s ambition, or his sense of duty to produce a magnum opus that will define his career, is one with which Gass identifies, identifying both in himself and some of his peers the same duty or striving after greatness—the pursuit of the kind of vast project characteristic of the “serious” writer. He explains to Kaposi:

The writers I admire from my own generation were all after the great book. You know, Gaddis, Barth, etc., they were all working for the supreme achievement. Writing is not an amusement for them, it was very serious business. And the writers that I admire, whether they write long, big books or
not, have that ambition of looking at their career as a life devoted to certain projects. Sure you’d like to be successful, but that’s not the issue. Such attitudes have mostly disappeared. (“A Talk” 137)

When pressed to define “big,” Gass says it’s less about the heft of the number of pages and more about the “importance” and “ambition of the project.” It goes back, for him, to the writer’s vocation as a calling to do something important “and not just to gain renown or get into the New Yorker. Even to get an identity as a writer was a terribly important business. And I still feel that way. It goes further back than the sixties, it’s nineteenth century romanticism about the artist; it is a very romantic but not a rosy view” (“A Talk” 137).

Success itself is a secondary or tertiary goal; the commitment to producing a “serious” monument is, in itself, a sign of serious intent that marks only the most dedicated artists. The hewing to a nineteenth-century romantic view of the artist is at odds with the model of the postmodern bricoleur, the faceless arranger who subordinates his singular personality to the raw linguistic and cultural materials which will undergo their ontological transformation in the work of fiction. Gass, in associating the “supreme” novelist achievement with the quintessentially encyclopedic texts of Gaddis and Barth, invites us to conclude that The Tunnel wishes to claim a comparable status. Kohler, his fictional confederate, wants to instruct his audience that a life devoted to producing such monuments places one at an increasing remove from the more immediate rewards of reality.

If his book fails to measure up to his lofty vision, Kohler will instead take satisfaction instead in “tear[ing] a strip of comedy across the News of the World” (14). Kohler claims that he abandoned poetry for history in his youth, and the choice suggests not merely a turn from the dreamy pastime of a green adolescence to a weightier pursuit, but the replacement
of one form of authorial anxiety with another:

A simple inspection of the past was child’s play, but the composition of history was not a young man’s work; it was not an arena for the display of an ill-informed or immature mind; no inept cape, however flamboyant, could turn aside the charges of time; it was not everybody’s satisfying hobby or soothing Sunday scrabble; for how many great ones were there in a century? when poets were as plentiful as pilchards and paintings bloomed like fields of fall weeds. I would have had to climb beyond bias, become Olympian, part the clouds; and already I had resolved to work with material so racial and rednecked and cruel and costly (the extirpation of the Jews exceeded any subject), what tools or gloves or masks or prophylactic washing-up would protect me from contamination? (337)

Kohler counts himself unfit for inclusion in his imagined pantheon of “great ones,” wizened historians perched on an Olympian mount of analytical scholarship. Kohler’s ghastly choice of material, however, “exceeding” as it does “any subject,” proves too toxic for even the instruments of dispassionate scholarship to shield him from corruption. In Kohler’s biographical shadow pages, then, he chooses the alternative approach by embracing bias, flaunting prejudice, and courting contamination without the prophylactic shield of undemonstrative rhetoric. It is only by immersing himself in these cruel attitudes that he can harness the kind of unsentimental clarity which his scholarly work fails to attain.

Kohler’s personal pages comprise an archeological shadow-narrative to the clean academic prose which is the ghostly other half of this novel; together, they constitute a sort of perverse form of self-inquiry. The section of the novel entitled “Around the House” offers
the most detailed transcription of Kohler’s quotidian thought patterns. This extended, stream-of-consciousness tour of the minutiae of his morning routine, from evacuating his bowels to brushing his teeth and all the thoughts that fall in between, is the apotheosis of what he calls his “dictionary style,” his own particular brand of baroque invective. Against his own efforts to extricate himself from the heavy influence of his professorial mentor “Mad Meg” comes the growing awareness that his tunnel-digging and window gazing do not lead to outward views, but only direct the gaze further inward, towards the locus of the greedy, logorrhoeic “dictionary style” which Kohler claims to dislike:

I don't particularly enjoy the dictionary style. Admittedly, it has its merits. I've figured out that when I begin to play with words--take them apart like 'breakfast' and make my own microchasm, compare them to their bedfast cousins, revolve them or doodle them dipsy, like fast break or break wind, wind down or downcast; if I anagram them out of recognition; if I fix my mind on their precise definitions, snuffle out their etymologies, pun on them, rhyme with them, riff, and generally fiddle them to fits—then something about their wordless counterpart has made me nervous, anxious, reluctant, so I spell my way out of the referent's presence, manage the moment by managing its sign; but, oddly, then, just that disinvolution frees me to find the truth, the solution, the what?... (451)

Kohler luxuriates in this kind of fussy attention to playing with the rhythms of language. His attempt to “manage the moment by managing its sign” betrays his anxiety about resting in a state of present awareness, which would entail abandoning his ongoing inner monologue of complaint and recrimination that constitutes his sense of self.
…for history, I do believe, is not a mighty multitude of causes whose effects we suffer now in some imaginary present; it is rather that the elements of every evanescent moment endeavor to hitch a ride on something more permanent, living on in what lives on, lengthening their little life by clinging to a longer one, and in that manner, though perhaps quite unintentionally, attaching what will be to what still is (and so far has survived) the way a word’s former employments are the core of what it presently means—because a word’s history is what the word is, its future an encrustation like a cloak of bark—and lurking beneath its present use, holding it up into the light of nowadays, is the Hercules of all it’s been. . .(315)

The historicist’s self-awareness and the inexorable prejudices through which he will filter the chronicle into a narrative text are here transformed: it is not the chronicler, but the very nature of the chronicle form which is corrupt and to be distrusted. Hence, Kohler’s repeated refrain in which he bids us “welcome to history”: “Welcome to history. To incident and anecdote, chance and serendipity. To the country of the cruel joke” (325); “Welcome to history. To cause and fate, power and purpose. To the country of the clever calculation and con. Welcome to conspiracy and criminal connivance. To a world of rig” (326); “Welcome to history. To personality and pleasure, immediate motives and margins of profit. To the stealthy operations of the human ego, to vice as the honest and homely vector of events” (328). History, an earnest attempt to record and teach us about the events of the past, is contaminated by chance and human desire.

Kohler’s own wariness about direct experience informs his decision to withdraw into his own imaginative worlds: “Experience,” he says, “is broad and muddy like the Ganges,
with the filthy and the holy intermixed in every wash,” and pedagogically valuable “because it teaches primarily through pain, defeat, disappointment, loss” (40). It is from the vantage point of his own experience that he is able to deride his students: “They are confident. They are silent. They are still, They know nothing. It comforts them. […] Just as well, for if the students knew what I know (and won’t teach them), they would run amok with their felt pens and bobbie, defacing bystanders and marking up other innocents. Life will get you bastards yet” (187). So we, then, become the recipients/auditors of Kohler’s lecture. He gloats about being able to view his naive students from the vantage point of hard-won experience. Kohler engages in an extended meditation about the range and extent of miserable fellow-feeling among humankind, wondering if his own state is neither abhorrent nor exemplary but merely ordinary: “I wonder how many men and women, kids and dogs, go through life in a state of modest misery; how much communal coldness there is, how much extinguished hope. Perhaps I should form a party for the disappointed people” (227). He plans to form an imaginary Party of Disappointed People, whose founding principles he imagines as a set of passive emotions: the sense of indolence, sloth, and missed opportunities conveyed in the aging academic’s refrain of “life in a chair.” He keenly feels the irrelevancy of the life of the mind and the scholar’s struggle to make sense of a century’s defining atrocity. The moments of self-recognition that come from reading Kohler’s musings on loss and disappointment can come as a painful blow, though Gass’s verbal felicity enables us to take pleasure in the punch.

As a student in Germany in the 1930s, Kohler is mentored by a brilliant and charismatic history professor he calls Mad Meg. Meg is a master rhetorician and holds auditoriums of Germany's best and brightest spellbound in rapturous attention with his tour-
de-force disquisitions, in which he repeatedly insists that history is not a dispassionate, objective record of the past but is more akin to the kind of rhetorical virtuosity which he demonstrates. He drives his students into nationalistic fervors, and is portrayed as a relativist with proto-fascist sympathies. Such is his influence that even visiting Meg on his deathbed, Kohler is torn between his attraction to Meg's volatile ideas and his own dawning awareness of their abhorrent potential for abuse.

Mad Meg is the mouthpiece for the view that fact and history are but rhetorical effects. The “security of the scientific treatise” (255) is predicated upon a faith in the bedrock of fact that is itself a construction of the weavers of narrative who constitute the membership of ostensibly objective scholars. A black bird crosses Kohler and Tabor’s path, prompting this exchange:

There! in just that kind of whoof men once stopped trying to think in verse or in desultory talk and sought the solidity of formal speech, the written dialogue where prose appears—prose, Kohler, is less primitive than poetry—and soon afterward history commences, the narrative mode arrives like rescuing cavalry in your movies, annals replace anecdote—until that, in turn, is abandoned for the security of the scientific treatise, a format which Aristotle again—that divinity—licked into final shape. (254)

While Gass’s work warns against the seductive danger of obsession with language such that the grounds of reality are usurped, and history, for instance, is taken to be only a rhetorical or “merely linguistic enterprise” (Holloway 98), here it is given its most forceful assertion.

His avowal of the world’s unknowable and indifferent nature fosters Kohler’s isolation—and, if he is to be believed, the isolation of everyone who is like him, even in
degree (which is to say, those who find themselves reading his secreted pages).

If I am lonely because I do not like the world, why should I let it in, then, to run around in my head like a troop of loud kids and trouble me? Nosirree, I dig; I go down into the depths of myself and fool around in hidden holes and cart dirt away secretly; I’ve got the big stones moved and I’ve picked a few feet of earth loose, and begun to work out a strategy; my god, the complications of the lonely life; and maybe that was why Mad Meg clung to my arm, even though he talked to me most of the time as if I were another hall of students; still I think he had his hopes, not that I would change the state of his soul, but that I would help him hide it from himself, hide the hollow where his words were, the words which expressed over and over his despair, for I realize, now that I’ve begun to doodle the designs, that Magus Tabor will always be the spiritual founder of the Party of the Disappointed People. (266)

Kohler, like Meg, uses words to “hide the hollow” of his internal despair and loneliness, his longing for the kind of authentic experience the lecture-hall relativist would deny. Mad Meg’s disquisition on “WORDS, gentlemen!” (120) echoes Gass’s arguments, developed throughout his non-fictional works, about the opacity of words and their tenuous connection to their referents. We have placed the word on a pedestal, and in doing so we have distanced ourselves from the direct experience of life, of things-in-themselves.

Think of the safety a word sets before us. Does the word ‘prick’ stick us? what bumps when ‘bump’ is spoken? is there any blood in ‘bleed’? And they are just a beginning. We’ve plain desires, but complicated cookery men look at them—these words—and see. . . Salvation. Soon then, so beautiful they seem,
so full of peace and promise—whatever their subject; upon our sentences stand others nearly as lovely; we take an almost holy office from their Being, and in this heedless way, continue into commentary. Thus the thief consoles his paid-for dinner with a pilfered fork. There’s no end to this ludicrous folly. Accounts again are rendered; thought takes thought, not things, for substance; language replaces life; history usurps the past, and we make sounds about sounds without limit; we steeple up a church to worship all the names we’ve given Time. (268)

Alongside Meg’s ability to mesmerize his students with his virtuoso performances is an acknowledgement that this rhetorical enterprise is an empty game that exploits our attraction to the numinous in language while simultaneously divorcing us from the reality to which we always must return. Descriptions only mediate between the individual and the world in a way that is always unsatisfying.

Honestly now... My fair-haired, blue-eyed gentlemen and hopes of Germany—we do not care, will not give a soft stool for the august verities if what we believe is convenient; if it puts us in bed with women, kicks others out, and deprives them of the pleasures which, from some inadequacy, we cannot share. What trivial nonsense truths are, how false in fact their elevation. It’s a mere name, yes, a flattering designation, a title like Right Reverend, the Honorable, or Most High (any baron’s is better), a pure canard, this Truth; it’s Descartes’ deceitful demon set in his cups to dream a doubting I—Yes—It is a cacofogo’s gloat then, just one more tasteless jape of Nature, or, if you like, the last itty-bitty fib of God. (269)
Kohler’s association with Meg will prove the “blot upon his honor” which will serve as Meg’s “gift to him: a set of disturbingly honest and repulsively accurate ideas. For these, he comes to your deathbed now to thank you—for simultaneously giving value to, and ruining, his life” (276). The intervening years have seen Kohler struggle with his own views about Mad Meg’s potentially dangerous relativism. Kohler ventriloquizes Mad Meg’s views, both as a means of goading his colleagues—taking pleasure in their reactions to his “satisfyingly gloomy” theses (418)—and as a form of genuine inquiry into their soundness, a way of testing his own hand-me-down conviction in an epistemological framework that scorns conviction itself: “That's what causes are, I answer in Mad Meg's mode; they are lies that advertise, lies that have fan clubs” (417).

Kohler combines the self-justifying eye of a serial seducer of students and a misanthropic wish to bring others down a rung, or several, closer to his own level of misery: “Fucking everybody,” he confides, “has always been my deepest wish” (410). Kohler’s misanthropy is not presented as that of the choleric satirist—in writers like Swift, for whom their railing against human misery, stupidity, and hypocrisy is motivated of a burning desire to set things right. While Kohler too wishes to see the unjust punished, he also maintains that everyone who is a member of the corrupt family of humankind is, at present, guilty by association.

My indifferent principle is simply that nobody can really stomach anybody else. So I’m the human-racist. I play no favorites. I leave no one out. My favorite writer isn’t even Jonathan Swift, or Louis-Ferdinand Céline: it’s Rainer Maria Rilke, the transultimate Romantic, good old Doctor Serafico, who knew what to love—he loved things. You can have Spinoza and his
beloved Ideas. Ideas don’t do it. Ringadinga. (362)

Kohler’s disappointment is based on the sense of loss that accompanies the suspicion that “we have not lived the right life” (100). A clear undercurrent of entitlement runs through his melancholic evocation of a world of pleasures promised but ultimately withheld: “Loss in life: that’s what I mourn for; that’s what we mourn for, all of us who have been touched by the fascism of the heart. It’s not having held what was in our hands to hold; not having felt the feelings we were promised by our parents, friends, and lovers; not having got the simple goods we were assured we had honestly earned and rightfully had coming” (366).

Kohler’s colleagues also serve to externalize facets of his own thinking and hence are recipients of his scorn and envy alike. They are representatives of different approaches to fact and history. Little wonder, then, that Kohler’s predilection for griping carries over to his collegial relationships, though he believes petty sniping to be the de facto condition of the academic: “Our teeth chatter with complaint like the castanets of gypsies” (386). His relationship with his colleagues is, as a result, characterized by “[e]nvoy, jealousy, spite, malice.” These, Kohler claims, “are the feelings we dress in, our basic black, the essential scholarly regalia” (386). Hatred, for Kohler, serves as the engine of scholarship, and by this unstated logic his own hateful pedagogical method lends his lessons extra weight.

His colleague Planmantee is a positivist, a “devotee of ultimate data” who “believes history is made of small moments like seeds” (402). He is one for whom “things did not become real until they had been understood as quantities, and until, ideally, each quantity had received its rightful name, for the name, in this case, would contain the character of the thing to precisely the same degree as the thing itself” (393). Kohler mocks the positivist’s pedantic compulsion to partition experience into artificially uniform, ordered units:
I’ve decided to call them Eames, Planmantee says. Now it is another day, another conversation. We are standing in front of our mailboxes and have been surreptitiously eyeing one another's envelopes. What? call what, what? The ultimate elements of history, the hairs which make up the tale. The smallest units of any objective narrative. Culp immediately suggests mythettes. How about narashards? Telltatters? no, that's decay, not construction. Plotdots? Pointillies? Eames as in taxemes, Plan says. Morphemes. Sememes. Epistememes. I prefer anecdots to plotdots, T.G. tells Culp. Anecdots is good, Culp agrees; but a wag is principally what a tail does; it is its ultimate unit of action, so why not call them wags? (404)

By contrast, his colleague Hershel’s doctrine, which holds that external facts refuse our restrictive labels for them, is shrugged off as an unremarkable commonplace.

What Hershel has taught me, by being his deeply inconsequential self, is not that there is no reality; that there are no events “out there” solid enough to sustain a spider's scrutiny or a waterstrider's scoot (for that is what I am tempted to believe when I am solely on my own); rather, his inadvertent existence has proved to me that the real is harder, indeed, than a dry roll; that everything that happens is as tough as tempered steel, stainless as a steel sink, sharp, if it needs to be, as a Spanish blade, blunt as any iron sledge, greedy and as eager to grab for its own good as a thief, cruel, unforgiving, inexorable—all the harsh hard unbending brutal words: in sum, the firstborn fact, from which we should never allow ourselves to be estranged is — yes — simply — that there are facts. Whoopee. (416)
These deflating comments—“whoopee”—load down the narrative along with Kohler’s other theatrical expressions of exhaustion. “There are facts, but we don't know them. Nah . . . you don't say? what a pity! Ah . . . then they know us” (416). Kohler mocks what he sees as the self-evident truism that facts exist but are unknowable, which merits little more response than a rhetorical “so what?”

Suggesting that facts “know us” reverses the epistemological order to which their human superintendents cling.

My thesis, taught I thought by my mentor, Magus Tabor (peace to his spirit)—that there is no Nature which we are compelled to obey, only a Culture which various interests conspire to place on its empty throne—is a satisfyingly gloomy point of view which I tried out in Herschel's hearing half a dozen times, only to have the heresy sent back to me—when I dispatched my radically relativistic and cynical formulation, “There are no goals, only errant ways”—revised and replaced by a phrase even more succinct, “Few ends, yet many means.” One pole is sufficient, Herschel says, to hold up the tent. (418)

Kohler trots out the familiar assertion that all impositions of order upon, or descriptions of, reality are suspect. Kohler tries to convince Herschel that “our failures do not lie in the flabby irresolution of reality,” but rather “lie in our accounts”:

Our accounts, I say, as breathlessly as I can, anointing my voice with hollow wonder, our accounts...our accounts...our accounts: when they are not absurd fancies or outright lies or mad misconceptions or manipulative tricks (a category which covers most of our ideologies with dirt fresh from the grave), they are invariably prejudiced, partial, incomplete, confused, unbalanced,
injudicious, lacking the necessary objectivity, the necessary tender regard, the requisite mix, the awed appreciation of complexity, its supple shadings, its fine proportions, almost unheard harmonies, its inconsistencies, melangeries, the endless intermingling of contraries which comprise it, the extenuations of which it is made like the mud which makes bricks, yet its straightforward simplicities, its dashed-off lines, or, again, its unaccountably sudden eruptions, the kinds of chaos which create its causes and their orderly operations: that is to say, to cite, among facts, the second one we should not lose sight of: reality has many of the marks of a work of art. (422-23)

Kohler’s account, by extension, claims for itself a greater fidelity to “realism” than the artificial realistic mode, in that his own narrative’s “endless intermingling of contraries” takes on something of the relational nature of reality itself.

[Reality is] a work of art which not even the most highly refined science can hope to comprehend, not in large or in its smallest part, because there are no parts, if by parts one means elements fundamentally on their own: no, there are only endless relations and the properties to which they give rise; partialities, shadings, hints, secret sympathies, hidden harmonies, each relating and rerelating, turn and turn about, integrating and reintegrating over and over, the way night and day do, or like lovers, repeatedly positioning and repositioning themselves . . . (423)

Kohler instructs his audience about the complexity of experience which blurs the distinctions between art and reality, and in so doing relinquishes the pretense of mastery his age and experience have given him. The fundamental lesson is cultivating this “awed appreciation of
complexity” (423).

I keep my study door closed because Martha can't stand to see inside. . . . Let me explain to you, she says; what you honestly are is a dealist, a toponian. You want a world that perfectly meets your nutty specifications, and when it doesn't, you say fuck it. If you can't enjoy your world order, pantheon perfect, every bust in place and done by Donatello, every bird's song a panegyric, you will settle on bric-a-brac instead, and want nothing better than trailer parks, cycle gangs, and total confusion. If you can't have King Reason and all his rational kin ruling absolutely in your realm, you'll have the random and its rascals. It's fun to have a wife who's so amusing. There's dirt in your drawers, dearie, I don't say, if you ever thought to look. (453)

Despite Kohler’s constant depiction of Martha as an obese, frigid harridan who had long ago abandoned any pretense of playing the loving wife, her diagnosis of her husband’s spiritual pathology seems astute. Kohler’s narrative is characterized by the kind of vacillation between panegyrics on lost loves and a cultivation of total confusion—or at least sordid disarray—that Martha observes is central to his logorrheic constitution. His petty unspoken rejoinder, the secret satisfaction he receives from knowing he has been filling the drawers of her dresser collection with his dirt, renders Martha’s assessment no less accurate. “There’s dirt in your drawers, dearie” is also a rebuke, Kohler’s smug refusal to attribute to Martha the unflinching self-awareness to which he believes his tunneling has given him exclusive rights.

Kohler, like Mad Meg, takes his own turn at lecturing, but he does not use his powers to drive his students—many, we are told, who busy themselves in campus protests against the Vietnam War—into a volatile nationalistic fervor. He instead takes pleasure in vituperative
classroom fantasies in which he reveals to them that, unlike their predecessors who had come seeking knowledge that would allow them to live better lives than their parents, they can expect only disappointment: “You are doomed to a lesser life, most of you, what do you think of that? But I rejoice at all who are downwardly destined. You will make wonderful recruits for the Party of the Disappointed People” (465-6). He advocates instead a credo of short-sighted self-interest, justifying selfishness on the grounds that good intentions alone will not guarantee that the fickle future will acknowledge you, let alone assure you happiness. His off-script classroom lesson serves as an over-the-top espousal of cynicism and pure self-interest.

Wise up. Don't encourage your kids to get ahead. Don't count on their support during the rot end of your life. I plan to inherit my own estate, retire on it, and vote against every school levy the newlyweds propose. Wise up. Don't invest in a future you will never see, a future which will despise you anyway, a future which will find you useless. Pay for your own burial plot. Get the golf clubs out. Die with a tan your daughter’s thighs would envy. (466)

Kohler’s excavations allow him to enact his own solipsistic Socratic inquiry, looking for assurances of certainty that lie beyond the scholar’s warrant or the naked exhibitionism of the confessional mode. The novel flirts with the proposition that learning needn’t be wedded to classroom rhetoric or the straining to lessen, through language, the distance between the observer and inalterable bedrock truths. Rather, it is the evanescent experience of attention to the moment, a coming to rest in the awareness of consciousness touching itself, that is the root of coming to know:

Sometimes, when the circumstances are right, that gray sky seems to
materialize at dusk to descend toward the furrowed portion of the field, and as it does it darkens everything on the ground as well, where a little gray daylight had been reflected before, so that the two shades separated by what seems a single shadow began to close on one another, the sky settling, the earth swelling, the shadows shrinking, two expanses of experience mingling. I am aware of my weakness in philosophy, but were I a thinker of real thoughts, I think I would think only about the evanescent, and the character and condition of consciousness; because I know that is all I am, even if I feel I am standing in my living room (what a name for the family sofa), surrounded by a world wide as the world is, and that world oceanned in space, as alone in its orbit as I am in mine, however minor mine is—up and down, desk to window, window to workplace, typewriter to tunnel—and even if I feel I know how others feel—even if I feel I feel their feeling—even if I can read the brand of cookies—Bahlsen—lying on the Fuhrer's table—just the seam, the shades of gray which make up that image aren't the cookies or their calories; nor are my sensations when I sense them, my feelings when I feel them, in any way in the world of their objects, though the photo is certainly there, in the realm of the referent; so where am I, then, other than nowhere? my mind's eye? the ghost in the dream? where are we?

It is the question. (467)

Kohler’s evocation of the numinous “character and condition of consciousness” suggests that his typically blinkered, solipsistic perspective can, in settling upon the perennially discomfitting question of the nature and location of the perceiving self, be granted a moment
of expansiveness (but only when “the circumstances are right,” existentially as well as meteorologically). Kohler touches on the terrifying and recurrent question of the location of the “I” who has been recording these thoughts and experiences.

This immersion in the rhythms of Kohler’s domestic routine, and his simultaneous verbal “fiddling,” invites an empathic response, though even he is aware that his insistence on presenting himself as a toothless everyman shows signs of strain: Kohler’s misgivings about the possibility of genuine spiritual or emotional communion mingle with a desire to share his own experiences of the numinous through language:

We are hearing the same sounds just as we may be reading the same text, yet we are not having the same experience any more than we are likely to be sharing the same interpretation of some lines of Holderlin. My hero. Where are your birds? where are mine? The print lies on the page, but the meanings, and their corresponding things? Lie? oh, they lie, but where? Ancient puzzles which will not go away; simple puzzles which refuse their solution. (468)

Kohler’s obsession with the performative nature of sincerity manifests itself in the pun on “lie”—where these meanings, these referents reside or are located, but also an acknowledgement that they too are untrustworthy. Kohler wants to explain the appeal of digging his tunnel of words, which constitutes an escape from experience. He believes that this refuge exempts him from the economy of lies and self-deception that drives ordinary life, and goes on to claim that his carefully nurtured illusions are, paradoxically, more authentic:

Now, though, I do what I formerly dreamed: slipping inside the world in such a way I remain outside everybody, creating a kingdom like a realm of play, but now a realm in the Real, for I have made a cave which can cave in. . .
There I can tell myself the truth, too, as Magus Tabor taught me, because ordinary life is supported by lies, made endurable through self-deception; because in my illusion no illusions are allowed. (503)

Kohler’s circular musings demonstrate his failures to make use of the experiences he has accumulated. Kohler boasts that “[he marks] Henry James’s sentence: observe perpetually” (11); for him, this sentence is as much a punishment as a prescription. He strives to be someone on whom nothing is lost, though the weary reader, having had enough of Kohler’s finely observed bile, may wish it had been otherwise. Despite the evidence that Kohler’s enviable gifts of observation are hobbled by a limited, pinched viewpoint, the novel repays the investment in its reading if it demonstrates how to bring its narrator’s obsession for minutiae to bear in learning to direct our attention outwards instead of further inwards. The extent to which Gass succeeds in indicting us along with Kohler—in eliciting our sympathies for “a shit”—may render this salutary effect more difficult to appreciate. Kohler’s cautionary example is complicated by his overwrought attempts to shock his readers into a recoil of self-recognition, but he himself admits his actions, such as they are, may have no discernable purpose.

I am an intransitive man. I'm reconciled to it. Even my husbanding has no object. With my tunnel I have committed the ultimate inactive act. After all, what is a useless hole? I can honestly say I have accomplished Nothing. (Ulysses answered Polyphemus with a similar riddle.) Such doughnut-shaped deeds have amassed this pile of paper, determined my present detachment from my work, developed my unimpinging personality—‘unim-,’ yes—endlessly rehearsed these unheard lectures, projected my antiutopian visions
onto a darkly boarded black screen, formed there my disheveling plans. (468)

For Kohler, the seductive certainty of a nihilistic philosophy and the intransitive labours of life in a chair may be entryways to a kind of hallowed interiority, one that neither bigotry nor disappointment can corrupt: “I complain of the tedium of my task; I grouse about my lack of loving companionship and the absence of any appreciative understanding, true; yet I know how hallowed the hidden is, how necessary it is for us to occupy a world of our own contriving, even though it has to find its moment of secrecy and silence in the midst of rabble’s rousing” (502). As an example of “the ultimate inactive act,” The Tunnel aspires towards the status of purely stylized anti-novel even as, Gass’s avowals to the contrary, it remains committed to the intractable givens of the extra-textual world. The sentiments The Tunnel expresses may be neither pleasant nor true, but they strongly argue that narrative representation refuses to remain quarantined from reality. Rather than dethroning logocentrism, Kohler’s ruminations show how firmly he remains in its grasp: furthermore, to fool oneself into thinking that salvation lies solely in the rhetorical exhumation of ancient grievances will only ensure one’s elect standing in the party of the disappointed. Those who hate the novel most may yet gain from it, even if that gain is a recapitulation of the modest, but by no means trivial, tenet that advises “paying absolute attention to what is going on” (448).
Chapter Three

“Paradox, perversity, opacity, obscurity”: William Gaddis and the Antirealist Syllabus

Late in William Gaddis’s *J R* (1975), the blocked writer Jack Gibbs secludes himself in a detritus-ridden New York apartment in order to finally complete his long delayed book, a history of mechanization and the arts. He attempts to explain his difficulty in completing the project to Rhoda, a slovenly squatter who has inconveniently taken up residence in his workspace. In her view, Gibbs’s central problem lies deeper than his inability to write. More importantly, he has failed to account for the limited intellectual appetite of his imagined audience. “Man like that’s what people want books that tell them what they already know,” she tells him: “like I mean look at all the fucking books in this place who asked you to write another one anyhow” (605).

Rhoda’s question is a vexing one for the budding scholar and novelist alike, laying bare as it does the impolite truth that originality, to the extent that achieving it is even possible, often finds little welcome among audiences grown used to the safety of the familiar. Gaddis himself knew how it felt to have one’s work received with critical and popular indifference. While his debut novel *The Recognitions* is, today, often hailed as an ur-text of postmodern, encyclopedic American fiction, its publication in 1955 was attended with little fanfare. It is a notoriously lengthy and widely allusive novel that shares *J R*’s mordant humour and many of its challenging formal properties. In both, information is withheld, causality confused, and the narrative often suspended for lengthy digressions on subjects ranging from Flemish art in *The Recognitions* to the knotted jargon of finance in *J R*. Despite
these similarities, *The Recognitions* is a more traditionally diogetic text, one in which readers are chaperoned through the complex narrative by a wry, omniscient arranger. That both these texts would, today, typically be grouped under the same broad banner of postmodern American fiction belies Gaddis’s apparent reluctance to align his work with the movement, one which he would later go on to caricature as an outgrowth of the cultural swamp of “paradox, perversity, opacity, [and] obscurity” (*Agapē Agape* 2) he wishes to describe—if not counter—in his own work.

Gaddis is typically described as the quintessentially “difficult” heir to Joyce and more immediate forefather to David Foster Wallace and other contemporary novelists of encyclopedic ambition. However, ascribing to him this static authorial persona that both accounts for and maintains his cult status does a disservice to his work, which traces an evolving attitude towards the novelist’s cultural and didactic influence out of which more than one “Gaddis” seems to emerge. *J R*’s Jack Gibbs attempts to cultivate an authorial persona of aloof mastery of the sort initially attributed to the early Gaddis of *The Recognitions*, but his failure to complete his work of encyclopedic scholarship is, in part, an unavoidable consequence of his overstrained ambition. He writes not to fulfill the demands of would-be readers or to fill a conspicuous gap in the apartment’s already heaving bookshelves, as Rhoda suggests he might, but in order to assert his own creative primacy. In this sense, Gibbs shares the hubris of antirealist writers like the William Gaddis whose work is, for some, “marked by an authorial arrogation of the creative powers of God himself” (Kuehl 23). In contrast to his fictional avatar, however, it has been argued that the Gaddis who wrote *J R* “had to descend from the eminence of the all-knowing, all-decreeing ‘arranger’ of *The Recognitions* in order to coexist with banality and breakdown” (Wolfe
In one sense this would be a fitting move, as *J R*'s apparent freeform transcription of overheard dialogue attempts to replicate the tedious and formulaic linguistic rituals around which the novel’s profit-obsessed characters comport their everyday lives. In surrendering his Olympian seat of authorial omniscience, Gaddis would ostensibly be renouncing any claims to full control over his material and, subsequently, his reader. The question then remains if *J R*, written from this downgraded seat of authority, could ever be more than another book that tells readers what they already know.

Gaddis’s novels, increasingly at home with banality and breakdown from *The Recognitions* onward, mirror the unstructured flux of information readers encounter in the world external to the organized literary text. As such, they can ostensibly reacclimatize readers to habits of perception grown deadened through routine by reminding them that breakdown can be reinvigorating—Gaddis, here, employs not so much a method of literary defamiliarization than one which attempts to refamiliarize us with our inherent capacity to welcome experience without the ballast of preconceived ideas obstructing our perception. In doing so, however, these texts can evince an exclusionary impulse in their refusal to accommodate short attention spans and what the narrator of *Agapē Agape* (2002), Gaddis’s posthumously published final novel, diagnoses as the public’s firmly-entrenched taste for anodyne aesthetic experiences. Gaddis’s novels cultivate disorder not only to mirror the entropic extra-textual world, but also, seemingly, to deny readers easy entry into their imaginative worlds. *J R*, for instance, eliminates chapter breaks, and offers little in the way of authorial cues to telegraph its frequent shifts in time and locale. Furthermore, the novel is written almost exclusively in minimally punctuated dialogue that is presented without attributive tags to indicate who is speaking. This uninterrupted transcription of overheard
words makes it difficult to unravel one strand of monologic delivery from another until the reader learns to identify the characters by their distinctive verbal tics. Given this entropic auditory salad, it is remarkable that any of Gaddis’s characters manage to understand each other at all. In many cases, they simply talk past each other. Communication proves to be difficult, since the aim of these interactions is rarely to engage in a fruitful exchange of ideas, but rather an attempt to find some measure of reassurance in the compulsive rehearsal of their relentless inner monologues.

If the reputation of *The Recognitions* rested on the scandal of its initial critical neglect, as it largely still does, *J R* may have seemed like a deliberate provocation to those for whom the earlier text was already a test of the reader’s good will and patience. Indeed, *J R* offers few concessions to the reader unprepared to encounter, at least initially, a good deal of frustration. Forced to contend with Gaddis’s “unreadability,” critics have responded with either pejorative dismissals or overdetermined justifications for his unconventional style. Such narrow debates about Gaddis’s difficulty, however, tend to close off other avenues of interpretation and preemptively limit the audience for his work. In this sense, perennial rehearsals of *J R*’s unreadability take on the air of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Despite the obvious hurdles it faced in attracting a wide readership, *J R* was awarded the 1976 National Book Award for fiction. The apparent reversal of Gaddis’s critical fortunes prompted some backlash of the emperor’s-new-clothes variety; for example, Robert Boyers asserted that *J R* is “touted for the very trivialization, arbitrariness, and repetitiveness that make it all but unreadable.” For Boyers, “avant-garde fiction” like Gaddis’s is remarkable primarily for its stylistic defects: “One cannot get away from the fact that failure, boredom, emotional limitation, and linguistic excess are often inherent in the very enterprise and
intention of avant-garde fiction” (731-2). However, in depicting both artists and an educational system that have been compromised by commercial interests, J R satirizes reductive conceptions of aesthetic value on which critiques like Boyers’ are based. The J R, or “junior,” for whom the novel is named, is J R Vansant, a sixth grader who exploits the anonymity of the postal system, telephone calls, and a series of hapless adult proxies to fraudulently amass a vast and precarious financial empire. The novel’s teachers and artists, the characters with the greatest responsibility to introduce both J R and others to alternative standards of value to those cultivated in the classroom and boardroom, are thwarted in their efforts to do so by a culture that has embraced a rigidly utilitarian model of knowledge and relegated art to easily assimilable background noise. Unfortunately, J R’s would-be artist-heroes harbour grandiose ambitions which are themselves self-defeating, since “the myth of the artist in isolation, oblivious to the ways in which the symbolic capital of his work is manipulated, is equally as destructive as the myth of the artist as true agent of social change” (Shavers 179).

In staging its characters’ repeated failure to teach, learn from or “read” each other, J R calls for an alternative model of apprehending experience, one in which readers must remain open to the potential value of initial misunderstandings. Encountering the “unreadable” needn’t be taken as evidence of aesthetic breakdown or our own hermeneutic inadequacies, but rather as a sign that we may need to reevaluate the preconceptions that lock us into overly distrustful or antagonistic relationships with the strange or unknowable. In J R, these unhelpful preconceptions are harbourd by both the representatives of the venal culture at large and the artist-teachers who fail to make use of their gifts to communicate with the audience they doubt even exists for them. These figures, Gaddis suggests, fundamentally
misapprehend the purpose of the creative enterprise. They are bound to fail when their sole aim is to assert the imaginative primacy of the lone artist as a means of countering the complex of corporate interests that would absorb or co-opt their work. While this threat is a very real one, as the novel makes clear, any desires to mount oppositional attacks against the culture from a position outside it preemptively doom one to failure. Moreover, increasing confusion about the purpose of artistic or intellectual labour often induces a self-righteous paralysis of the will among Gaddis’s characters. Gibbs, one of a handful of J R’s ambitious artists, is held up as a cautionary example of the kind of cultural and critical marginalization that awaits writers who attempt to assert their creative divinity over a world in which entropy and easy pleasures rule, much as Gaddis himself was censured for the avant-garde stylistic indulgences that Boyers catalogues. What distinguishes Gaddis from his characters is an awareness of the role the boredom, failure, and emotional limitation play into his didactic strategy. Paradoxically, they lend his didactic voice the authority he seems to have surrendered along with the penchant for structure and traditional narrative.

In spite of its characteristically astringent satiric vision, Gaddis’s work harbours vacillating attitudes about the novelist’s didactic agency. From J R onward, Gaddis begins to eliminate the author as the primary locus of narrative authority, a strategic withdrawal whose ramifications are only fully realized in Agapē Agape. J R’s catalogue of impotent artists enmeshed within an educational system colonized by corporate interests suggests that, in the absence of reliable didactic guides, the only trustworthy source of instruction is the self. Gaddis thus promotes an autodidactic protocol of reading as the only feasible one left to us in a culture that no longer genuflects to the novelist’s authority. Readers must then also learn to decipher the noise of the culture around them without recourse to the authority of the
encyclopedic text. This kind of autodidactic emancipation from overly confining and restrictive structures of learning can prove immensely liberating, tapping into the creative power that lies immanent in states of uncertainty. At the same time, as \textit{J R} suggests, such a democratic redistribution of creative and didactic energies can leave the autodidact adrift in currents of cultural noise, vulnerable to having her desire for instruction and delight exploited by the venal culture at large. In \textit{Agapē Agape}, Gaddis offers a bleaker assessment of the didactic potential of distributed creative authority in a society that stigmatizes risk and misunderstanding—both of which, for Gaddis, are potent gateways to the kind of productive failure that is to be courted rather than eliminated. Its frustrated narrator scrambles to reassert his didactic authority even while he articulates, in laboured, fragmentary prose, the conditions that make such a reversal of authorial fortunes all but impossible. Misunderstanding and unreadability no longer maintain the aesthetic and cognitive valence they take on in \textit{J R} but, instead, are simply the consequences of Gaddis’s exhaustion with a literary marketplace that forecloses novelty and instruction and sends us “back [to] this swamp of paradox perversity, ambiguity, aporia back where we started” (\textit{Agapē Agape} 70). Here, Gaddis’s retrograde elitism yields the sort of unstructured antirealist excess that courts failure of the unproductive variety, suggesting that a deliberate shift toward unreadability alone can neither reinvigorate fiction nor restore to it its lost didactic power.

\textit{“One Grand Misunderstanding”: Reframing the Unreadable in \textit{J R}}

In \textit{J R}, the stultifying corporate ethos of utilitarian gain has its origins in the classroom, where students are indoctrinated to distrust the chaotic and unfamiliar in their pursuit of meaningless academic accolades. Jack Gibbs, the struggling writer who
moonlights as a science teacher, interrupts the day’s lesson on entropy to lay bare the school’s reductively utilitarian pedagogical aims:

   Before we go any further here, has it ever occurred to any of you that all this is simply one grand misunderstanding? Since you’re not here to learn anything, but to be taught so you can pass these tests, knowledge has to be organized so it can be taught, and it has to be reduced to information so it can be organized do you follow that? In other words this leads you to assume that organization is an inherent property of the knowledge itself, and that disorder and chaos are irrelevant forces that threaten it from the outside. In fact it’s exactly the opposite. Order is simply a thin, perilous condition we try to impose on the basic reality of chaos.

   (20)

The novel itself can seem like a test meant to drive home this lesson, as readers are charged with imposing order on its unyielding flow of dialogue. As Boccia correctly points out, Gibbs’s impromptu lesson “is a paradigm for the novel” which describes “how and why order is imposed on a chaotic world, which is exactly what all novels do and exactly what Gaddis has done: imposed order on the chaos of the universe and created a description of the world” (44). But with J R, Gaddis is less concerned with imposing order on chaos than demonstrating how the world stubbornly resists attempts to marshal its cognitive riches, a state of affairs which his characters must begrudgingly acknowledge. Paradoxically, the lesson Gaddis is eager to impart to readers of his entropic texts is that genuine learning is only possible when one recognizes, and abandons, the rigid pedagogical model based on a master teacher chaperoning students through a taxonomized hierarchy of knowledge.

   Conversely, fiction, and the freedoms of the antirealist text, can provide a repository of
cultural representations and act as a vehicle for communicating propositional concepts that explicitly acknowledge the provisionality of knowledge and learning. However, these lessons in learning how to cultivate an appreciation of contingency are, in Agapē Agape, increasingly at war with an elegiac, quasi-Luddite sensibility that mourns the loss of both certainty and the writer’s cultural standing in an age driven by a “frenzy of invention and mechanization and democracy” that is determined “to have art without the artist” (11). Gaddis’s necessary renunciation of encyclopedic ambition in J R undermines his later attempt to rehabilitate the artist’s pedagogical agency in Agapē Agape.

Gaddis, who envisioned his readers being “swept along” in the “flow” of J R’s unremitting transcription of dialogue, understands that they may miss a lot as well. “This is a risk I take,” Gaddis acknowledges, “but isn’t that what life is, after all? Missing something that’s right there before you?” (“The Art of Fiction CI”). Eldridge and Cohen suggest one further potential source of Gaddis’s difficulty—namely, the discomfort readers experience when asked to examine their assumptions about the values that structure their lives, as his novels prompt them to do.

We may be deeply unwilling to supply the required articulations of the value and deeply frightened at calling our lives into question. We may be tempted to dismiss this writing as too fragmented, particular, and unilluminating to bear our attention. It may even be that. If we are given only transcriptions of what people say, without having some characters’ remarks highlighted as thematic and critical centers for the writing, and if there are no significant contrasts among the various characters so that their values and ours may be contrastively assessed, then we will have little to learn from the labor of
reading, which will rather leave us with the inchoate and uncriticized self-understanding with which we began. (49-50)

Some suggest that the labour of reading Gaddis’s chaotic text does not, on its own, do enough to provide readers with this kind of illumination. Boyers maintains that *J R*’s radical form is an exercise in self-indulgence, a test of the reader’s endurance that offers none of the rewards one expects of literature: it neither evokes an affective response nor enhances our cognitive capacities. Those who would counter such dismissals can, generally speaking, employ one of two strategies: first, by challenging the implicit appeals to a bourgeois, universal reader that underwrite charges of unreadability; and, secondly, by reframing Gaddis’s difficulty as a necessary response to outworn narrative conventions. According to critics like Wolfe and Boccia, *J R* aggressively solicits the reader’s collaborative participation in the composition of the text by surrendering the encyclopedic ambitions of *The Recognitions* and all but ridding the text of a central narrating presence. The novel’s antagonistic form is directed less at the individual reader than a culture in which the conditions that must be in place for non-trivial art to flourish have been systematically devalued. *J R*’s break from the recognizable narrative structure of *The Recognitions*, then, constitutes a bold declaration of independence from the conventions of realist fiction, or indeed even a rejection what one critic calls “the nemesis of narrative, the Western mania for order and control” (Black 29). And so, in surrendering the encyclopedic ambitions of *The Recognitions* and all but ridding the text of a central narrating presence, Gaddis aggressively solicits the reader’s collaborative participation in the composition of the text. By this logic, “this curious absence of any overriding, stabilizing speech” in *J R* is what “seems to give it such empirical authenticity” (Black 30). The absence of a singular, arranging consciousness
leaves readers to impose their own order upon a mess of information, just as they must in “real life.” This requires attention, openness, and a willingness to engage the text on terms which may be slow to reveal themselves.

In light of this missing central consciousness, Gaddis’s readers are all tasked with reading autodidactically. Drawing out instruction from a particularly difficult text can be frustrating when the author-as-teacher is unsympathetic to notions of models of education in which instruction is handed down from on high in clear directives. The collaborative relationship Gaddis envisions between the reader and author, by contrast, is one where the text disavows mastery of its materials and the lessons it ostensibly contains. The varieties of thematic irresolution that critics have identified at the centre of Gaddis’s narratives remain a key element of this disavowal. The authorial absence also gives readers the space to stage their own investigations, to carry out the kind of experiments in thinking and feeling for which the text has equipped them.

As helpful as they are, however, these approaches entrench discussion of the novel within a rigid dichotomy that forecloses alternative approaches to the text. Some readings seem content to rehearse Barthes’s distinction between the “readerly” and “writerly text,” in which the model of reading as passive consumption yields to one based on a fantasy of active co-production, while others situate the novel amid debates about the tenets of Modernist difficulty, in which the supposedly unreadable text rewards the analytical labours of the fit readers though few to whom it is addressed. J R’s Gibbs is himself beholden to the high-Modernist sensibility that esteems difficulty as a guarantor of quality—or, at the very least, serious intent. He tells his lover that he wants his book, a social history of mechanization and the arts, to be “as difficult as [he] can make it” (244). His understanding of the compact
between the difficult text and its reader places the blame for “unreadability” squarely on the latter’s intellectual complacency and inattentiveness: “problem most God damned writing’s written for readers perfectly happy who they are rather be at the movies, come in empty-handed go out the same God damned way” (289). He assumes the reader extracts some form of value from the text, is enriched with new knowledge or fresh ways of relating to the world that the purely diversionary aims of the popular film industry automatically foreclose. The audience that only wants to be entertained, and that refuses to risk engaging with a work that might transform them or trouble their social or ethical enclosures, is deserving of the artist’s scorn. Furthermore, the unqualified reader will gain nothing from an encounter with a challenging text, which Gibbs frames in terms of utilitarian exchange: “don’t bring a God damned thing to it can’t take a God damned thing from it” (605).

What readers are invited to bring to J R is not necessarily a storehouse of knowledge equal to Gaddis’s but rather a willingness to endure and even invite misunderstanding. The novels’ characters are repeatedly depicted as lacking this attitude of openness in their interactions with each other. They have become illegible to each other, the novel suggests, because they understand reading exclusively in terms of problem-solving, having subscribed to the values of a society that has, as Gibbs ruefully observes, “eliminated the very possibility of failure as a condition for success” (605). What makes it difficult, however, to avoid situating J R in the context of elitist initiation is that the novel itself appears to endorse such an approach, at least if we accept at face value Gibbs’s assertion that “problem solving” is “what any book worth reading’s about” (499).

Deciphering J R’s fragmented particulars can certainly be regarded as a problem-solving exercise, a process by which unifying structures of order only become apparent after
much hard work on the part of the reader. “Because we feel compelled to construct the plot from the disordered elements of the novel,” Boccia claims, “we are forced to solve a series of problems, including the nature and identity of the speakers, where the characters are, and even who they are—if we desire to comprehend events in the book in traditional cause and effect sequences or as continuous action” (42). However, Gaddis’s novels reveal a growing ambivalence about the value of such an approach. While $J R$ is informed by Gaddis’s attempt to grant greater collaborative agency to his readers, the later $Agapē Agape$ expresses a frustrated desire to reclaim the authoritative position he had ceded. He moves from setting obstacles before readers to grousing about their ultimate intractability: the author, now stripped of the authority to propose definitive answers, can only endlessly work over the terms of the problem.

Gibbs’s model of utilitarian exchange gives rise to the expectation that one will be rewarded for making the effort to engage with a difficult text. In this vein, $J R$’s titular character proposes a scheme by which students are, in lieu of grades, paid (or fined) on the basis of their classroom performance.

—I mean where school’s always this bunch of crap which it never has anything to do with anything real you know? […] Like there’s this neat idea where instead of getting those dumb marks you get paid see like a dollar is A, fifty cents is B C is a quarter D is like nothing then see instead of E you have to pay a nick […] (649)

$J R$’s entrepreneurial approach to educational reform has a precedent in the remark of one of the school’s administrators, who would strip away the pretense of formal education as anything but a long apprenticeship for the drudgery of workday labour: “Pay these kids
salaries instead of giving them grades and they might learn what America’s all about” (J R 456). That grades can be so easily translated into monetary reward exploits an inbuilt dynamic that structures the traditional classroom, the students’ hardscrabble pursuit of approval that Gaddis mourned in his essay “The Rush for Second Place”:

>This hunger for approval appears in all its desperate trapping in John Holt’s excellent, profoundly saddening book How Children Fail. The overriding desire of the children in his elementary classroom to please, irrespective of the lesson’s content or even the question itself; the anguished search for an answer, any answer, even the wrong one, to end the anxiety; and the hapless attempts to manipulate his authority, later drove him to recommend the disbanding of schools altogether. But finally he came round: these schools were, after all, preparing these children for exactly the contentless, need-for-approval, manipulative society he saw out there waiting for them. (54)

Resting in anxiety is difficult. The problem is not that the “anguished search for an answer” finally ends in error, but that students are trained to escape this anxious state of not-knowing as quickly as possible. This state is a necessary prerequisite to learning in that it opens one to the possibility of insight, even if the insight is only a more perfect understanding of the terms, boundaries, or implications of the question that has baffled them. Gaddis’s narratives of frustrated instruction thus share an urgency to make vivid the consequences of the artist’s increasing marginalization in what has become a “contentless” and “manipulative” culture. However, they also make it clear that these artists suffer from a failure of motivation. They see too clearly that they have neither the wherewithal nor the courage to complete their projects, fearing that their labours may go unrewarded by those for whom “what America’s
all about” is the kind of venal self-interest that has little concern for either wisdom or aesthetic pleasure. This anxiety gives rise to the elitist strictures of difficulty that Gaddis’s characters believe will preemptively shield them from expected failure, a self-defeating trap to which Gibbs also falls victim.

*J R* frames misunderstanding through staging a number of encounters between readers and writers in which their attempts at collaborative dialogue end in comic frustration. In one of these scenes, Jack Gibbs is attempting to resume work on his book in an apartment occupied by a young squatter named Rhoda. She is, on one level, an obvious comic foil, a broadly-drawn bohemian whose characteristics—she is slovenly, hedonistic, and liberally punctuates her speech with “likes” and “mans”—seem to identify her as the kind of unfit reader (or non-reader) who is the target of Gibbs’s scorn. When Gibbs solicits Rhoda’s feedback on a section of his manuscript, she attempts, with great effort, to read it aloud. She attributes her struggles to make sense of the text to Gibbs’s reliance on “phony big words” (606), while an exasperated Gibbs suggests a different reason: “God damned problem not read to be written aloud” (604). Rhoda goes on to argue that she, not Gibbs, would be the more successful author: “I mean I could write this book people would read, you know? . . . like I mean I’d communicate, you know?” (609).

In this scene, the frustrated reader desires communication, but this does not necessarily line up with the desires of the author, or with the realities of the literary marketplace. “Man like that’s what people [want],” Rhoda complains, “books that tell them what they already know, I mean that's why they’re all such bullshit” (605). Gaddis’s readers may be invited to scoff, along with Gibbs, at Rhoda's flippant attitude about the rigours of intellectual labor and the creative process, about how difficult communicating truly is. But
her motives appear to be more genuine than Gibbs’s, for whom sharing his knowledge is
eclipsed by a need to assert his intellectual superiority over his imaginary readers. He has
failed to assimilate his own schoolroom lesson: his desire to make his book a magisterial
paradigm of orderly knowledge contributes to his creative paralysis. He is too invested in his
vision of himself as a modern-day Diderot whose intellectual traffic with the world must be
unwaveringly centrifugal. Supposedly eager to reward others with the gifts of his syncretic
vision, he refuses to entertain the feedback of readers who might challenge his own
readymade convictions. Gibbs attempts to rationalize his paralysis as a principled refusal to
compromise his integrity in order to gain entry to a degraded and undervalued marketplace of
ideas. This, however, is only a form of self-delusion, as his unwavering principles safeguard
him from completing his manuscript and facing the very real prospect of its failure to attract
readers.

Gibbs mocks Rhoda’s attempts to counsel him—“ought to teach too, lecture like
wow”—but her instruction may be more valuable than he recognized. She claims she would
write a book “without all these big phony words” Gibbs uses: “I mean like, I'd communicate”
(609). Gibbs fails to see the ways in which her situation parallels his own. She, too, has
suffered the agonies of trying to live up to an idealized version of herself that she has come to
resent.

—And then I mean I finally figure out like all this time I’m trying to be it I
really hate this fucking model I always said I’ll be, you know? [. . .] I mean
like when I finally find out I’m fine like just who I am, and I mean this model
I always said I'll be like I find out all this time I really hate her you know? I
mean I’m breaking my ass and she’s making me hate who I really am, you
She insists she could write a book about her experiences that would not only address concerns Gibbs shares, but that it would do so in a more effective fashion and reach a wider audience: “—Like I mean I’d communicate, you know?” Gibbs’s contempt for her confident assertions and seemingly unearned security in her own identity forecloses the possibility that he may hear something valuable in her implicit critique of his own working methods and assumptions about the nature of the relationship between writers and readers.

Communication is paramount in any kind of didactic exchange, of course, but failures to communicate can also reveal something of value by pointing to a blind spot in the conditions of cultural production that repeatedly make these failures possible. From there, one may take steps to correct it—or, alternatively, to sidestep this dynamic entirely.

Gibbs maintains that this sort of communication breakdown is not valuable at all, and instead exacts a terrible toll on the writer who would counter it. Gibbs bitterly compares working on his incomplete manuscript to the exhausting responsibilities of nursing an invalid:

—Sixteen years like living with a God damned invalid sixteen years every time you come in sitting there waiting just like you left him wave his stick at you, plump up his pillow cut a paragraph add a sentence hold his God damned hand little warm milk add a comma slip out for some air pack of cigarettes come back in right where you left him, eyes follow you around the room wave his God damned stick figure out what the hell he wants, plump the God damned pillow change bandage read aloud move a clause around wipe his chin new paragraph God damned eyes follow you out stay a week, stay a
month whole God damned year think about something else, God damned
friends asking how’s he coming along all expect him out any day don’t want
bad news no news rather hear lies, big smile out any day now, walk down the
street God damned sunshine begin to think maybe you’ll meet him maybe
cleared things up got out by himself came back open the God damned door
right there where you left him . . . (603)

Gibbs’s writing task remains a Sisyphean one, but not simply due to his flagging discipline.
His creative stultification is, rather, a natural consequence of his failure to consider for whom he is writing—indeed, of having dismissed the considerations of audience entirely. Both Gibbs and, later, the speaker of Agapē Agape turn their projects into private monuments to their own failures of will, seeking to find within the strictures of their work the solace the external world has refused them. Their products of their intellectual labours can still teach, but only as cautionary examples of what can happen when one’s creative motives are either forgotten or distorted by vying for the attention of a contentless, easily manipulated culture.

Gibbs’s stalled progress and relentless self-laceration suggest, however, that willful difficultly, when cultivated as an exclusionary gesture, does not receive the text’s unqualified endorsement. Gaddis continues to explore the tension between the desire to communicate that Jack Gibbs harbours alongside the self-destructive elitism that freezes his progress in Agapē Agape, whose narrator laments the valorization of democratic, pleasure-giving art over the serious work that would teach. But the fact that his project remains fragmented and embryonic testifies to the stultifying effects of his pride and defensive cynicism. Gaddis’s text thus continues to call for a relaxing of elitist structures of authorship that privilege the autocratic genius’s creative autonomy over more contingent modes of knowing, even while
expressing doubts about the collaborative model of meaning-making introduced in *J R*.

“Everybody his own artist”: Educating the Herd in *Agapē Agape*

With *Agapē Agape*, Gaddis extends the analogy of scholarship as an extended act of palliative care with a jeremiad that addresses the tension, established in *J R*, between Rhoda’s earnest but unsophisticated desire to communicate and Gibbs’s elitist, self-aggrandizing obscurantism. A stream-of-consciousness monologue on the themes of bitterness and failure, *Agapē Agape* attempts to argue for the primacy of art’s cognitive value over its cultivation of beauty, which has been debased by its association with the public’s appetite for the kind of easy pleasures made possible in part by technological innovations like the player piano.

The targets of *Agapē Agape*’s critique include the waning authority of both the qualified critic and the taste-impaired contemporary zeitgeist to recognize genuine art and to laud those who make it. *Agapē Agape* marks a further turn from *The Recognitions*’ maximalist aesthetic of mastery to a new one announced by the fragmentary discontinuities of *J R*. Gaddis’s final work takes the form of a rambling internal monologue of a speaker, semi-autobiographically modeled on Gaddis himself. Recumbent on his sickbed, he reflects on his failed attempts to shape a lifetime’s worth of research into a complete final text; like *J R*’s Jack Gibbs, he is at work on a history of mechanization and the arts, in particular the player piano and its inauguration of an age marked by a fear of difficulty and failure. The player piano’s co-option of the province of the once privileged artist receives the full force of *Agapē Agape*’s narrator’s wrath. *Agapē Agape* quickly becomes a complaint about the technological age and its would-be ouster of the artist. In Gaddis’s estimation, the human creator is being replaced by automata and mechanical prostheses—like the player piano—
which allow the untalented to experience a simulation of creative activity. The consequence of this democratization of the creative act has been a catastrophic devaluing of the genuine artist and his works. This confirms for the narrator his thesis that “entertainment is the parent of technology”: technological innovation is not initially driven by the long-range goal of achieving “some great breakthrough in medical science” or “advanced weapons design or aerodynamics” but “for entertainment, for pleasure in its highest form to entertain Plato’s educated elite” (45). Art, then, becomes severed from its cognitive or instructive functions altogether.

Early on, Agapē’s narrator introduces a rambling précis of his (and Gaddis’s) central themes:

...that’s what my work is about, the collapse of everything, of meaning, of language, of values, of art, disorder and dislocation wherever you look, entropy drowning everything in sight, entertainment and technology and every four year old with a computer, everybody his own artist where the whole thing came from, the binary system and the computer where technology came from in the first place, you see? (2)

Notable in this list of grievances is the narrator’s distaste for the possibility that everybody can be “his own artist,” an early intimation of the elitist anxiety that will inform the speaker’s belief in creative work as the sanctified provenance of the artist alone. If left to dilettantes and the unwashed masses, art can only become a parodic shadow of its genuine self, as risible as what might be produced by a “four year old with a computer.” His “whole thesis” (45), he claims, is that the drive for pleasure, as the mother of technological advancement, eventually gelds the genuine (and therefore potentially threatening) artist, resulting in
this democracy of every man his own artist where we are today, this
democracy of Plato’s chance persons and having art without the artist because
he’s a threat, because the creative artist has to be a threat so he’s swamped by
the performer by the, by the pantomimic by the imitative who is not a threat...
(46-7)

Here, he rails against the same corporate interests that would have turned the artist into a
performer—like the executive in J R who commissions Edward Bast, a gifted but tortured
composer, to write “zebra music” to serve as an incidental soundscape for home movies of an
African safari. In such an environment, one can only mourn the loss of “that fierce
authenticity of Hawthorne between the writer and the reader, between the reader and the page
what it’s all about, the solitary enterprise between him and the individual reader” (Agapē 55).
In lieu of letting his work stand on its own, the ambitious writer must submit himself to the
indignity of performing before a crowd. Gaddis’s speaker is aghast at the galling thought of
Hawthorne embarking on a publicity tour, “giving readings to entertain” (50-1). The
“castrated” (51) Melville, too, provides a customary example. Forced to refund his publishers
after his latest novel had failed, he was shunted off to his job at the Custom House, and so
“reduced to a non-person” and “eliminated as a threat” (51). This hostility towards a culture’s
genuine artists itself becomes part of the message Gaddis’s narrator strives to communicate.
Here, he channels some of the urgency of J R’s Rhoda, who was also desperate to
communicate (though one should note that the assumptions behind his lesson would only
further disenfranchise the voices of those who, like Rhoda, fail to measure up to his elitist
standards). “[T]hat’s what I have to explain” (51), he insists, even while acknowledging that
explanations ultimately prove to be impossible, even recursive: “all we hear are explanations
of these explanations” (51). In this sense, both *Agape’s* speaker and the didactic authorial voice he represents are left facing a communicative dead end: “Can’t really explain anything to anybody” (53).

The speaker’s aspiration to explain is, on one hand, another instance of imposing order on the fundamentally inchoate structure of experience, an attempt to edify the masses that may be nothing more than the “one grand misunderstanding” Jack Gibbs diagnoses in *J R*. In either case, Gaddis’s speaker continues to express his scorn for the mechanisms of the literary marketplace which increasingly favour the pantomimic performer over the cognitive and transformational gains the ungelded artist may bring about. In his view, literary prize committees are often ridiculously misguided in their failure to recognize genius, and hence irrelevant to all save “the poets who compose to please the bad taste of their reviewers end up instructing one another, what this glorious democracy in the arts is all about isn’t it?” (50-1). This is especially true of the present day, when the sheer number of available awards guarantees that, at some point, “everyone” will be “a winner”—a democratized, inclusive distribution of accolades that eliminates the possibility of the kinds of productive failure Gaddis and his narrator value. These criterion-free rituals of self-congratulation—“now everybody out there giving prizes to each other” (54)—further devalue what was once intended to recognize singular examples of artistic excellence. What’s more, the writers ostensibly being honoured are only pawns being used to advance the self-serving cultural agenda of the prize-givers and the market: “not even for winners no we’re all just props for the ones who give the prizes, pantomimics imitation entertainment for this supine half-literate and non-literate crowd out there” (54).

Both the limitations of this largely “non-literate” audience and the unlikely cultural
longevity of his text weigh heavily on Agapē’s speaker, who must balance a desire to get it right with the exigencies of the ticking clock. While impatient to announce his diagnosis of this growing cultural crisis with the few remaining literate readers, the limitations imposed by his illness and his perfectionism have paralyzed his creativity. Furthermore, if the collective memory of the masses he imagines usurping the artist’s role is short, then what does it matter if his work remains unfinished or not? The narrator’s death will fail to bring his work into the public’s eye, perhaps, but the anger that drives him may be enough to project his argument beyond the sickroom. What survives is not the narrator’s intended work but his personal lament about his losing battle—a record, in other words, of his failure to correct his readers’ errors.

Gaddis’s critique here becomes confused: he conflates the speaker’s paranoia about a cabal of influence-peddling critics with his recurring elitist disdain for the barely literate reading public (the same public presumably taking their aesthetic direction from these compromised arbiters of cultural value).

We are thousands and they millions, write the fiction they want or don’t write at all, ruling out Pound’s cry for the new, the challenging or what’s labeled difficult, so when Gravity’s Rainbow is being devoured by college youth everywhere and wins the National Book Award, its unanimous recommendation by the Pulitzer jury is overturned by the trustees for a double-talk spoof of academic vagaries by a bogus ‘Professor,’ to everyone’s relief...(61)

“We are thousands and they millions” alludes to a line of Tolstoy’s the narrator discovers on one of the innumerable scraps of paper among his unorganized research notes. The line
speaks to Tolstoy’s conviction that artists must produce work accessible to the masses—or “the herd,” in the less charitable opinion of Gaddis’s narrator.

Why Tolstoy says it’s our duty to edify the masses, our vocation to edify mankind even for the ones who think you can teach without knowing anything since artists teach unconsciously, that music, literature, painting all the arts are just a stew of nonsense and falsehood if the masses don’t support them. (55)

Gaddis’s narrator subscribes to the attitude, often attributed to the avant-garde, that artists know what’s best for the public it holds in barely-restrained contempt: we, he imagines them saying, know what’s good for you, and we’ll give it to you whether you like it or not. The public may yearn for beauty, but disjunctive art is what the masses need to have their eyes opened to the squalor and injustice of our modern world. The “support” of the masses need not enter into the writer’s consideration. But such a militantly prescriptive view—in the sense of knowing what kind of art is “best” for us—could be ascribed to those who would champion beauty as the only truly valuable aesthetic. Beauty, viewed in its debased, current incarnation as the insatiable desire for the image, helps account for the avant-garde’s disdain of it. For some, recourse to the beautiful constituted turning away from the ugly truths of the world which the artist has a moral compunction to confront us with (and, in its more militant forms, to rub that ugliness in our faces). Hence, beauty and its attendant pleasures became off limits to the serious, politically committed artist. Escaping discomfort by pursuing diversionary pleasures is the only motive Gaddis’s narrator can ascribe to “the herd’s” preference for beautiful works, and it would be unseemly for the artist to indulge it. For him, it seems that the fact beauty gives us pleasure aligns it with the immature appeal of escapist art, the kind embraced by the masses “waiting to be entertained because that’s where it
started and that’s where it ends up, avoiding pain and seeking pleasure” (17). The writer then faces a dilemma: if his didactic impulse is incompatible with giving pleasure, he must reject the kind of well-shaped prose that would allow him to lucidly express his ideas and win the approval of his reader.

The narrator is convinced that he and his shrinking coterie of peers have been wronged by a flippant dismissal of genuine artists for the facile pleasures of democratic creativity. For him, the player piano becomes an emblem for the masturbatory simulacra of artistic creation that grants “the herd” the illusory thrill of performance without exacting the price it has traditionally demanded—specifically, a long apprenticeship in which one repeatedly confronts and comes to terms with failure. If one grants that this democratization of the arts is a disastrous development, his anger is justified. In voicing the fear that works of novelistic art like The Recognitions, for instance, are doomed to vanish for lack of a fit audience, though few, the narrator clings to his elitism in the mistaken belief that this hardline stance is the only way to restore the artist to his once privileged position. What he fails to consider is that articulating the conditions of this loss may help readers revise their own representations more effectively than the kind of hectoring for which he is so well equipped.

The speaker constantly worries about rushing to complete his study, what is to be the culmination of his life’s work, “before all [of it] is misunderstood and distorted and, and turned into a cartoon because it is a cartoon, whole stupefied mob out there waiting to be entertained, turning the creative artist into a performer, into a celebrity like Byron, the man in the place of his work” (2). Such a fate is all but inevitable in a sound bite, personality-driven culture of limited attention spans, where the labours of the committed artist have been
cheapened by technology’s facilitation of instant aesthetic gratification. Clearly, easy
pleasure has been valued over and above utility. His lament presupposes that art must satisfy
more than an audience’s taste for easy diversions—that, as J R’s Gibbs puts it, one must take
something away from a book if it is to be of any worth, ideally after a prolonged period of
problem-solving. Art may teach something of value, but for its lessons to resonate, an
audience must be willing to engage with repeated failures of understanding. Crucially,
Gaddis envisions this kind of failure as distinct from the exclusionary elitism of J R’s Jack
Gibbs, who aims to make his study “as difficult as [he] can” (244) in order to demonstrate his
intellectual bona fides to an imagined readership who will judge his work according to
standards as lacerating as his own.

For Gaddis, technology’s unwelcome encroachments upon the artist’s domain betray
America’s distrust of chance and, crucially, its attendant fear of failure. The player piano’s
mechanical precision allows “the herd” to play at being artists by sidestepping the long
apprenticeship to self-doubt that all genuine artists must undergo. For Gaddis’s speaker, the
“whole point of [technology] to order and organize to eliminate chance, to eliminate failure
because we’ve always hated failure in America like some great character flaw what
technology’s all about” (13). This Luddite complaint is entangled with the speaker’s
ambivalent stance towards the Flaubertian elitism that informs his understanding of the
artist’s vocation. For these artists, the “herd” will “always be detestable.” Technology, in
aiming to eliminate the “fear of chance, of probability and indeterminacy,” speaks to what
Gaddis’s speaker identifies as a quintessentially American quality: “this fear this stigma of
failure which separates the crowd from the elite” (50). Technological reproduction engenders
an aesthetically democratized world in which we have “art without the artist because he’s a
threat so he’s swamped by the performer by the, by the pantomimic by the imitative.”

Gaddis’s speaker admits he’s “afraid of the death of the elite because it means the death of me.” His greatest fear is that he will be forgotten, “left on the shelf with the dead white guys in the academic curriculum that my prizes are forgotten because today everybody’s giving prizes for that supine herd out there waiting to be entertained” (48). The growth of the insatiable herd is a consequence of living in a degraded version of Plato’s republic, in which artists, vetted by the ruling classes, produce work “that delights the best educated” (14). This kind of aesthetic pandering proves self-defeating to the poet, resulting finally in a disastrous abdication of the his didactic authority: “you get your poets composing to please the bad taste of their judges and finally the audience instructing each other and that’s what this glorious democracy’s all about isn’t it” (14). Here, the Gaddis of J R who suggested that serving a didactic muse may compromise the aesthetic autonomy of one’s work bemoans a society in which the loss of the artist’s authority to instruct goes unmourned. The do-it-yourself ethic of the player piano has helped bring about a world in which everyone can be his own artist, suggesting a parallel to the autodidactic protocols of learning authorized by J R and the precocious entrepreneurial exploits of its eponymous hero. The poet-teachers, writing to please the bad taste of their critics, abdicate their responsibility to instruct, leaving the underqualified free to teach each other—a repugnant development, as Gaddis’s narrator makes clear. While some may welcome this collaborationist, decentred model of learning, this loss of a locus of didactic authority threatens to compromise the structures of apprenticeship and influence that have undergirded both Socratic instruction and Bloomian models of literary influence. But this fear of the crowd’s usurpation of the artist’s authority has at its heart more than an instinct of elitist self-preservation. Above all, Gaddis’s speaker
bemoans the contemporary loss of *agapē*, “the community of brotherly love celebrated by early Christian writers” (108). Such a community is founded on a recognition of the value and autonomy of the individual imagination, “because that’s the heart of it, where the individual is lost, the unique is lost, where authenticity is lost not just authenticity but the whole concept of authenticity, that love for the beautiful creation before it’s created” (37). This informing spirit of *agapē* is “what you don’t find in these products of the imitative arts that are made for reproduction on a grand scale” (37).

Gaddis’s speaker exerts a considerable amount of his limited energy in demonstrating how he has failed to tame a lifetime’s worth of scholarly material, bemoaning his inability to shape how his work will be received when he is gone. He remains wary of the old saws of postmodernism, including the much-ballyhooed death of the author—the logical outcome of Flaubert’s dictum that the artist, God-like, “must manage to make posterity believe that he never existed” (To which the narrator, ever aware that his society values perpetual novelty over the preservation of cultural memory, responds with the acidic aside: “what posterity?”) (49). Against the cynical poststructuralist “belly-talkers” who promote “the death of the author,” Gaddis insists on upholding the sanctity of “the artist’s solitary enterprise with the individual reader Hawthorne talked about” (50). He rejects the contemporary view in which the author, “everywhere present and nowhere visible,” is led “right into the embrace of the death of the author whose intentions have no connection with the meaning of the text which is indeterminate anyway” (49). If both traditional conceptions of authorship and literary posterity are casualties of the age of mass reproduction, in which easy novelty is valorized over hard-won insight, the writer no longer has any motivation to attempt to bring himself into that scared communion, didactic or otherwise, with the ever-endangered individual
reader. In such a climate, emulating the “fierce authenticity of Hawthorne” (55) no longer seems possible.

Furthermore, the morality of making art at all—no matter to what ghostly authorial presence the work may or may not be attributed—must itself be called into question. The dilemma is not a new one, as Gaddis’s narrator is reminded when, rummaging through his notes, he finds the following anguished excerpt from Tolstoy’s diaries: “I shall write no more fiction; people are weeping, dying, marrying, and I should sit down and write books telling ‘how she loved him’? It’s shameful!” In struggling to articulate his own position on how the artist can reconcile the independent spirit of genius with the populist allure of beautiful form, Gaddis’s narrator frequently looks to Tolstoy, who held that it is the writer’s duty to edify the masses (59). In positioning himself against Tolstoy’s anguished humanist conscience, Gaddis’s narrator affirms a more self-interested view of literary production for which the fictional work provides its own justification for being. But he has a dilemma: he cannot complete his study, and even if he does, it is a work of scholarship that will not be able to survive the contemporary cultural condition of inattentive audiences and loss of shared aesthetic standards it describes.

In struggling to articulate his own position on how the artist can reconcile the spirit of genius with the populist allure of beautiful form, Gaddis’s narrator frequently looks to Tolstoy and the legacy of what, today, is often regarded as his unfashionably naïve aesthetic theory. In the history of aesthetics, Tolstoy has served as a “whipping-boy,” accused of propagating extreme versions of “expressionism” (the position that “artworks serve to transmit, and arouse in others, the particular emotions of the artist”) and “moralism” (Cooper 164). One uncharitable anthologist characterizes Tolstoy’s late writings on art as the
“petulant, almost fanatical outbursts of an old man” (Cooper 164). In this sense, Gaddis’s renunciation of fiction’s didactic potential is haunted by the humanist convictions of Tolstoy’s often devalued aesthetic theory. Art’s “infectious” power, argues Tolstoy, endows it with a responsibility to embody and transmit the good, such that its moral qualities must take precedence over aesthetic criteria. Hence, successful art must be both populist and moral: Tolstoy holds that, in David Cooper’s paraphrase, “effete and obscure works which communicate only to the few are, for that reason alone, bad art or non-art” (Abuse 165). Both Agapē’s speaker and J R’s Gibbs fancy themselves scholars, not artists, but their cultivation of obscurity has the same limiting effect on the size of their potential audience.

Tolstoy argues that art is to be distinguished from the mere “business of handing on knowledge” (Tolstoy 169), alluding to what Arthur Danto calls the cultural insight model of art. In this model, art’s aims are primarily anthropological, and hence no better for this purpose than “cook books, Polaroids, the Sears Roebuck catalog” (Abuse 130). Any truth claims a work of art makes are, as we recall, immediately subject to the skeptic’s litany of objections. In the case of the “big” novel, even the most diligent attempts to approximate an encyclopedic breadth of knowledge within the confines of a quasi-realistic narrative are bound to be constrained by considerations of length alone. To the extent that fiction can exert a didactic influence at all, it must abandon both the anthropological aims of the cultural insight model and ideals of encyclopedic verisimilitude and, instead, consider how it may catalyze transformative cognitive gains by verifying the usefulness of productive failure.

Gaddis, who continues to task the novelist with the pedagogical goal of exploring the disorder at the heart of things, suggests that an audience’s relationship with the world can be reforged even by an artwork in which misunderstanding outweighs successful
communication, a possibility that *Agapē Agape*’s narrator fails to consider. The kind of misunderstanding he lays at the feet of the masses may be a source of knowledge. In admitting our confusion, we immediately make ourselves more receptive to receiving the kind of didactic guidance founded not on models of elitist mastery but informed, instead, by the spirit of *agapē*, the communal form of love whose passing Gaddis laments. When neither student nor pupil are hampered by conventional strictures of didactic authority, knowledge may no longer be treated as a commodity but, rather, as the outgrowth of a communal process of creativity in which everyone acting as his own artist need not signal the erosion of aesthetic standards or genuine art.

For Gaddis’s artists, self-aggrandizement goes hand in hand with self-doubt. Their tendency to indulge in solipsistic introspection is a source of their creative strength as well as their greatest impediment to expressing it or translating it to the outside world. However, when coupled with the kind of elitism expressed by *Agapē Agape*’s narrator, this self-nurturing isolationism becomes coterminous with a kind of cognitive selfishness. The stultified artist who would restrict aesthetic experience to only a select few has little chance of mounting a vigorous opposition to *J R*’s America, which would render him little more than a gelded entertainer. For the narrator of *Agapē Agape*, his desire for recognition can only be satisfied by gaining the admiration of his imaginary coterie of fellow elites. In refusing to surrender his ossified belief that artists must assert their sovereign jurisdiction over the cultural marketplace, the narrator’s laments about shrinking audiences will remain little more than examples of the kind of chilly, insular hectoring that confirms Boyers’ diagnosis of antirealism’s fundamentally tedious nature. Gaddis’s narrator must conceive of a more modest vision of the artist’s role if he is to regain the social voice he believes—mistakenly or
not—he once commanded. The kind of failure Gaddis’s stultified creators experience exposes their cognitive and ethical blind spots, if only to the reader. They must surrender their elite selfishness along with any cherished notions of irrefutable truth for a more workable model of didactic art to emerge. Only in this way can one yield a truly democratic model of artistic creation.

In its brevity, its self-doubt, and its demonstration of the impossibility of any triumphal, totalizing “understanding,” Agapē Agape goes even further than J R in embracing banality and breakdown. For Gaddis's speaker at his most self-consciously reactionary, beauty, by virtue of its pleasurable immediacy, is condemned for its pandering to the poor attention span of the “herd” and its insatiable appetite for spectacle. Hence, it is unworthy of the committed, serious artist's attention. But Gaddis's strategy, taken to extremes, may only reaffirm the elitist attitudes that foreclose a literary text’s ability to exercise a productive didactic influence. In light of the novel’s antipathetic motivations, readers must learn to stay receptive to the potential benefits of failure without succumbing to the defeatist attitudes that threaten to ruin Gaddis’s most promising artist figures.

The value of not-knowing lies in its potential to grant one a newfound perspective that does not mistake itself for a wholly inclusive view, but is instead readily prepared to surrender whatever authority or cognitive security it has worked so hard to attain. Gaddis’s fiction, like the entropic intrusions that punctuate the lives of his characters, effectively exposes readers to the kind of uneasy instability that allows one to audition new cognitive or ethical positions from within the relative safety of fiction’s imaginative laboratory. We are encouraged to embrace the ephemerality of supposedly stable edifices of knowledge, attitudes towards others, and rules about living. J R suggests that the entropic nature of
existence does not need to be battled or domesticated, for it is ultimately a source of vital creativity best suited to combating the stultifying utilitarianism of the classroom. The price of this new pedagogical dispensation is the arrogation of divine authorial power that *Agapē*’s embittered speaker would retract, longing to reclaim a belief in the artist’s power to impose a veneer of order upon the chaos of experience, thin and fragile though any such effort is. While there may be no exiting the swamp of opacity and obscurity in which Gaddis increasingly found himself stuck, his fictions nonetheless maintains a fierce commitment to the value of the didactic, refusing, even in their self-diagnosed failure, to be satisfied by telling readers what they already know.
Chapter Four

“The Most Reverent Looking”: Epistemic Awe in *Three Farmers on their Way to a Dance*

It is unsurprising that the label most frequently appended to Richard Powers’s fiction is “encyclopedic.” His novels offer dense, information-rich narratives about characters who immerse themselves in unfamiliar disciplinary frameworks, and are challenged to keep pace with the proliferating connections that such epistemic cross-pollination breeds. The challenge is usually extended to his readers, as well. In an interview with Jim Neilson, Powers has described his novels as a successive series of “attempts to wed narrative with discursive writing, to find a form where each betrays itself as the flip side of the other” (“An Interview” 14). Powers claims this fusion of rhetorical modes as a marriage of necessity, explaining to Stephen Burn that he is attracted to the capacious novel of ideas because it is especially qualified to represent the character of contemporary life:

[D]ata-intensive novels appeal to me both because they reflect the explosion of data that typifies life in the information age and because they offer the richest possible model of the proliferating maps that the individual brain must make in navigating runaway culture. The novel of information is uniquely suited to speculate on how individual existence impinges on collective reality, and how, with regard to saying what it means to be alive, everything connects with everything else. (“An Interview” 172).

In its intellectual promiscuity and willingness to include “essayistic narration, self-referring
commentary, and even poetry alongside relatively traditional stretches of mimetic narrative” (Burn 164), Powers’s work claims obvious affinities with the so-called encyclopedic novels of Gaddis, Pynchon, and DeLillo. However, it differs in its interpretation of the consequences of total epistemic interconnectivity, or what it means for “everything [to connect] with everything else.” In the work of his predecessors, this intuition is typically regarded through a lens of paranoia or dread. DeLillo and Pynchon, for instance, often voice a suspicion of invisible patterns and connections too vast and seemingly conspiratorial to be a product of coincidence. In their novels, collective reality impinges on individual existence, occasionally to the point of engulfing and assimilating subjectivity altogether. Powers’s novels differ from those of a Pynchonian cast, in which the accretion of information takes one further afield from solutions to problems or genuine contact with reality. In these texts, for the paranoiac, increasing evidence of the interconnected nature of reality leads not to understanding but to further bewilderment. Characters in such fictions gradually come to see themselves as ensnared by a panoptic convergence of forces that ultimately denies them agency, reducing them to prop actors caught in a malevolent system whose motives lie beyond understanding. These forces collude to strip them of autonomy or force them into solipsistic retreat, seeking in self-enclosed imaginative worlds the security the external world refuses them. Overwhelmed by the pressure of the ceaseless flow of information, subjectivity itself is threatened with erasure, as in Gravity’s Rainbow when Slothrop is literally effaced, disappearing into the text. Undergirding these kinds of novels is a kind of epistemological skepticism, a doubt that the investigative appendages of the human intellect can ever make contact with the bedrock of reality. Instead, the scholar is continually surprised by a proliferating series of trap-doors and false bottoms: each hard-won insight further reveals the
unruly contours of a world that suggests either unfathomable complexity or conspiratorial networks intent on keeping the observer forever at bay. Reality is thus either fundamentally unknowable, always out of the reach of our limited representational tools, or is concealed by forces unwilling to reveal its secrets.

In spite of these seemingly insurmountable barriers towards understanding, Powers’s characters, like those of his encyclopedic predecessors, remain information addicts restlessly driven to immerse themselves in the monastic pursuit of specialized knowledge. They devote themselves to their feverish agendas with the faith that the emergent patterns they discover will somehow prove redemptive. The pattern in Powers’s novels, however, is such that the growing awareness of interconnectivity proves liberating instead of oppressive. Don DeLillo’s ominous intuition, in Underworld, that “everything is connected” (825) undergoes a transformation in Powers’s fiction from a wary admonition to an exclamation of unbidden insight, an epiphanic moment that retroactively imbues his characters’ blind hermeneutic gropings with the aura of inevitable discovery. This awards them a next-to-numinous recognition of the interconnected nature of a world that becomes slightly easier to navigate once they have assimilated their lessons in problem solving—“what any book worth reading’s about,” as J R’s Jack Gibbs affirms. For Powers, the problems fiction sets before its readers need not involve apprenticeships in failure of the kind that yield only temporarily satisfying insights. “Puzzles,” in Powers’s hybrid narratives, “always involve some moment of insight—the instant of aha. The solution comes in a flash, all at once, so simple and obvious you wonder why you couldn’t see it before” (Three Farmers 151).

The ravenous intellects of Powers’s characters, however, often render them emotionally malnourished. The recurrence of such characters throughout Powers’s novels
leads Joseph Dewey to identify within them a dynamic of alternating retreat from and reluctant engagement with the world (Understanding Richard Powers). Powers’s scholars, scientists, and autodidacts typically withdraw into monastic isolation, determined to find in the mastery of arcane disciplines the structure that will shore up their loose psychic moorings. In such readings, these characters’ pursuit of knowledge is a palliative measure, never wholly taken up for its own inherent rewards. Instead, it serves as a coping mechanism, a distraction to numb the pain of loss, bereavement, or generalized malaise borne of living in an information age where signal can no longer reliably be distinguished from noise. These characters, grappling with fresh wounds or long-nursed traumas, throw themselves into quixotic research projects or the construction of private imaginative worlds. In exercising a measure of control over these limited private spheres, they seek the kind of security unavailable to them in their interactions with an external world that impishly reasserts the fundamental groundlessness of embodied human experience: loss, both sudden and inexplicable, is always a moment away.

Powers’s fictions thus explore the “counter-impulses of withdrawal and engagement that define the artist / audience relationship” (Dewey, “Little Knots” 202). As I have been arguing, this dynamic of withdrawal and exchange is also one predicated on a relationship between the teacher and his students. However, instead of ensnaring the reader in dense thickets of information in order to browbeat her into submission to his superior intellect, or to underscore the interpretative impotence of the untutored amateur, Powers proposes an alternative framework for the didactic relationship between author and reader. In depicting the shortcomings of hoarding information as a response to epistemological anxiety, Powers offers a more optimistic course of instruction for his readers, nominating the concept of
interconnectivity as the basis for a more reverent relationship to the world and those with whom we share it. For Powers, the stresses of navigating the world’s inassimilable surplus of information can be ameliorated by incorporating this knowledge into fictional narratives, such that what he calls the “almost untenable conversation” between “the interior landscape, the self-telling story, and this irrefutable outside world” (“The Art of Fiction No. 175” 22) may briefly assuage the epistemological anxiety of those characters seized by a mania for certainty. Fiction may play a role in deepening our appreciation of the world’s seemingly inexhaustible networks of information by instructing us not only in the particulars that comprise them, but in the imaginative interventions we can offer in response.

Powers has mused that the kind of aesthetic quarantining of fiction from the concerns of the extra-textual, a strategy of the sort championed by William Gass, is understandable but ultimately limiting. As he notes, the strength of any artwork claiming to offer representations of the world will in part be determined by how far its creator chooses to sequester herself from the struggles or monotonies of quotidian reality in an effort to preserve some notion of aesthetic independence.

Is it art’s function to create a moratorium, a warm, womblike separation from the calamity of day-to-day politics and the contest of ownership? Or does art doom itself with too much separation? Does it become antiseptic? Does it become airless? How far is far enough? How far is too far? Clearly, you can’t make great art in the center of the intersection that’s under fire, you need to be withdrawn from the maelstrom in order to represent the maelstrom. But that attempt to withdraw completely from the condition of earthly politics is a Faustian one. It will doom itself. It will create the seeds of its own impotence
Countering this kind of impotence and irrelevance requires action, and “acting,” Powers asserts, “must begin with the most reverent looking” (Three Farmers 260). Powers’s work posits that fiction can encourage the sort of “reverent looking” that rejects solipsistic retreat into self-enclosed aesthetic worlds, instead training the reader to turn this gaze outward. In so doing, one may recognize that the world need not threaten the observer with engulfment or the erasure of subjectivity, and that the antirealist protocols of encyclopedic mastery or linguistic exhaustiveness can be put to uses other than self-indulgent play by bridging divides between disparate discourses of knowledge.

Powers himself has come to be seen as a translator of sorts, that ostensibly rare novelist who is able to bridge C.P. Snow’s infamous cultural divide between the sciences and the humanities. But Powers has expressed some discomfort at being described as a kind of benevolent interdisciplinary ambassador, one whose work positions him comfortably at the intersection between the supposedly irreconcilable sciences and the humanities. As he tells Stephen Burn:

My only difficulty with the word “intersection” is that it presupposes boundaries in the first place. [. . . ]There truly are no independent disciplines that operate exclusive of any other—just people, acting out of very human hopes, fears, and desires. And fiction is uniquely privileged to place its camera at those imaginary boundaries between disciplines, to show the ways in which the turbulent currents generated by any mode of apprehending the world necessarily cascade into all other streams of thought. (“An Interview” 171)
Powers has made a career of placing fiction’s camera at disciplinary boundaries since the publication of his first novel, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1988), which aptly takes photography as one of its principle motifs. *Three Farmers* explores how the traumas, technological advances, and shifts in epistemological paradigms that were products of “that unmitigated act of violence called the twentieth century” (212) have altered the way individual subjects approach what Powers calls the “interdependent activities” of looking and knowing (208). It announces “the problem with the world” that Powers’s fictional experiments will go on to investigate: as he tells Jim Neilson, “we have made it that it can’t be survived without the fictional moratorium that fiction provides, but it can't be opposed adequately from within that fictional moratorium” (“An Interview” 22).

In Powers’s work, this fictional moratorium may harness didactic energies that dismantle the imaginative (and, in his view, imaginary) boundaries that have constricted the cognitive potential of both antirealist narrative and, in a wider sense, the genre of the novel. Speculation about the humanities’ attempts to achieve a “vertical integration” with the sciences presupposes boundaries that, Powers says, have always been artificial. We have come to believe in the solidity of artificial lines of demarcation between supposedly independent fields of knowledge that were originally necessitated by a taxonomizing university system, as well as by the sheer growth of knowledge in each field that made the figure of the renaissance scholar, fluent in the languages of multiple fields of inquiry, an impossible ideal. Powers’s debut novel sets the stage for his consequent explorations of fiction’s relationship to our ever-proliferating fields of knowledge. Even though his texts delight in expounding the finer points of recondite disciplines, Powers’s ideal “novel of information” is ultimately one that best teaches by the perceptual attitudes it cultivates in its
readers, as opposed to any verifiable propositional content it may communicate.

Like his antirealist predecessors, Powers draws upon familiar metafictional tropes in structuring his work. He distinguishes himself from DeLillo, who risks alienating readers by antirealist difficulty in order to evoke the earned lessons of “awe and fear” (*Ratner’s Star* 207), and from Gass, whose obsessive “dictionary style” uses linguistic showboating to initiate the reader into the narrator’s particularly boorish mode of rumination as a means of instilling in them more refined habits of perception. Unlike Gass’s William Kohler, who attempts to coerce his reader into tacit complicity with his repugnant ideology, Powers’s metafictional gambits aim beyond insinuating his authorial mastery over a potentially flummoxed audience who are periodically reminded that they are being manipulated. The multiple narrative strands of Powers’s novels often coalesce with a metafictional pulling back of the curtain, in which a character bearing the autobiographical markings of Richard Powers asserts his role in the construction of the novel we have been reading. The sudden juxtaposition of these intersecting narrative frames thus “direct[s] the reader outside the book, driving her back to the irreducible heft, weight, and texture of the entrapping world” (Powers, “Being and Seeming”). Powers’s didactic goal, then, would see readers returning to the world with valuable information gleaned from their immersion in his novel’s hybrid narrative, newly armed with fresh ways of apprehending the multivalent complexity of experience. The main feature of this new epistemological orientation is an appreciation of interconnectivity as the quality that endows life with a numinous quality. One may seek out potential resonances between seemingly irreconcilable phenomena, people, and attitudes without harbouring fears of conspiracies or broadcasting one’s weary resignation about the endlessly sordid manifestations of self interest that ultimately contaminate all human affairs.
The epistemic leaps engineered by the extra-textual “Richard Powers” offer the possibility—or illusion—of analogous epistemic leaps readers can make when they return to the extra-textual world. Powers’s hybrid fiction encourages readers to carry out their own autodidactic program of learning that turns the empirical tools of scientific investigation towards self-inquiry. In so doing, it promotes a curiosity and dogged willingness to continually refashion the personal narratives that lend structure to one’s life in the face of fresh evidence or unexpected connections, which *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* attempts to make explicit with the metaficitonal ruptures and essayistic addresses that recur throughout its entwined narratives.

While such continual reminders of the artificiality of literary narrative can be seen as tedious metafictional gamesmanship, Powers attempts to use it in the service of his argument for the cognitive value of literature by using these epistemic “jump cuts” as spurs to forge new connections across both interpersonal and interdisciplinary boundaries. In particular, I want to suggest that Powers’s work can serve as a test case for how literature might arbitrate debates around seemingly intractable postmodern crises of knowability. Powers has often been asked to comment on such debates, given his reputation as a writer whose fiction often draws upon the kind of “hard science” that is often depicted as inimical to the humanist academic context in which his novels have begun to attract attention. In an interview with Neilson, Powers suggests that this crisis of knowability has been somewhat overinflated:

> The idea that narrative necessarily informs any interpretation of the facts seems to relegate the facts to some non-circulating, unreachable place and to leave us stuck inside our own private construction. But to my mind, those who announce the death of fact and meaning have replaced one incomplete model
of knowing with another. If naive materialism has truth flowing on a one-way street from the outside in, naive social constructionism and naive linguistic determinism have interpretation flowing down a one-way street from the inside out. I think a new consensus of thought may be forming, one that appreciates the two-way traffic of comprehension. (“An Interview” 15-16)

Powers’s work endorses a framework of knowledge in which apodictic certainty cedes some of its authority to imaginative collaboration. These forms of engagement—between author and audience, or photograph and viewer—challenge the rigid objectivist frameworks of knowledge in which his characters are so often immersed. Powers’s narrators learn to value intellectual inquiry for the ways it may strengthen social interdependence, as opposed to those models of knowledge building in which the scholar is quarantined from the part of the world he investigates. Accepting the invitation to engage in imaginative exchange with a cultural artifact such as a photograph or a novel can break us free from the antiseptic cocoon of our private representations. In this way, Powers’s fiction powerfully argues for the value of collaborative, incomplete knowledge over the often Procrustean compartmentalizing of objectivist epistemology.

Powers’s narratives suggest that the didactic energy of fiction is most effective not when endorsing a particular view of the world, or arguing the soundness of a particular moral proposition, but in demonstrating the value of initial misconceptions. As a character in Powers’s *The Gold Bug Variations* suggests, science is “is not about control,” but rather “cultivating a perpetual condition of wonder in the face of something that forever grows one step richer and subtler than our latest theory about it. It is about reverence, not mastery” (411). Readers are enjoined to trade efforts to master what can be known about the world
with an awareness that a repeated exposure to misunderstanding may be the better teacher. “So much depends on an initial misunderstanding” not simply because it may reveal the places where we need to reconfigure our knowledge, but because exposing our cognitive blind spots to ourselves enjoins a more reverent kind of looking (Three Farmers 325). As such we must, as the novel approvingly says of the industrialist Henry Ford, remain “willing to be wrong in good faith” (Three Farmers 335). As in the work of DeLillo, Gaddis, and Gass, Three Farmers acknowledges failure and misunderstanding as potential instruments of greater understanding. Unlike them, Powers typically avoids acknowledging the potential failure of his own didactic strategies. Because of this, there is a chance that his attempts at instruction may leave readers unconvinced, as Powers’s text often assumes that its assertions about the value of “reverent looking” can persuade by merit of their authoritative force alone.

But what is the value of this kind of reverent looking? Are we to presume it is a good in itself? Or is reverence to be valued because it tempers the obdurate scrutiny of the scientific mindset with a willingness to trade certitude for larger mysteries? In choosing how to address these questions, Powers repeatedly returns to the concepts of reflexivity and interconnection. In an interview with Steven Burn, Powers suggests that literature is “a remarkable embodiment of . . . situated knowledge: reflexive knowledge of the recursive relationship between people and their ideas, ideas not just about the physical world but also about the natural, economic, psychological, political, social” (“An Interview” 168-9). Powers goes on to claim that he learned early on to “[approach] works of literature not as objects of historical museum curation but as nodes in a connectionist network” (“An Interview” 169). Fiction thus has the potential to “represent and enact kinds of interdependent knowing that other disciplines acknowledged but were unable to reach” (“An Interview” 169). Fictional
texts can not only act as nodes in this network, but may perhaps best be able to reveal the contours of the network itself. Powers’s work thus attempts to infuse the mimetic aims of the realist novel with self-reflexive reminders that any understanding of the world it offers is always provisional. What one regards as established truths are, per the scientific method, hypotheses subject to retesting; we must be willing to abandon initial misapprehensions in the face of new information. As Dawes notes, “This does not mean that truth as such is equal to fiction. But it does mean—again, following in the tracks of science—that errors are productive, often yielding truth” (48). Three Farmers’ narrator says of Henry Ford, a figure prominent in the novel’s interwoven narratives, that he was “often willing to be wrong in good faith,” approvingly citing the industrialist’s assertion that “the only history that is worth a tinker’s damn is the history we make today” (335). The novel repeatedly reaffirms the value of initial misunderstandings in the process of discovery. To clarify ambiguities entails an exercise of the imagination, a testing of multiple narrative paths that might best reconcile the desires of the knower with the epistemological gaps that have stymied them or halted her progress. This withholding, deliberate or accidental, of epistemological closure as a spur to the imagination extends to the novel’s narrative structure. “Importantly,” as Joseph Dewey notes, “Powers refuses to validate entirely any one story. . . . There is no irrefutable evidence of which characters are invented and which characters are doing the inventing. Furthermore, the three narratives are each denied conventional closure or any reassuring wrap-up” (Understanding Richard Powers 21). Equally important is Powers’s refusal to seek easy recourse in strong relativism, or a postmodern flattening of distinctions between discourses that strips language of its instrumental and communicative value.

For the novelist, specialized knowledge, scientific or otherwise, may be valuable for
the evocative vocabularies it provides for charting emotional experience. Dewey argues that the characters in Powers’s novels ultimately come to see the value, indeed the duty, of acknowledging the “hot alogic of the heart” as a necessary counterbalance to the icy reason of the intellect (“Hooking the Nose of the Leviathan” 64). In this rubric, the head is ultimately always in service of the heart. But such readings are burdened with the same questionable Cartesian premises that Powers’s fiction rejects. They perpetuate a false assumption that the passions are fundamentally incommensurable with the knowledge-gathering intellect.

The scholar-hermits who populate Powers’s novels are faced with the choice between studying the world and participating in it. Powers’s own attempt to construct a hybrid fiction combining essayistic, didactic instruction with traditional narrative is one attempt to show that such a choice is based on a false premise. Their personal storehouses of information are only valuable insofar as they facilitate their rehabilitation into a life that is largely shaped by communion with others. In Three Farmers, the most potent way of forging such connections is through autobiographical exchange, the sharing of one’s story. Read in this framework, Powers’s novel, then, suggests that there is no psychic wound or epistemological anxiety that the “careful architecture of narrative” (Dewey, Understanding Richard Powers 108) cannot remedy. However, Three Farmers also warns that this palliative vision of shared narratives might be illusory, predicated less on a good faith attempt to reverse the artist’s withdrawal from the world than to reassert his creative primacy even at the cost of distorting, or looking away from, the historical facts that have shaped his current reality. Reverent looking, then, becomes even more important: it keeps the artist honest, checking his propensity to invent out of whole cloth with a duty to accurately represent the often unpleasant or irredeemable
givens of the world.

Like the work of DeLillo, Gass, and Gaddis, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* explores the attraction of retreating into solipsistic worlds for individuals still feeling the reverberations of the twentieth century’s various cultural and historical traumas. The novel alternates between three separate narratives, all of which are linked by their relation to a photograph of its titular subjects, entitled *Young Westerwald Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, 1914 by the German photographer August Sander. The first narrative is a first-person account of a stockbroker who becomes obsessed with tracing the photograph’s history after a chance viewing at a Detroit art exhibition. The other thread follows Peter Mays, an editor for an electronics trade magazine whose moribund existence is upturned by his equally obsessive search to discover the identity of a stunning redhead (an actress dressed, as he later discovers, for her role as Sarah Bernhardt) he spots marching in a Veteran’s Day parade. Intercut with these are chapters that trace the fortunes of the three subjects of the photograph as they each respond to, and are acted upon by, the events that plunged Europe into the Great War.

*Three Farmers’* characters learn that the responses that fiction may both demonstrate and elicit can be a powerful indicator of the socially interdependent nature of knowledge, including how one might enter into an imaginative exchange with another, or incorporate one’s personal narrative into the particulars of a greater history. Initially, Powers’ protagonists greedily consume information purely to satisfy their own desire for certainty. The aesthetic encounter, on the other hand, is premised on what the novel describes as an implausible two-way exchange.

We scour over a photo, asking not “What world is preserved here?” but “How do I differ from the fellow who preserved this, the fellows here preserved?”
Understanding another is indistinguishable from revising our own self image.

The two processes swallow one another. Photos interest us mostly because they look back. (258)

With its insistent focus on reciprocal observation, *Three Farmers* inaugurates a theme common to his subsequent novels, a theme which endeavours “to connect the involved reader with the splendid agitation of response, the bold intrusive activism that has always rested at the mysterious center of the aesthetic exchange” (Dewey, *Understanding* 22). The novel traces the twentieth century’s demolition of the myth of the disinterested observer in order to posit that the “autobiographical impulse,” the need to inscribe cultural artifacts with one’s autobiographical narrative, is, for better or worse, “the true measure of worth” (*Three Farmers* 253). Powers’s novels grant the existence of an external reality that is independent of the imperfect and socially situated discourses we use to describe it. They also insist, however, on our “inability to separate empirical fact from personal necessity” (*Three Farmers* 207). Powers suggests that empirical facts only become meaningful in the context of a narrative that weaves them into a larger network of personal significance.

In describing his visit to the museum, *Three Farmers*’ narrator voices the opinion that “the finest of this century’s paintings will never make up for our concurrent botch of everything else. Art can only hope to be an anesthetic, a placebo” (13). By the end of the novel, this dismissal of art as a “placebo” no longer seems so pejorative. (Placebos often do have a therapeutic effect.) In this sense, *Three Farmers* is ultimately optimistic about the ameliorative effects of the collaborative exchange between artist and audience, suggesting that Powers’s hybrid fiction can guide us out of the prisonhouses of passive, subjective knowledge. *Three Farmers* offers an alternative response to traumatic history, suggesting in
place of the dogged pursuit of facts an intermingling of verifiable truths and subjective personal narratives as the kind of aesthetic placebo that may promote the kind of interconnectivity that positivistic inquiry alone cannot.

However, if objective knowledge of the sort fetishized by Western thought is an unattainable and damaging ideal, the collaborative vision of intertwining personal narrative with empirical fact may foster an illusory sense of community in which a multiplicity of individuals mistake interconnectedness with cocooning themselves in their own private narratives. And, while the imaginative act of dealing in biographical fallacies may help individuals forge their own ways of relating to the material and historical forces that have shaped their lives, its ameliorative effects may be achieved at the cost of promulgating attractive untruths that romanticize or distort the traumatic inheritance of the twentieth century’s violent upheavals. This is why the kind of self-reflexive perception Powers describes is so important, and is no less a part of the reverent looking it promotes.

Powers often abrogates the traditional demands of the realist novel, such as a sustained exploration of characters’ internal psychological states, in order to pursue alternative aesthetic and cognitive goals. In *Three Farmers*, a marriage of tempered antirealist excess and didactic energy is most evident in the novel’s frequent direct addresses to the reader. In one central example of such passages, Powers’s narrator introduces the concept of “trigger points,” which he claims represents “those times when the way a process develops loops back on the process and applies itself to its own source” (81). The novel uses its own trigger points to unite the century’s newfound self-reflexive modes of perception with the conspiratorial networks that link incident and information.

Social culture has taken tail in mouth and rolled a benzene ring. Art takes
itself as both subject and content: post-modernism about painting, serialism about musical composition, constructivist novels about history: a still, eclectic, universally reflexive, uniformly diverse, closed circle, the homogeneous debris in space following a nova. Nothing can take place in this century without some coincident event linking it into a conspiratorial whole. (83)

In this passage and similar ones, Powers engages in an essayistic mode to explicitly instruct his readers in the logic of second-order observation that structures his novel. These irruptions of essayistic instruction lay forth his views on the consequences of the twentieth century’s new relativistic paradigms, and the ways technology has profoundly altered relations between both nations at war and individuals connected across time and distance. Powers enjoins the reader to transfer this logic into their extra-textual lives—to consider the possibility that they may need to “[jump] out from under bad assumptions” (151) to find the answers to their most pressing questions. In these moments, Powers returns to the vision of a good book as one that is primarily concerned with problem solving, as per J R’s Jack Gibbs. But here, the problem solving is not envisioned as a test of the reader’s qualifications to claim the aesthetic and cognitive rewards of the text. Rather, Powers announces his desire to revisit the value of art that takes itself as both subject and object and redeem it from postmodern fiction’s tendency to steer self-reflexive play into solipsistic dead ends, like Gass’s Kohler, for whom intense self awareness produces more darkness than light. For Three Farmers’ narrator, determined to discover the story behind Sander’s engimatic photograph, the “farmers on the muddy road had become, in the process of [his] tracking them down, hopeless amalgams of history, association, bias, and measurement” (334). Both Powers’s hybrid novel and the ambitious
documentary project of August Sander, the man behind the novel’s titular photograph, mobilize the attraction of artworks that combine exacting observation with imaginitive conjecture and personal association.

Sander, we are told, hoped to arrest the particulars of his age with the objective scrutiny of the camera. The novel’s narrator explains that Sander intended to compile a taxonomizing archive of portraits that would serve as a physiognomic compendium of “The Man of the Twentieth Century.” Sander was convinced that his camera could preserve something of the tenor of the emerging century by photographing subjects drawn from a broad swath of social strata. His belief in the privileged epistemological stance afforded by photography was, however, out of phase with a new century whose discoveries would challenge the Enlightenment ideal of the neutral, independent observer. As Powers’s narrator reminds us, the defining insight of the century across all disciplines was the inextricability of the observer and observed.

Sander, at the same time as those working in physics, psychology, political science, and other disciplines, blundered against and inadvertently helped uncover the principle truth of this century: viewer and viewed are fused into an indivisible whole. To see an object from a distance is already to act on it, to change it, to be changed. (46)

Powers, eager to alert readers to the premise that undergirds his novel’s formal and didactic structure, stresses the inseparability of observation from action. There exists no objective, external vantage point from which one may take the measure of a culture on the brink of catastrophe, or attribute discrete causes to immensely complex events. Indeed, this insight itself has come to be so much of a truism that its own involvement in the condition of
epistemological relativism it diagnoses is often overlooked:

> These are the recognizable bywords and clichés of our times. Casual talk abounds with the knowledge that there is no understanding a system without interfering with it. This much I know well. What did not occur to me . . . is that this position is itself tangled. Generalized, it attacks itself: “All observations are a product of their own times. Even this one.” This recursion is critical, not because it places a limit on knowing, but because it shows the impossibility of knowing where knowledge leaves off and involvement begins. . . . Describing and altering are two inseparable parts of the same process, fusing into a murky totality. (206)

We must be aware, then, that the appropriation of the context-specific theories of Heisenberg and Einstein may easily be misrepresented, divorced from their original contexts because they serve as attractive metaphors which remain vulnerable to crude reduction. Nevertheless, they remain useful by highlighting the recursive nature of self-observation, and the opportunities for fresh perspectives that present themselves when an epistemic system begins to interrogate its own unexamined premises. The novel’s own repeated evocation of this observational recursivity suggests that knowledge and involvement extend to its readers, who are solicited to bring their own desires (for, say, resolution of the mysteries that send the narrator on his obsessive quest to learn about Sander’s photograph) to bear upon the text’s intermingling narratives. This instructs them in the protocols of an autodidacticism that has at its roots the heightened and sustained acts of attention—a form of reverent looking—that Powers’s text demands.

While Sander’s ambition may have doomed his project to failure from the outset,
Powers’s narrator recognizes that his failure was a productive one:

Clearly Sander’s camera could no more exhaustively document Man of the Twentieth Century than a mechanical planetarium can exhaust the night stars. Yet his work completes itself in failure. The shattered, overambitious, unfinished work seems the best possible vehicle for its indemonstrable subject. . . . The incomplete reference book is the most accurate. (43-4)

The work fails because “the subject matter of the project—Man of the Twentieth Century—will accelerate numerically, far outstripping any attempt to document it” (339). Sander’s composite sitter is thus “never, ultimately, catchable” (44). The work that “completes itself in failure” presents a record of a finite mind running up against its epistemological limits. This incompleteness invites those perusing the archive to imaginatively engage with its lacunae, soliciting narratives that transform an imperfect attempt to arrest the particulars of a time and place into more fecund imaginative territory.

The drive for knowledge can be a sterile or a self-serving dead-end, or it can lead to connection with others. The boyfriend of a colleague of Mays, having promised to identify the redhead, takes him to lunch at The Trading Floor, whose old-world opulence is marred by “the strange fruit of the present: cathode screens, dot-matrix printers, and above the mirrored and marbled bar, a twelve-foot green phosphor ticker reading out the latest spasm of common-stock transaction,” all of which provide the restaurant’s primarily stockbroker clientele with the “steady, real-time stream” of data they feel they need to stay sharp and ahead of their competition (148). Bullock continuously excuses himself from the table to check the latest stock quotation. Mays comes to the realization that Bullock “has an even more violent sickness” than he had thought: “he was addicted to information” (155). The
novel’s intertwining narratives, which promise to coalesce into a satisfying whole the longer
and more carefully one progresses through the text, prompt a mode of reading amenable to
the information addict. However, it also suggests that the uncritical accumulation of
information is of little use outside the context of narratives in which facts come to be aligned
with values.

Mays fails to acknowledge that their two ailments are more similar than he might care
to admit. He luxuriates in the anticipation of imminent answers, attracted by the tantalizing
promise of mysteries forever just out of reach. We are told that Mays “had no hobbies,
religion, or social convictions. His job held no interest. His friends, be they ever so humble,
and love affairs, be they ever so transient, grew predictable after a while. Things, he had
always felt, stayed interesting only until they revealed their underlying behaviour” (150). His
relentless curiosity and desire to see through to the workings of things suggest he possesses
the qualities of a scholar or scientist, but they are hobbled by his constant desire for novelty.
Investigation becomes, for him, only an escape from the monotony of his unfulfilling
life. His need to track down the redhead in the parade is presumably only the latest in a series
of desires which have provided him a “motive for getting up in the morning and searching—
for something, anything—if only to overcome the sloth he suspected was at the center of his
personality” (150). The thunderclap of love—or infatuation—finally jolts Mays out of his
torpor, but Bullock’s identification of Mays’s mystery redhead brings disappointment. As
evening falls, with the woman having been identified as Kimberly Green, a “local talent
who's made a name for herself doing a revue of famous women from the past” (154), he
realizes that he “no longer [has] the mystery to organize his time” (155), suggesting that
sometimes the one thing more unsatisfying than an unsolved problem is the solution that ends
the need for investigation.

Mays is furious at the “whole trail of lies, misrepresentations, involvements, false leads, and ambiguities” that have thwarted his hopes to unearth pure biographical facts about this woman that would be unsullied by subjective interpretation or the imperfect workings of memory: “The deeper he pursued the mop of strawberry hair, the more her identity seemed grounded in willful reworking or clumsy observation” (159). Mays decides to abandon his hunting for clues, surrendering himself instead to the whims of unfathomable circumstance, musing that if “some conspiracy indeed lay in wait for him, he would fall into it willingly with the satisfaction of having brought on, at least in part, his own inheritance” (159). After he makes this decision, his inheritance quickly follows: upon emerging from the restroom, his waitress recruits him, as the nearest plausible male, to pretend he is her fiancé in order to deflect the amorous advances of an elderly diner who is enthralled by her resemblance to his long-dead wife. This deception leads to Peter accompanying the waitress to a performance of the faux-Bernhardt’s one-woman show, “I Dwell in Possibility,” during the course of which a newer, more immediate mystery announces itself. During intermission, photographs from the turn of the century are projected on stage, the last of which pictures Henry Ford with a young man and is captioned “One of World's Richest and an Heir.” Upon its projection, Mays “[shoots] bolt upright” in recognition, as “the figure draped by Mr. Ford's arm, identified by the press as a potential beneficiary, was him” (201).

Powers’s accumulation of coincidence and happy accidents is designed to demonstrate the veracity of his interconnectivity thesis. But these invigorating episodes of synchronicity may just as well be evidence of the power of authorial fiat: everything in this fictional aesthetic enclosure is indeed connected, but only because Powers has engineered it
that way. What nevertheless makes Powers’s fictive universe compelling, from a cognitive standpoint, is its similarity to “the strange persuasion of photographs,” which *Three Farmers*’s narrator tells us “rests on selective accuracy wedded to selective distortion”:

The reproduction must be enough like the original to start a string of associations in the viewer, but enough unlike the original to leave the viewer room to flesh out and furnish the frame with belief. Photography seems particularly suited for this precarious hybrid. It produces a fingerpainting in light-sensitive salts, but one regulated mechanically—simultaneously the most free and determined of procedures. (249-50).

The final photographic product “mixes technical exactitude with veiling and distortion,” which invites its viewer to respond, in turn, with his or her own. This process is analogous to Powers’s own narrative hybrid: “a cross between essayistic firmness—‘this, then, the dossier, the facts’—and the invitation of fiction—‘What can we make of it?’” (250). Readers must, like Mays and others, furnish the frame of the world’s various personal and historical narratives with their own responses to the invitations they pose.

*Three Farmers* suggests that the twentieth century has taken us further afield from the kind of sustained attention the novel both demands and endorses. The technological advances that opened the door to “machine-inflicted suffering on a scale incomprehensible to [the] three rustics” of Sander’s photo also ushered in the mechanization, and subsequent democratization, of art. Henry Ford’s industrialist brio steamrolls over nuance and reflection in the name of progress and efficiency. The novel posits a choice between aesthetic transport and mechanical transportation, conjugate in this theme of getting from point A to point B: “machines strip processes of any value aside from the result. Packing plants, cameras, and
motorcars care nothing about the way from A to B; they only want to get there sitting down, and in the easiest manner possible. But the most expedient path is never the most delightful: the two are by definition distinct. We must choose between begetting and going, the journey itself or the material outcome” (254). But this is something of a false dilemma. Powers’s own text is willing to forego leisurely aesthetic transport when the needs of his didactic program take precedence over chaperoning the reader through the novel’s parallel narrative threads.

One of these lessons is Powers’s assertion that the reciprocal gaze of an image charges its “future looker” with an imaginative response. An artwork will alter those who look at it, if the viewer is willing to give it the reverent attention it demands. In this way, both image and audience are held accountable to each other, for the attention and call to revise our own understanding of ourselves the image may inspire is an attitude one must learn to bring to interactions with others: “Understanding another is indistinguishable from revising our own self-image. The two processes swallow one another. Photos interest us mostly because they look back” (258). Passive observation is rejected in favour of an active exchange, which produces a more useful kind of knowledge in that it asks us to turn this reverent looking back towards ourselves, and to imagine taking on the perspective of the subjects of the (in this example) aged photograph.

The twentieth-century’s defining observation about the inextricability of the observer and the observed finds its inverse in the consequence that suggests that, just as observation itself changes the object of investigation, we claim the beginnings of our responsibility to take action by learning how to look with reverence.

To look at a thing is already to change it. Conversely, acting must begin with the most reverent looking. The sitter’s eyes look beyond the photographer’s
shoulders, beyond the frame, and change, forever, any future looker who catches that gaze. The viewer, the new subject of that gaze, begins the long obligation of rewriting biography to conform to the inverted lens. Every jump cut or soft focus becomes a call to edit. Every cropping, pan, downstopping receives ratification, becomes one’s own. (260)

A photograph “looks back” at its viewer, as a strong work of art can launch us on the kind of self-inquiry which leads to alterations of actions or beliefs. We assimilate the artwork, and the other preserved therein, by this process of biographical reinvention. Looking reverently is always, then, an expression of a desire to know about the person captured therein, the “other fellow.” Powers’s fiction instructs us in looking closer, such that the attraction an artwork exerts on its audience always prescribes action. Powers the antirealist concedes that aesthetic transport does not need to justify itself in terms of utility or cognitive value, but the explicitly didactic undercurrent of *Three Farmers* charges readers with preserving and carrying forward the “code of survival” preserved therein, a code which for Powers is an attitude of perpetual attention that borders on awe. In some respects this places him in the company of Gass’s Kohler, who encourages a leering contemplation of ugly thoughts so that we may apply these newfound powers of attention to denuding ourselves of pretty illusions about human nature. Powers, however, suggests that further isolation within private aesthetic sanctuaries is not the best response to works that both tax and inspire our attention.

Photographs, like the genetic material contained in each human cell, represent coded material from the past, an encrypted solution to what Powers describes as the problem of survival: “And just as genes are retested in the crucible of individual experience, so must the photographic code be reinterpreted with each viewing. The end of this retesting and
reinterpreting is to add to the code, improve its survival value” (334). The continual process of reinterpretation that a photograph, like other works of art, calls out for is necessary because it helps ensure the work’s survival value. This survival value derives less from the work’s ideational content or its aesthetic attraction, both ostensible guarantors of its continued relevance to future generations, than the process of sustained states of attentiveness it encourages. The work enjoins its viewers to recognize not only its content, but the process of recognition itself. The twentieth century’s central insight thus no longer condemns perception to a recursive, self-referential dead end, but enjoins the viewer to take action in the world we occupy. Observation thus becomes a prompt to action, each message from the past “a challenge to re-form the future” (209). Similarly, while fiction gives readers a reprieve from navigating the maelstrom of everyday living, it can also engineer its own “trigger points” that encourage the kind of self-inventory that precludes action. _Three Farmers’_ moratorium on quotidian experience allows for these potentially epiphanic moments by shifting the reader’s attention to their protocols for interpreting the text before them, a strategy common to the metafictional cast of much antirealist work, and one whose importance its narrator makes explicit:

Each day as I sift through my many new experiences, I find a few that I recognize without having any memory or experience of them. I do not mean mystical déjà vu; I mean the practical moment artists call epiphany and scientists call the moment of aha.

At this moment of recognition I temporarily stop taking part in the thing at hand and jump a level in the hierarchy of awareness, no longer looking at the object from my vantage point, but at myself from the vantage point of the
object. This shift of awareness away from the looked-at to the act of looking creates the illusion of familiarity, since this moment of standing outside the observed system is common to all other such moments. (207-8)

In focusing attention to the importance of this external awareness—this jump up in epistemic levels that allows the observer to recognize himself as such, shifting the awareness to the act of looking itself—Powers raises a crucial question. Is it the awareness of the act of looking that teaches us something? Or is this newfound awareness of the reciprocal nature of observation itself the crucial lesson—that in ceasing to take part in the disinterested observation one interferes with the system under observation? As Powers’s narrator reminds us, this insight is a twentieth century truism, but in attempting to engineer its own trigger points the novel takes advantage of “the consequence of our unusual ability to make one level of our terraced awareness double back and appraise another” in its own shifts from traditional narrative to essayistic digression (208). “At the moment when the stuff holding our attention dissolves and gives way to an awareness of awareness itself we recognize a community with all the other similar moments we have gone through—a concord, or close fit, between hypothesis and measured result.”

We are accountable to these moments. In them, we feel the logical fit of two interdependent activities—looking and knowing. By slightly changing our angle of observation, a copse of seemingly random trees reveals itself as an orchard. This specific angle of observation, then, has an independent validity, revealing an order not of the viewer’s making. (208)

This sudden revelation of order where there had seemed to be none is powerful not only in its declaration of independence from the viewer but also because it can inspire more than just an
imaginative response. Powers suggests that this unbidden recognition of independent order can be a spur to action: instead of triggering a disinterested aesthetic response it enjoins audiences to reach out, to explain to others what they value in the object of their reverent attention: “The form that delights the eye prescribes action; the eye’s delight is its own best telling” (336). Unlike the narrator of Agapē Agape, Powers is unwilling to surrender his belief that an author’s invitation to engage in a collaborative exchange with his reader can produce fresh insights, even if he shares Gaddis’s grim assessment of the twentieth century’s deleterious ursurpation of the artist’s didactic power. Powers carries forward Sander’s belief that a photograph can compel its viewers to compare their lives with the ones of those it depicts, asking them to identify potential sources of commonality between themselves and these foreign, ultimately unknowable subjects preserved in the photograph. Didactic art encourages the perpetual revision of our self image, which for Powers is inseparable from the process of trying to understand The Other Fellow. Like the benzene ring of self-conscious art, the “two processes swallow each other,” forming an ouroborous of interdependent looking. The promise of fiction that depicts or encourages this kind of exchange is that, unlike the sterile and insular tendencies of antirealist experimentation, it offers the promise of self recognition that can direct the reader beyond the confines of the difficult text. We must carry our reawakened reverent attention forward into the world, a process that is repeated over and over, prompted each time by an initial misunderstanding.

If anything prevents Powers’s novel from achieving a smooth vertical integration of essayistic instruction and antirealist play, it is his refusal to moderate the extremes of one form to more easily accommodate the other. By combining dissimilar modes of discourse, Powers is willing to trade a loss of verisimilitude for an increased cognitive force. This often
imperfect integration of discursive modes produces its own kind of productive failure by arresting the progress of the novel’s entwined narratives to accommodate its multiple essayistic digressions. Powers alludes to his comfort with the digressive nature of fiction that straddles rhetorical boundaries by returning to the scene of Sanders photographing the boys near the end of the novel. In response to Peter’s snide remark that “an obviously well-off fellow” like their portraitist does not own a car, Sander replies: “A car is for getting from start to finish as quickly as possible. But I earn a living by pointing out what happens between” (341). An encyclopedic novel is hardly the most efficient method from getting to start to finish if one values the momentum of a swift moving narrative over languid essayistic musings of the sort Powers employs to make explicit the events, cultural shifts, and scientific insights he identifies as the crucial “trigger points” of the twentieth century. Positioning his fiction to describe ”what happens between” the boundary separating antirealist play from verifiable fact allows Powers to clarify his didactic aims, even (or especially) if his readers experience discomfort in adapting to the demands of his hybrid text.

From this countryside scene, the novel flashes forward to Mays and his colleagues gathered around the photograph as they consider “that most elusive, universal, persistent quantity, always in need of foreign aid, the Other Fellow” (352). For Powers, interconnectivity also suggests that knowledge and values are intertwined; a consequence of knowledge’s inseparability from values is that a cultural artifact, be it a documentary photograph or a work of fiction, is always an exhortation to act. Powers addresses the problem of fiction’s antiseptic separation from the world with his own uniquely hybrid style to reinvigorate the didactic potential of antirealist narrative. He carries forward his antirealist predecessors’ recognition of the role failure and misunderstanding can play in cultivating
greater attentiveness, encouraging readers to apply this reverent mode of attention to situations beyond navigating a difficult text. In *Three Farmers*, Powers counts on a communal intermingling of biographical concern with historical fact to transform his characters’ initial misapprehensions into an eventual “moment of aha,” an epiphanic moment that often blurs the distinction between knowledge and values. But this optimistic vision can become a liability if it over-invests its faith in the ameliorative potential of collaborative narrative.

Powers’s characters learn to abandon an all-encompassing desire for certainty for the richer consolations of provisional, embodied forms of learning, a communal process into which Powers, as authorial teacher, draws his readers. In so doing, *Three Farmers* begins to argue against the disciplinary isolationism that has promoted science as the most legitimate framework for describing the nature of existence and restricted literature’s role to the perpetual regurgitation of ostensibly ahistorical truths about human nature or meditations on the codes that govern the passions. As “making and understanding create each other” (207), so do our imaginative responses to the real world enhance our original apprehension of it.

The world, *Three Farmers* affirms, exists independently of both our perceptions of it and our explanatory narratives, and will always outpace any efforts to document it in aesthetic form, as Sander’s ambitious but incompletable “Man of the Twentieth Century” project demonstrates. Despite its similar limitations, fiction’s imaginative interventions into the maelstrom of daily life can allow us to transcend the limits of our epistemological instruments by demonstrating how to forge connections between the observer and the objects of his perception, a connection whose provisionality does not hobble it but endows it with an enduring and attractive power. That this eventual recognition of interconnected truths stems
from what is typically an initial misunderstanding renders the insight more valuable, for it reveals how easily the confluence of chance and coincidence that structure Powers’s narrative may have taken his characters further from the epistemological resolution they seek. A willingness to be wrong in good faith opens up a view of knowledge as a process to be courted, not a product to be consumed. Paradoxically, *Three Farmers* typically expresses this central lesson in the essayistic detours that characterize Powers’s style, providing ammunition to those who would critique him for turning fictional narrative into a sugarcoated delivery method for propositional truths. But Powers elides this allegation by valorizing fiction that explores the places where our understanding falls short as more productive than the kind which merely shoehorns verifiable fact into its invented narrative.

*Three Farmers* suggests that gaps in our understanding, like those represented by the always-incomplete reference book and the enigmatic questions posed by a mute photograph, encourage the exercise of the imaginative faculties that play a vital role in the production of knowledge. Furthermore, it suggests that fiction may play a role in revealing such gaps where we thought none existed. By framing observation and action as reciprocal processes, Powers proposes that antirealist fiction’s characteristic self-reflexivity and sustained attention to the probabilities of error need not be impotent dead ends. Rather, they are tools that can endow readers with a greater sense of agency by returning them to the extra-textual world with renewed purpose:

No action unchanged by observation. No observation without incriminating action. Every moment of unsponsored recognition calls me to return to the uninspired world, to continue the daily routine of invention and observation, to dirty my hands in whatever work my hands do. (209)
The “daily routine of invention and observation” is key. But, crucially, it also acknowledges the possibility that the ameliorative effects of such exchanges may be temporary, if not illusory. A well-intentioned but naïve endorsement of the power of imagination can, for instance, mistake the consolations of art for a principled moral stance which can only be born out of sustained encounters with others, not manufactured out of the self-enclosed worlds of even the most well-intentioned aesthetic experiments. In this way, the novel’s didactic goal—an attempt to counter the allure of perfect hermetic antiworlds by training readers to cultivate a reverent attention to the imperfect present—is undercut by its overinsistence on biographical intervention as a necessary counterbalance to value-free empirical data. Personal necessity may bestow meaningful resonance upon empiric facts just as easily as it may bend and distort them, and so the fictions we weave from initial misconceptions may be simultaneously nutritive and destructive. If Three Farmers on Their Way To a Dance trains us to be wary of this dynamic alone, we may at least learn to operate from a greater level of awareness than the overweening information addicts the novel depicts.
Conclusion

Whoever looks always finds. He doesn’t necessarily find what he was looking for, and even less what he was supposed to find. But he finds something new to relate to the thing that he already knows. What is essential is the continuous vigilance, the attention that never subsides without irrationality setting in—something that the learned one, like the ignorant one, excels at.

—Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (33)

Throughout this study, I have attempted to demonstrate how a number of postmodern American novelists employ antirealist literary practices of ontological destabilization, metatfictional digression, and deliberate textual difficulty as ways of revisiting the proposition, rejected by many among their cohort, that fiction may have pedagogical value. In so doing, I argue there is a didactic undercurrent in their work that runs counter to the aims and attitudes of the tradition from which they draw. In focusing on instances of failure and misunderstanding in various pedagogic relationships, these novels suggest the durability of a particularly humanist intuition about our motives for producing and consuming fiction. What, after all, do these novels verify if not a desire to extract lessons from even the most avowedly ludic or anti-pedagogical work of fiction? Then again, that desire may be mine alone, as my own repeated confrontations with failure and misunderstanding in producing this study have forcefully confirmed. Even so, the recent surge in various cognitive approaches to literary studies suggests, at the very least, that this intuition does not reside solely among those ostensibly “naïve” readers outside the academy for whom the novel that both instructs and
delights is a commonplace, not a theoretical aberration. And while we might grant that fictional works possess some instructive properties, accounting for their cognitive power in unambiguous terms remains tricky. As Richard Eldridge reminds us, in attempting to explicate the cognitive features of a work of fiction, realist or otherwise, “we are faced with a puzzle. We seem to learn something from reading literature, but we have trouble explaining exactly how or what we learn—at least when we are in the grip of a certain picture of knowledge as the methodologically correct achievement of a replicable result” ("The Ends of Narrative" 139).

Holding exclusively to such a picture of knowledge will naturally engender a certain pessimism about fiction’s ability to teach, one which relies on “a misleadingly narrow conception of cognition” that “construes knowledge as consisting of discrete bits of information” (Elgin 44). It then becomes especially important to decide on the appropriate questions to pose when determining what a literary work might “know,” as William Paulson suggests.

Academic criticism customarily asks what it adds to the history and forms of the novel, and even more often whether it confirms the theories of the day. An “epistemocriticism” of contemporary literature could and should ask the question, “what does this work know and suggest that could not be seen or understood without it?” Such criticism’s own work of communication would consist of making explicit the knowledge often implicit in literary works, and in making such works part of an intellectual dialogue not limited to the bellettristic concerns that still predominate in departments of literature. (32)
He goes on to caution against the dangers of treating the novel as a thing to be explained in isolation from extra-literary spheres of discourse, arguing that “the teaching of literature has all too often been a matter of explication and repetition, in which the work is sometimes neutralized by being subjected to erudition or schematization, sometimes made into the object of a cult and thereby removed from the space of real dialogue or creative work” (32). As such, in a conclusion that is crucial to my project, Paulson maintains that “[r]ethinking the teaching of literature should be a fundamental part of any attempt to inaugurate a form of criticism or research that treats literature as a cognitive process and experience” (32-33).

Given the nature of this study, subjecting the novels I examine to a certain degree of erudition or schematization has been unavoidable, though it has not necessarily eased the difficulty of making explicit the kind of knowledge I claim they offer. Part of this difficulty stems from my contention that these texts are themselves demonstrations of cognitive processes—more specifically, the processes that reveal the limitations of the model of teaching founded on the explication and repetition that Paulson describes. They are, instead, more interested in advancing a set of attitudes than the kinds of paraphrasable facts which, outside the context of a literary work, can appear hopelessly banal. To revisit John Gibson’s claim about the unique cognitive value of fiction in general, these antirealist novelists do not attempt to teach propositional facts, but rather model an attitude—a kind of cognitive resilience in the face of failure and misunderstanding which encourages our attention to grow stronger. These models are productive inasmuch as they allow us to activate our under-utilized capacity for autodidactic discovery that the constricting edifices of formal education and the traditional didactic protocols of realism have suppressed.
According to Philip Weinstein, the telos of the narrative that links Enlightenment thought with Modernist literature’s quintessential focus on epistemological concerns “is education: escape from self incurred tutelage, daring to know. The central text of the Enlightenment is surely the seventeen-volume *Encyclopédie* edited by Diderot and d’Alembert. What greater testimony to the value of education could there be than an encyclopedia?” (44). In moving from the authoritative, structured logic of the reference book to an increased obsession with communicative breakdown, creative blocks, and authorial failure to master the raw material of the world, the antirealist works of the writers examined herein continue to undermine the association between encyclopedia and education. However, I have suggested that this continued dismantling of the encyclopedic tradition is not entirely attendant with a desire to surrender a pedagogic role for the novel. The often extensive knowledge about the extra-fictional world these antirealist novels contain is secondary to insights they may provide about the limitations of our conceptual categories—including admittedly specialized ones regarding the postmodern novelist’s didactic authority.

Certainly, novelists like DeLillo and Powers hew to the encyclopedic mode by incorporating an abundance of nonliterary languages within their work, but in doing so they vacillate between straightforward explication and playful obfuscation, reverting to the kinds of exclusionary Modernist gestures of difficulty revealed in *Ratner’s Star’s* implicit promise to leave its readers “strewn along the margins” (410). Despite such gestures, these novelists remain interested in mobilizing a compromised didactic mode which, vexingly, retains its association with the moralizing imperatives of the kind of fiction Tolstoy prescribed in his essay “What is Art?”, in which he cautioned against “artificiality and forced originality, unnecessary obfuscation, and fine phrasemaking without content” in favour of “sincerity that
seeks to convey moral values, along with clarity, simplicity, and economy” (Roche 64-5). The antirealist novelists I consider in this study ignore these directives, making virtues of insincerity, complexity, and alternating modes of maximalist excess and fragmentary incompleteness. Dubious critics see this as evidence of a tiresome postmodern obsession with textual play that clearly precludes not only the conveyance of moral values but of any cognitive reward. And one can certainly see their point. In keeping with the insular nature of antirealist worlds, these novelists typically choose to explore this crisis of pedagogy within artificially enclosed or confined spaces: the scientist’s laboratory, the scholar’s chair, the invalid’s sickbed. Among the novels I have examined here, only in Richard Powers’s does the scope expand to include a panoramic view of history and varied locales, in which photographic and scholarly archives provide vital entry points to imaginative collaboration among a cast of principals linked together across both time and space. Placing my reading of Powers at the end of this study thus seems to suggest that his work, characterized by its imperfect amalgamation of essayistic addresses with postmodern gamesmanship, may offer the most promising path to the eudoxic marriage of fact and fancy I discuss in my introduction. But his novel’s exhortation to cultivate a reverent attention to the world is hamstrung by its overreliance on a didactic mode that often tells more than it shows, its metafictional flourishes reminders that Powers has favourably rigged the odds for his characters’ final epiphanic appreciation of interconnectivity. Even at its most didactic, Powers’s authorial persona emerges to place his thumb on the scale, obliquely announcing his role in crafting the narrative—a typically heightened postmodern reflexivity that threatens to turn the work back in towards itself.
Though their attempts to elide stultifying modes of instruction are not entirely successful, these writers are committed to transcend the insularity of the more militant strains of antirealist fiction and to engage in the kind of interdisciplinary dialogue for which Powers has evangelized. While often conflicted or ambivalent about the degree of authority they are willing to surrender, these novelists still credit readers with the capacity to make sense of their invented worlds without the constant supervision of an arranging authorial presence. Rather than sustaining a vision of themselves as aloof custodians of a vast cultural archive, they attempt to bring the reader into a didactic relationship by indulging in encyclopedic narrative while acknowledging its limitations. Rejecting the hierarchies of knowledge, authority, and understanding between author and audience is, on one hand, clearly in line with the category-leveling imperatives of postmodernism, in which divisions between high and low art are elided, and interpretation becomes a collaborative task. Equality thus suggests itself as a more sustainable didactic model for novelists working within this tradition, even as a number of them struggle to reclaim the didactic authority that it willingly ceded.

Of course, in attempting to explore how these antirealists reconcile instruction and delight, my readings have been circling around a central paradox: in order for these novels to promote a didactic mode of narrative based on equality and verifying for oneself, they must temporarily reclaim the mantle of explicatory authority that antirealist principles saw necessary to eliminate, and which for Rancière and Jacotot are associated with stultification. Yet these writers acknowledge the potential value of this form of didactic narrative, even as they remain wary of appearing to align their work with its traditional imperatives. These writers move away from explication towards a shared progression of knowledge, one built upon the continual revisions of our understanding that failure is best able to engender.
If frustration is able to act as a catalyst for such a collaborative pedagogical exchange, antirealist strategies may be especially effective in fostering it. One may thus locate a potentially overlooked form of cognitive value in the antirealist novel’s predilection for cultivating misunderstanding, and in reinvisioning the encyclopedic author as an avowedly ignorant instructor who guides his charges towards a fuller appreciation of their own autodidactic capacities. In this way, misunderstanding is reframed as an opportunity to consider fresh (even if ultimately misguided) modes of perception or understanding. What initially appear as seemingly unnecessary detours down blind alleys may provide us with knowledge we might otherwise not have encountered. However, this assumes that errors, failures, and misunderstanding are productive more often than not. Sometimes a dead end is just that, and misunderstanding can be easily ascribed to the text’s opacity or the reader’s inescapable cognitive or interpretative deficiencies.

But one never enters into a didactic exchange with a predetermined guarantee of success. What ultimately matters is the potential for meaningful insights to emerge from the states of misunderstanding or not-knowing which many explicatory models of teaching see as impediments to, rather than instruments of, greater comprehension. Just as these encyclopedic novelists cede some of their ambition and authority, Roche proposes that critics eager to rehabilitate literary cognitivism consider a similar shift in motive: “Their primary concern is not the display of the specialist’s knowledge, the vanity of being recognized as an encyclopedic in the field, or the gross manipulation of literature for a particular agenda, however just that agenda might be; it is, instead, the astonishment, wonder, and impact of new and meaningful insight” (Roche 82). And so, in the spirit of ceding claims to mastery in favour of more modest aims, I wish to extend to novels within the American antirealist
tradition the same capacity for promoting cognitive gains that Noël Carroll attributes to their
traditional realist counterparts.

Realist literature can convey knowledge nonaccidentally by characterizing a
social milieu in terms that equip readers conceptually with a means—a kind of
map of social categories—for finding the relevant confirming evidence on
their own. Since that is also what most teachers do—we hardly produce
masses of evidence in class on the spot—and yet what we do counts as
communicating knowledge, then logical courtesy compels us to award the
same title, that of *teachers*, to the pertinent realist novelists… (“Literary
Realism” 39)

Many, if not all, of the novelists I have discussed herein would no doubt be discomfited to
claim for themselves the loaded honorific of “teacher.” But if for no other reason than their
committed efforts to model the kind of continuous vigilance that leaves us open to
astonishment in the wake of failure, they too deserve to share that title.
Works Consulted


