RECONNECTION AND/OR RECOMMENCEMENT: NARRATIVE DESIRE AND THE BLANK PAGE IN ANNA SEGHERS’S TRANSIT,
VLADIMIR NABOKOV’S PALE FIRE AND J. L. BORGES’S “TLÖN, UQBAR, ORBIS TERTIUS”

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the way in which first-person narratives are constructed from a position of displacement. In particular, I focus upon the way in which the blank page in J. L. Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940), Anna Seghers's Transit (1944), Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire (1962) becomes a metaphor for caesura and an extension of exilic space. It is my contention that the presence of the blank page in these tales forces the first-person narrators to actively explore, and ultimately to choose between, two narrative desires: reconnection to history or recommencement upon the blank page. I further argue that these two narrative desires result in different strategies of narrative-building and history-making: one end-directed and one that relies upon a postponed conclusion. Though each narrator faces the same choice, the vacillation between reconnection and recommencement plays itself out in different ways. The nameless narrator in Anna Seghers's Transit, for example, opts for reconnection, while Charles Kinbote of Pale Fire chooses recommencement. "J. L. Borges" of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," however, vanishes at the end of the story, thereby leaving the question of reconnection or recommencement to the reader, who must now decide how to read the story. The question of whether to embrace or postpone ending, furthermore, is similar to the choice that confronts Odysseus upon Calypso's island. Considering the first-person narrators' relationship to the blank page, which acts as a metaphorical Calypso's island, allows for an examination of the narrators' relationship to history, both their own and that of others. In each text, it is a consideration that actively implicates the reader as well.
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INTRODUCTION

Exile is often described as a state of suspension. Milan Kundera writes that living in exile is like "walking a tightrope high above the ground," an act performed without the network of the familiar—"family, colleagues, and friends"—not to mention the ability to speak "in a language [one] has known from childhood" (75). This image evokes the feeling of distance—the fact of suspension—as well as a void that is described by the exilic individual's struggles not to fall.

In the consideration that follows, I focus on how the exilic individual’s struggles not to fall are concretely reflected in the act of first person narration. Too often, it seems, discussions of exile literature get caught up in abstractions. One such abstraction is the process of trying to define the term exile itself. As Johannes F. Evelein remarks: “everyone pitches his or her semantic tent somewhat differently and demarcates the territory to be explored accordingly” (12). And while such semantic parsing can make for an interesting discussion—establishing, if nothing else, a context from which discussion can begin—I have chosen to focus on the way in which the experience of exile, as a forced displacement with no possibility of return, shapes the first-person narrative act. In this way, my approach to the subject of exile—and the narrative subject in exile—functions in a broad range of contexts.

At the same time, I am aware that, as Caren Kaplan points out, “all displacements are not the same” (2). A broad focus, such as the one that I have adopted, risks overlooking the specific contexts—for example, the cultural, the political, the historic—in which displacement happens. For this reason, and because I am interested in the way in which the experience of exile, as a forced displacement with no possibility of return, concretely shapes instances of first person
narration, I will engage in a close reading of each text. This will allow for a specific exploration of the context in which each first-person narrator experiences, and then narrates, the fact of displacement.

Although the context in which displacement happens varies from work to work, each text in this consideration—Anna Seghers’s *Transit* (1944), Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962), and J. L. Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1940)—dramatizes exile as a physical and narrative displacement with no possibility of return. This idea reflects the way in which each writer engages with the rise of totalitarian governments and the catastrophes that marked the first half of the twentieth century. One particular concern of these writers is the way in which totalitarian governments manipulate history to suit their own ends. In this way, the writing of history comes to resemble the writing of fiction. It is the idea, as Hannah Arendt explains,

> that gigantic lies and monstrous falsehoods can eventually be established as unquestioned facts, that man may be free to change his own past at will, and that the difference between truth and falsehood may cease to be objective and become a mere matter of power and cleverness, of pressure and infinite repetition. (*Origins* 441)

By dramatizing exile as a narrative, as well as a physical, displacement, Anna Seghers's *Transit*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and J. L. Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" explore, on the one hand, the way in which history written from a position of displacement enables the first-person narrator, through narrative strategies of recursivity and repetition, to change their own past at will. Each first-person narrator is suspended in what Hannah Arendt describes as a void of “‘no longer and not yet’” (“No longer and Not Yet” 121). No longer possessing a sense of historical continuity, they have not yet arrived at a new alternative for history-making and identity construction. Instead, each first-person narrator finds himself in what Arendt characterizes as an "abyss of empty time and empty space."
It is from this abyss, I argue, that the narrators tell their tales, thereby exploring new possibilities of history-making and identity construction. Each narrator, that is, has the opportunity to seize narrative authority and rewrite history; or, as Edward Said puts it, to “compensat[e] for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule” (”Reflections” 181). As these works demonstrate, this activity, which I will refer to as storymaking, is itself a totalizing pursuit. By subjecting the seductive pull of this idea to critique, however, Transit, Pale Fire and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" demonstrate the ease with which history that is written from a position of displacement can become totalizing in its own right.

On the other hand, I argue that the first-person narrators in Transit, Pale Fire and “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” can also attempt to use narration to reconnect to the shores of human history, thereby regaining some semblance of historical continuity. In the words of Michael Seidel, the first-person narrators in Transit, Pale Fire and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" can choose to transform the “the figure of rupture back into a ‘figure of connection’” (x).

Whether telling the tale in order to recommence in oblivion or to reconnect to the shores of human history, the first-person narrators in Transit, Pale Fire and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" are confronted with a critical question, namely, how to tell the tale from a position of displacement. It is, therefore, my contention that the question of how to tell history from a position of displacement drives the plot in each of these works. It is a question that these texts ask across a variety of genres: for example, the autobiographical, the biographical, the literary critical.

In each text, furthermore, the first-person narrator—who, I will argue, tells the tale for the sake of reconnection (to a universal human history) or recommencement (in a new world to rule)—confronts the blank page as a catastrophic caesura and an extension of exilic space. At
the same time, I do not imply that the blank page is devoid of meaning. As Ernestine Schlant observes, silence, “like any language, . . . is infused with narrative strategies that carry ideologies and reveal unstated assumptions” (7). Marked by the lack of narrative authority and demarcated by the first-person narrator’s attempts to tell the tale from a position of displacement, the blank page comes to symbolize the fact of narrative displacement: the irredeemable loss of the narrative home. At the same time, it presents the narrator with the opportunity to tell the tale, while forcing them to decide how to do so from a position of displacement. In keeping with Kundera’s metaphor, the text becomes the tightrope the first-person narrator walks. The blank page, likewise, becomes the void described by the exilic individual’s struggles not to fall.

Although Transit, Pale Fire and “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” do not usually appear together in a single critical discussion, then, they have been brought together thematically. Each text dramatizes the way in which the first-person narrator confronts the blank page as a catastrophic caesura and an extension of exilic space. Each narrator, furthermore, is caught in the contrapunt described by Edward Said, where “habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together . . .” (“Reflections” 186). It is my contention that, caught between the fact of displacement and the memory of connection, the first-person narrators in Transit, Pale Fire and “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” vacillate between two narrative desires: the desire for reconnection and the desire for recommencement. Both narrative desires shape the way in which the first-person narrator tells history from a position of displacement.

In arguing that the first-person narrators of Seghers’s Transit, Nabokov’s Pale Fire and Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” vacillate between the desire for reconnection and
recommencement—and in exploring the way in which these desires individually shape the act of first person narration—I follow a pattern that is often repeated in the critical discussion. As Sophia A. McClennen remarks, exile literature is often analyzed in terms of “a binary logic, where exile either produces creative freedom,” allowing the displaced individual to operate in a space seemingly devoid of narrative authority, “or [exile] traps the writer in restrictive nostalgia,” leading to the unsuccessful attempt to regain what has been irrevocably lost (2). Unable to return to the lost homeland, the first-person narrators in Transit, Pale Fire and ”Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" vacillate between a need for reconnection, which is rooted in nostalgia, and a desire for recommencement that depends upon the use of creative freedom.

Although it is often the goal of the literary critic to break new ground, then—to “demarcate,” as Evelein puts it, new territory—it is difficult, in the present case, to overcome the coupling of untrammeled loss and aesthetic gain in the discussion surrounding narratives told from a position of displacement. (Indeed, McClennen herself does not try to operate outside this framework, but instead analyzes Latin American texts that hold these two ideas—untrammeled loss and aesthetic gain—in tension.) However the critic approaches his or her subject matter, the dialectic of untrammeled loss and aesthetic gain seems to be synonymous with the exilic experience. As Sharon Ouditt sums up:

The exile of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the wanderings of Odysseus, the diaspora of the Jews all speak to a fundamental sense of loss, displacement and a desire to regain a paradisiacal sense of sense of unity and wholeness, whether spiritual or secular. For many, though, that loss is transformed from the pain of dispossession into an alternative way of seeing. For Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus the “silence, exile and cunning” of his self-imposed expatriation provides the means to express untrammeled his artistic vision. For Salman Rushdie, the idea of homeland is intrinsically “imaginary.” For scholarly émigrés such as Edward Said and Julia Kristeva, exile is the necessary condition of the intellectual. (xii)
To this list, which covers various types of displacement, one might add the example of Odysseus/Ulysses. For whereas Homer’s Odysseus looks toward the horizon with a sense of nostalgia, or Heimweih, the Ulysses of Dante and Tennyson looks toward the vanishing horizon with a sense of longing, or Fernweh.

In arguing that the first-person narrators in Anna Seghers’s *Transit*, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and J. L. Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” must choose between reconnection and recommencement, then, I do not depart from the accepted critical norm. Indeed, I argue that the choice between reconnection and recommencement is similar to that which confronts Odysseus on Calypso’s island. For it is on Calypso’s island that Odysseus, the consummate wanderer, the nostalgic homecomer, must choose between a recommencement in oblivion or a reconnection to the shores of human history.

At the same time, I engage in a close reading of each text to discover how the choice between reconnection and recommencement concretely shapes the act of first-person narration. Unable to return to the lost homeland, the first-person narrators negotiate the two faces of exilic narrative desire on the blank page, which emerges as a catastrophic caesura and an extension of exilic space. By focusing upon the first-person narrator’s relationship to the blank page, and considering how that relationship changes as the story unfolds, I avoid the tendency—a tendency that McClennan also criticizes—to focus upon critical theory rather than the way in which history is concretely written from a position of displacement.

Finally, in considering the way in which history is concretely written from a position of displacement, I focus on the role of the reader in each text. It is the reader, I argue, who enables or disables the first-person exilic narrator’s vision. As I will show, each text under consideration demands that the reader take an active role. In this way, the question becomes not only how
history can be written from a position of displacement, but also how that history is received by the reader of the text.
CHAPTER ONE

The Two Faces of Odysseus: Telling the Tale for the Sake of Reconnection or Recommencement

Odysseus’s Critical Choice

In Book Five of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus stands at a critical crossroads. He can choose either to remain on Calypso’s island as the goddess’s immortal consort or he can continue the journey home to Ithaca and his mortal life. His choice is between immortality and mortality, forgetfulness and remembrance, oblivion and history, recommencement and reconnection. As readers, however, we can further add that it is a choice between two narrative threads, both of which are present in the *Odyssey*: the tale of homecoming, which occupies the epic from line one; and “the marvels and perils of the sea” (Borges, *This Craft of Verse* 45), which serves to make the tale of homecoming memorable (46).

In this discussion, I will examine first-person exilic narrators who stand at a narrative crossroads similar to that of Odysseus upon Calypso’s island. Faced with the blank page, which acts as a catastrophic caesura and extension of exilic space, the narrators in the texts under consideration—Anna Seghers’s *Transit* (1944), Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962) and J. L. Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1940)—must decide how to tell a story that has rupture at its heart. In deciding how to tell the tale, they, too, must choose between endlessness and ending, forgetfulness and remembrance, oblivion and history, reconnection and recommencement. It is a choice that directly reflections upon the way in which history is made and identity constructed from a position of displacement.
In telling their tales, for example, are the first-person narrators in these works trying to do what Michael Seidel argues is the task of every exile and attempt through narration to transform “the figure of rupture back into a ‘figure of connection’” (x)? Or, instead, are they trying, in the words of Edward Said, to “compensat[e] for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule” ("Reflections" 181) in the space of the blank page? Do the narrators of *Transit, Pale Fire* and “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” tell their tales for the sake of reconnection (to a common human history) or recommencement (in a place of open possibility)?

For Odysseus, the choice between reconnection (to the world of human history) and recommencement (with Calypso on her isle) is not a difficult one. As the hero tells the goddess:

> . . . , what I want and all my days I pine for is to go back to my house and see my day of homecoming. And if some god batters me far out on the wine-blue water, I will endure it, keeping a stubborn spirit inside me, for already I have suffered much and done much hard work on the waves and in the fighting. So let this adventure follow. (V. 219-24)

Odysseus is determined to endure “the marvels and perils of the sea” (Borges, *This Craft of Verse* 45) for the sake of his homecoming day. Although displaced into what François Hartog calls the world of “no past, no memories” (28), a world that, like an eternally blank page, also acts as a “limitless space of stories” (30), Odysseus is determined to retain his identity and return home to Ithaca. Therefore, as Hartog concludes, it is not the adventures at sea that make Odysseus exceptional, but “rather [Odysseus’s] ability to escape from [them]: not the voyage itself, but the endurance of it and all its perils, and the final deliverance from it” (35). Odysseus’s answer to Calypso, as well as the last adventure he has in exile—the adventure of first person narration—underscores this idea.

**The Adventure of First Person Narration**
Odysseus's adventure in first person narration takes place in Books Nine through Twelve of the *Odyssey*. In these books, the hero both reveals his identity and tells the story of his exilic adventures to the Phaeacians. Because Odysseus's tale both begins (IX. 29-30) and ends (XII. 447-50) with Calypso’s island, it reflects the totalizing, recursive nature of exilic space. At the same time, Odysseus's narrative moment is prefaced, indeed enabled, by the aforementioned revelation of his identity, an act of remembrance that poses a stark contrast to the eternally present oblivion through which he sails. After the tale has been told, furthermore, Odysseus emphasizes that the events he narrates do not need to be revisited: "It is hateful to me / to tell a story over again, when it has been well told" (452-53). Odysseus's narration, therefore, is end-directed; it is undertaken for the sake of return.

Although Books Nine through Twelve contain some of the *Odyssey’s* most memorable episodes—for example, Odysseus’s escape from the Cyclops and his descent into Hades—then, Odysseus does not tell the tale for the sake of dwelling on these moments, but rather for the sake of bringing his exilic adventures to a close. Calypso's island may bookend Odysseus's narrative moment, but the tale, once again, is end-directed, a fact that poses a contrast to exilic space where adventures occur *ad infinitum*. Indeed, the importance of Odysseus's closed narrative moment is underscored by the fact that, after listening to the tale in its entirety, the Phaeacians ferry Odysseus home. As a result, first person narration becomes Odysseus's last adventure in oblivion; all subsequent events take place on Ithaca's rocky shores.

**Critical Witness to Oblivion**

In telling the tale, Odysseus actively bears witness to oblivion; he speaks of things unspeakable. Had he chosen to remain on Calypso's island, the story he told would have been
lost to the eternal silence of a vanishing horizon. This fact leads Hartog to conclude that "the only bard of this space of distress and oblivion is Odysseus himself, the man who always remembers" (29). At the same time, Hartog emphasizes that Odysseus, who has been brought to speak by his exilic context, is no natural bard. He does not speak with the Muses' authority, but instead acts as the "sole witness" to everything that he has experienced, a fact that makes him an unreliable narrator.

The first-person narrators in *Transit, Pale Fire* and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" likewise bear witness to oblivion. Like Odysseus, they are brought to speak by their exilic context and act as "sole witness" to everything they have experienced. The experience of exile enables them to speak of things unspeakable and lends them a form of narrative authority. As Salman Rushdie observes:

> It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity. Which seems to me self-evidently true; but I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being 'elsewhere.' This may enable him to speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal. (12)

For Rushdie, the exile acts as a critical witness to the experiences of loss and lack. By wielding "the broken mirror" (11), as he terms it, the person who has experienced the "physical fact of discontinuity" can concretely reflect back upon the tragic caesuras that pervade human experience, as well as expose the cracked foundations of what we (unreflectively) take to be the whole picture, be that picture an autobiographical, historical or political one (13-16). At the same time, Rushdie also emphasizes that when the broken mirror is turned inward—when one attempts, for example, to remember a lost history—the result is fiction, rather than fact.
Attempting to reclaim what is irrevocably lost is to create simulacra: "not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (10).

In the texts under consideration, the first-person narrator will seize upon the position of critical witness to tell their stories. In telling their tales, however, they will also vacillate between the desire for reconnection (to a common human history) and the need for recommencement (in a place of open possibility), a fact that shapes their narrative strategies and influences the way they tell history, both their own and that of others. Through exploring their relationship to the blank page (as a means to reconnection or a site of recommencement), we can, therefore, ask how the stance of critical witness informs the narrators' relationship to history. It is a line of inquiry, furthermore, reflects back upon the reader. In each of the texts under consideration, the reader will emerge as an active participant who enables or disables the individual narrator’s attempt to reconnect or rebegin.

Reconnection and/or Recommencement

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus’s gaze is firmly fixed upon the hearth. He tells the tale for the sake of reconnection. However, the dichotomy between hearth and horizon that Book Five calls to mind is present as an unresolved dynamic in the Odyssean tradition itself. If we look at the Odyssean character in Dante’s *Inferno*, for example, or in Tennyson’s poem, “Ulysses,” we find that the hero’s gaze is no longer directed toward hearth and homecoming. Instead, it has been caught by the promise of the vanishing horizon.

As the damned spirit confesses, for example, in the *Inferno*:

not sweetness of a son, not reverence
for an aging father, not the debt of love
I owed Penelope to make her happy,
could quench deep in myself the burning wish
to know the world and have experience
of all man’s vices, of all human worth. (XXVI. 94-99)

And as the aged king in “Ulysses” laments:

I am part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untravelled world whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause to make an end
To rust unburnished not to shine in use! (18-23)

In these two works, Odysseus is no longer an exception to oblivion’s rule. Instead, he seems at home in the world of “no past, no memories,” which also acts as an eternally blank page, a “limitless place for stories” (Hartog 28, 30). Within the Odyssean tradition, therefore, Odysseus himself is a man of two faces: one turned toward the hearth, one turned toward the horizon.

As Michael Seidel observes, Odysseus's two faces coexist metaphorically in many works of exilic literature, just as they coexist in the Odyssean tradition:

The memory of home becomes paramount in narratives, where home itself is but a memory. . . . In exile, the expression of the desire for home becomes a substitute for home, embodies the emotion attendant upon the image. It is in this sense that so many of the adventures of Odysseus try to dim the hero’s homeward compulsion by making exilic space a substitute for the home island. . . . Hence the spatial frame of the narration: Odysseus, temporarily domesticated at the furthest bounds of the Mediterranean on Calypso’s isle, dreams of domestication with Penelope at its Ithacan center. In so doing, he displays not only the full range of the exilic course, extension and return, but the full power of exilic imagining, extension as return. (11)

However:

. . . [I]n variant versions of the Odysseus legend, which make up an epic subculture undoubtedly known by Homer and later resurrected by Dante, Tennyson, and Kazantzakis, the hero’s renewed desire for voyage out, even after his return to Ithaca, is something that is also part of his nature. This instinctively makes Odysseus reject, in the Homeric version, the promise of immortality Calypso offers on her isle. It is not just that Calypso prevents the hero’s return to Penelope, but that her domain is too much like the domestic tedium vitae that will reactivate the great homecomer’s wanderlust. . . . Satisfaction at home could not rival the desire activated in exile. It is common enough
even in actual cases of exilic return that the mental energy expended on the image of home in absence proves incommensurate with the reality of home as presence. (11-12)

Although I disagree with Seidel's assumption that Odysseus declines Calypso's offer because it represents the *tedium vitae* the hero will later reject—a reading that dims the pathos of the exile made exceptional by his desire to return—nonetheless Seidel makes an excellent point. Namely, that the “memory of home” and the habit of nostalgia for the lost homeland creates a dialect of (mnemonic) presence in absence and (perceived) absence in presence that continues even after the act of reconnection or return is achieved.

As Edward Said puts it: “For an exile, habits of life, expressions, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally” (“Reflections” 186). This contrapuntal experience (presence in absence and absence in presence) is a decentering experience. For if “the memory of home” is one center around which the exilic imagination revolves, it also represents an essential lack, a desire for an *elsewhere* that no “being present,” no subsequent experience of rootedness can ever fully erase. The desire for the lost homeland, which Seidel argues is expressed as imaginative extension, and which, in the texts under consideration, coexists with the need to create an “imaginary homeland,” a new world to control and inhabit, can also become habitual. In this way, the need for reconnection coexists with the need for recommencement, a fact that plays itself out in the narrative strategies of *Transit*, *Pale Fire* and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius."

In this consideration, I will look at the way in which the need for reconnection and the desire for recommencement together shape each first-person narrator's narrative strategies, a struggle that is embodied in the first-person narrator's vacillating relationship to the blank page. As we will see, not only do the narrators in these works experience physical displacement, a fact
that places them in the position to bear witness to the exilic caesura, but they also experience narrative displacement, a fact that places them in a position to bear witness to the blank page as an extension of exilic space.

In the course of each work, the first-person narrator has been forced out of a narrative "home" through the intervention of some catastrophe: suicide (Transit), murder (Pale Fire) or erasure ("Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"). (For example, the first-person narrator in Transit tries to escape his exilic condition by losing himself in a novel. Unfortunately, the author committed suicide before the work could be finished, thereby cutting off the narrator's retreat.) The resulting blank page, which fragments the narrative "home", acts as a catastrophic caesura and becomes a metaphor for exilic space. Because the narrators in each text witnessed this catastrophe, furthermore, they are placed in a position to tell the tale. In doing so, they bear witness to the blank page and to the catastrophic caesura it represents; their narrative authority stems directly from their position of witness. In telling the tale, however, the "old environment" (the memory of connection) coexists with the "new environment" (the fact of displacement). Caught on the cusp of a broken history and faced with caesura, which has a history of its own, both the vanishing horizon (the possibility of recommencement) and the shores of history (the possibility of reconnection) are in sight. It is in deciding how to negotiate the blank page in the tale—as a means to reconnection or as a site of recommencement—that the narrators must choose between endlessness and ending, forgetfulness and remembrance, oblivion and history.

In focusing upon the first-person narrator’s relationship to the blank page and in considering how that relationship changes, we can thereby interrogate how the two faces of exilic narrative desire shape the narrator’s relationship to history, both his own and that of others. As we shall see, the blank page is not simply a site of ruptured history, but rather a meeting of ruptured histories. In
deciding how to tell the tale, the first-person narrator also decides which histories will be saved, which altered and which lost.

**Storytelling and Storymaking**

In order to set the framework for the chapters to follow, I will now examine two short texts: Isak Dinesen’s story “The Blank Page” and Walter Benjamin’s essay "Der Erzähler" (“The Storyteller”). Both of these texts focus upon the importance of the blank page in the story and explore the storyteller’s relationship to the blank page as a function of his or her relationship to history. Because of their similarity of focus, I will engage in a comparative reading of both works.

In Isak Dinesen's short story "The Blank Page," the storyteller prefacing her narration with the following: "Where the story-teller is loyal, eternally and unswervingly loyal to the story, there, in the end, silence will speak. But where the story has been betrayed, silence is but emptiness. But we, the faithful, when we have spoken our last word, will hear the voice of silence” (100). For, as she continues: "Who then . . . tells a finer tale than any of us? Silence does. And where does one read a deeper tale than upon the most perfectly printed page of the most precious book? Upon the blank page." With these words, the storyteller begins a story that will both interrogate and illustrate the importance of the blank page in the story. As we read further, we find that a loyalty to the story implies a loyalty to a historical perspective that values preserving the blank page, the unwritten story, in the midst of, and even at the expense of master narratives in which we feel at home. As the storyteller demonstrates, her task is to tell the story in such a way that the blank page, framed by the tale, speaks after the storyteller has fallen silent. Indeed, it is only in the wake of the storyteller's silence, only after the last word has been spoken,
that the blank page can speak in its own right. For it is at this point that the unwritten past becomes a matter of present concern. On the other hand, if the storyteller abandons the position of witness to history's silent spaces, if Odysseus stays put on Calypso's island, then the blank page will remain empty: a space upon which an endless number of stories might be written; a space unable to speak once the storyteller's voice has stopped.

Within the story, the blank page takes the form of a blank canvas that is framed and hung in a row with other canvases. Each one is stained with the virgin blood of Portuguese princesses, testament to their honor on their wedding night; each one is displayed in a gallery along a convent wall, a chronology of royal marriage and a monument to tradition:

On the walls of the gallery, side by side, hangs a long row of heavy, gilt frames, each of them adorned with a coroneted plate of pure gold, on which is engraved the name of a princess: Donna Christina, Donna Ines, . . . . And each of these frames enclosed a square cut from a royal wedding sheet. (103)

In the midst of these frames, however, there hangs a canvas which differs from the others. The frame of it is as fine and heavy as any, and as proudly as any carries the golden plate with the royal crown. But on this one plate no name is inscribed, and the linen within the frame is snow-white from corner to corner, a blank page. (104)

As we see from these words, the blank page fulfills a function that is more than merely aesthetic; as a memorial, it is more than simply document. The page itself emerges—in the absence of legible content, though in the presence of narrative context—as a form of confessional space: an interior exhibited outwards. Furthermore, according to the tradition of virgin purity, the lack of virgin blood betrays a subversive act. At the same time, even though the blank page acts as a “figure of rupture” within the context of the master narrative—within the context, that is, of royal tradition—the blank page can at the same time still be considered a “figure of connection” (Seidel x). After all, it is the tangible evidence of a union that took place beyond the bounds of tradition.
Within the framework of the chronology, therefore, the blank page may function as a caesura in the authorized dominant narrative. However, by presenting a contrast to histories celebrated openly, it bears witness to histories that pass unspoken, thereby fulfilling its function as a “‘figure of connection’.” As such, the presence of the blank canvas on the convent wall, the presence of the unwritten story in the storyteller’s tale, both underscores and overshadows the storyteller’s words, becoming not only the title of the story, but also the place from which the storyteller speaks and the place at which she falls silent. In this respect, the experience of history, as the storyteller relates it, is obtruded upon the present as well as relegated to the past. Both speech and silence, therefore, frame the storyteller’s art. Indeed, in reading Dinesen’s story we find that the tapestry the storyteller will weave—one of history, myth, autobiography and, finally, the commentary that prefaces narration—can admit the blank page into its midst, for the presence of caesura does not halt the flow of the story, but instead provides it with departure, presence and impetus. At the same time, we must ask: Considering the tradition that frames it, why was the blank page included at all? Why was it not struck from the chronology altogether?

According to the storyteller, the answer to both these questions can be found in the same place. As she explains:

I beg of you, you good people who want to hear stories told: look at this page, and recognize the wisdom of my grandmother and of all the old story-telling women!
   For with what eternal and unswerving loyalty has not this canvas been inserted in the row! The story-tellers themselves before it draw their veils over their faces and are dumb. Because the royal papa and mama who once ordered this canvas to be framed and hung up, had they not had the tradition of loyalty in their blood, might have left it out. (104-05)

What does the storyteller mean here by a “tradition of loyalty”? For example, was it simply a blind obedience to tradition’s dictates that prompted the royal pair to frame a sheet left blank? In this case, the words would need some rearranging. A “loyalty to tradition” is all the royal pair
could claim. However, we have heard these words before, spoken in a similar context. As we saw above, in order for silence to speak, in order for the blank page to be meaningfully inserted into the story, the storyteller herself must remain “loyal, eternally and unswervingly loyal to the story” (100). Had the royal couple simply been loyal to tradition, they might well have effaced all memory of the blank page. However, they possessed a “tradition of loyalty,” a loyalty to the story that prompted them to insert the blank page into the chronology, even if only in an anonymous light and even though it would irretrievably alter the character of the tradition that originally rendered it unspoken.

In this respect, we might consider the words of T. S. Eliot, who in the essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” remarks:

> Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, “tradition” should positively be discouraged. . . . Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense . . . ; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence. . . . This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional.¹ (71-72)

In this sense, the storyteller is certainly an advocate of tradition, a bearer of the historical sense as it is understood by Eliot. The wisdom of her own story contains “a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.” Indeed, within the tale, the blank page functions as a present absence, as an absence that opens up the past as presence. In contrast, we find that the marked canvases, written pages in their own right, offer matter for their viewers only for as long

¹ Edward Said cites many of these same lines with the following interpretation: “The force of these comments is directed equally, I think, at poets who think critically and at critics whose work aims at a close appreciation of the poetic process. . . . Past and present inform each other, each implies the other and, in the totally ideal sense intended by Eliot, each co-exists with the other,” Culture and Imperialism, 4. As Said continues, however: “Eliot’s synthesis of the past, present and future . . . is idealistic and in important ways a function of his own peculiar history; also, its conception of time leaves out the combativeness with which individuals and institutions decide on what is tradition and what is not, what relevant and what is not.” These comments underscore an important idea in my own consideration, which emphasizes that the blank page is a site of competing narratives.
as they are available for exhibition and only within the context of their present moment, as articulations of a single individual’s destiny: “Within the faded marking of the canvases people of some imagination and sensibility may read all the signs of the zodiac . . . . Or they may find their pictures from their own world of ideas: a rose, a heart, a sword—or even a heart pierced through with a sword” (103). According to the storyteller, however, the blank page is able to tell “a finer tale than any of us” (100). Indeed, the blank page invites not only imagination, but recollection: “It is in front of this piece of pure white linen that the old princesses of Portugal—worldly wise, dutiful, long-suffering queens, wives and mothers . . . have most often stood still. It is in front of the blank page that old and young nuns, with the Mother Abbess herself, sink into deepest thought” (105). Most telling of all: It is in front of the blank page that “the storytellers themselves . . . draw their veils over their faces and are dumb.” In the form of the blank canvas, and in the blank canvas’s tangible absence, the past is opened up to a collective audience as present experience.

However, in the light of the foregoing, we can also read the blank page as a metaphor for exilic space: the space created by rupture, characterized by lack, subject to nostalgia and embroidered into the narrative discourse by acts of departure and return. Lynn R. Wilkinson offers a similar reading of Dinesen's short story "The Poet":

What makes . . . storytelling possible is an experience of extreme loss, such as the catastrophe of Nazism and exile or Dinesen’s loss of her farm and lover in the early 1930s. Such catastrophes . . . make it possible to double back and consider the meaning of a life that followed the lines of a master-plot that resembles that of the Judeo-Christian tradition, with expulsion from the garden followed by various attempts at survival and even redemption (84).²

In accordance with this reading, the blank page is both locus and displacement. As center, it de-center. As monument, it proves an originary other that, though embedded in written history,

² Wilkinson also underscores Dinesen's interest in silence as a subversive, feminine space, a theme which I find intriguing, but which lies beyond the bounds of the present consideration.
opens up a space of possibility, a place of departure. Furthermore, though the blank page emerges as a literal and figural break with the master narrative of home and hearth—for the marriage bed, one of the most intimate symbols of domestic space, has been betrayed—nonetheless rupture becomes connection every time the blank canvas is included or gazed upon within the context of the narrative rite. By remaining faithful to a historical perspective that celebrates the presence of unwritten histories, the storyteller is able to overcome caesura and connect spoken histories to those that pass unspoken. In this way, the storyteller, though operating on the threshold of tradition—a threshold, moreover, created by the fact that that tradition has been "betrayed"—nevertheless confirms to a master narrative involving displacement and, from a position of displacement, redemption. In this case, it is the redemption of the blank page as a "speaking" space.

Turning to "Der Erzähler" ("The Storyteller"), we find that Walter Benjamin also emphasizes the ability of caesura to act as a connective space where individual lives are woven into a common human narrative and where the past is opened up to the audience as present experience. According to Benjamin, furthermore, the storyteller's relationship to caesura is likewise a function of the storyteller’s relationship to history. Whereas “The Blank Page” posits that the storyteller has a choice in this regard—a choice, that is, between a loyalty to and a betrayal of the story—Benjamin will argue that storytelling by its very definition involves the deliberate framing of caesura in the tale as a connective space capable of weaving individual lives into a common narrative thread. In this way, the storyteller, operating in the "im Haushalt der Menschheit" (457; “household of humanity” 101), creates a common human narrative we can all share. At the center of this narrative is caesura: the ultimate caesura in each individual life, the caesura that acts as a common denominator of all human experience—that is, death.
According to Benjamin, it is by weaving death into the narrative framework that the storyteller is able to overcome caesura and transform the “figure of rupture” into a “‘figure of connection’” (Seidel x):

All great storytellers have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder. A ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth and disappearing into the clouds is the image for a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier. (102)

As this image demonstrates, storytelling would not be possible without the open spaces framed between the ladder’s rungs. Indeed, as Benjamin continues: "Der Tod ist die Sanktion von allem, was der Erzähler berichten kann. Vom Tode hat er seine Autorität geliehen. Mit andern Worten: es ist die Naturgeschichte, auf welche seine Geschichten zurückverweisen" (450; “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back” 94). As a result, the storyteller’s relationship to caesura is a direct function of the storyteller’s relationship to history—or, in this case, to "natural history."

For Benjamin, “natural history” is our “natural” narrative home; it signifies the never-ending process of change that serves to connect all living things. By including death in the tale and by bearing witness to the universal truth that all things must end—indeed, by bearing witness to ending itself—the storyteller enables the narrative to continue from one generation to the next. Because death occupies a central place in the tale, furthermore, the past is opened up as a matter of present concern, and individual lives become part of a common narrative thread—an idea
Benjamin illustrates by turning to Johann Peter Hebel’s short story "Unverhofftes Wiedersehen" ("Unexpected Reunion"). In this story, the author concretizes the passage of time in the following way: "... und der siebenjährige Krieg ging vorüber, und Kaiser Franz der Erste starb, und der Jesuiten-Orden wurde aufgehoben . . . " (450; "... and the seven year war came and went, and Emperor Francis I died, and the Jesuit Order was abolished . . ." 95). In this chronology, each individual event reaches its conclusion. At the same time, the presence of ending acts as common denominator that places each event—“and . . . and . . . and”—into a single narrative thread. As Benjamin, therefore, concludes: "Tiefer hat nie ein Erzähler seinen Bericht in die Naturgeschichte gebettet als Hebel es in dieser Chronologie vollzieht" (451; “Never has a storyteller embedded his report deeper in natural history than Hebel manages to do in this chronology” (95). The presence of death in the tale acts like the open space between the ladder’s rungs.

At the same time, Benjamin also notes that in modern times death itself has disappeared from the scene:


Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one . . . In the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living. There used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not once died. . . . Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death, dry dwellers of eternity, and when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs. It is, however, characteristic that not only a man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are
made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. . . . This authority is the very source of the story. (94)

What happens to the story, however, when “the very source of the story,” the origin, disappears from the scene? According to Benjamin, the nature of both the narrative and the audience changes. For, having been thrust out of our narrative “home” by the disappearance of death, we become “dry dwellers of eternity,” stuck in a position of narrative displacement. Instead of the storyteller, then, who took his or her authority from the presence of death in the tale, we now have “the novelist,” the storymaker (my phrase), for whom the blank page is a “figure of rupture”: an eternally present space with no past and no memory. It is a space that cannot "speak" after the novelist/storymaker has fallen silent.

As Benjamin further observes:

In der Tat gibt es keine Erzählung, an der die Frage: Wie ging es weiter? ihr Recht Verlöre. Der Roman dagegen kann nicht erhoffen, den kleinsten Schritt über jene Grenze hinaus zu tun, an der er den Leser, den Lebenssinn ahnend sich vergegenwärtigen, dadurch einlädt, daß er ein >>Finis<< unter die Seiten schreibt. (455)

Actually there is no story for which the question as to how it continued would not be legitimate. The novelist, on the other hand, cannot hope to take the smallest step beyond that limit at which he invites the reader to a divinatory realization of the meaning of life by writing “Finis.” (100)

In the absence of death, the novelist/storymaker arguably takes his or her authority from the ability to append "Finis" to the tale. At the same time, the novel offers only a simulated form of ending.

In this context, it seems safe to assume—although Benjamin never uses the phrase—that the novelist/storymaker operates in the realm of unnatural history, of history that offers no real "sense of an ending" and that never allows the individual to overcome their position of displacement. At the same time, Benjamin also emphasizes that the absence of death in the tale introduces a new aesthetics into the mix, an aesthetics of displacement that makes it possible to
see "eine neue Schönheit in dem Entschwindenden" (442; “a new beauty in what is vanishing” 87). It is this aesthetic sense that is so beautifully captured in Tennyson’s poem “Ulysses.”

**Summary**

As previously discussed, the first-person narrators in Anna Seghers’s *Transit*, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and J. L. Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” occupy positions of narrative and physical displacement. Each narrator has been thrust out of a narrative “home” through the intervention of catastrophe: suicide, murder and erasure. However, the fact that they each witnessed the catastrophe that left the page blank places them in a position of narrative authority. At this point, the question, which is reminiscent of the choice faced by Odysseus on Calypso’s island, becomes: What will they do with their narrative authority? How will they frame the blank page in the tale? Will they tell the tale for the sake of salvaging a vanishing history or for the sake of forging "a new world to rule" (Said, "Reflections" 181) within the blank page as deserted space? Will they tell the tale for the sake of reconnection or recommencement?

As we saw in the previous section, telling the tale for the sake of reconnection implies allowing the caesura to "speak" its own history, an idea that involves the inclusion of death in the narrative. By including death in the narrative—the story, that is, of the suicide, murder or erasure that rendered the page blank—the narrator retains the position of witness. They are able to weave other lives together with their own, thereby reconnecting to a common human history. In this respect, the narrator’s task becomes end-directed; the past becomes a matter of present concern. Reconnection is achieved through the presence of ending in the tale.

On the other hand, telling the tale for the sake of recommencement involves ensuring that death remains outside the narrative framework. This allows the blank page to become an absent
presence: an open space with no past and no memories to contradict whatever story the narrator conjures; a place of infinite possibility in which to create a “new world to rule.” In order to maintain this "new world,” however, the narrator must also create the conditions by which ending can be postponed. This idea leads to what I will call storymaking (constructing a story for the sake of recommencement), as opposed to storytelling (telling the story for the sake of reconnection), and results in a form of narration that is both totalizing and recursive, reflecting the nature of the blank page as exilic space. Within these texts, furthermore, storymaking has a strong aesthetic appeal. It is the aesthetic appeal of the vanishing horizon, the "untravelled world whose margin fades / For ever and for ever" when the narrative "I" moves.
CHAPTER TWO

Storytelling and Storymaking: Odyssean Exceptionalism and the Myth of the Island Kingdom in Anna Seghers's novel *Transit*

I came to a place where no light shone at all, bellowing like the sea racked by a tempest, when warring winds attack it from both sides.

- Dante, *Inferno* (V. 28-30)

In 1945, Anna Seghers wrote that: “Der Krieg hat fast Schluß gemacht mit der ohnedies schmalen Möglichkeit der inneren Emigration. Er hat keine Zuflucht mehr erlaubt, keine Inselreiche; weil er nur eine Front hat, weil er total ist” (“Inneres und äußeres Reich” 203-04; "The war has almost done away with the already slim chance of inner emigration. It allows for no more escape, no more island kingdoms; because it has only one front, because it's total" 3). Within the essay, Seghers defines "island kingdoms" as stories capable of awakening nostalgia for a pre-Hitler Germany; stories that, because of their nostalgic effect, appear to offer pathways of (inner) escape from the outer chaos of World War II. However, as Seghers also argues, the context of total war makes escape into the text impossible.

It is a concept with which Seghers was intimately familiar. Born into an affluent Jewish family, Seghers, née Netty Reiling, was forced to flee Germany in 1933 after being held by the Gestapo for a short time. After her arrest, Seghers made her way to Paris with her husband, the Hungarian philosopher, László Radványi, and her two children. Two years later, when the Germans invaded France, she again fled with her family, eventually making her way to Mexico. It was during her voyage to Mexico that Seghers wrote the novel *Transit*.

Set in Marseille in the winter of 1940-41, Seghers’s novel *Transit* (1944) 4 documents the

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3 Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the German are my own.

4 *Transit* was first published in English and Spanish in 1944 and only appeared in the original German in 1948.
refugee experience from a first person perspective. In particular, the novel explores the way in which the first-person narrator, himself a German refugee, tries and fails to escape into an "island kingdom," as this idea is described by Seghers. Before embarking on a journey from Paris to Marseille, the narrator, whose name we never learn, comes across a suitcase belonging to a German author named Weidel. As the narrator discovers, Weidel has committed suicide while living in exile in Paris. Not knowing what else to do with the suitcase, the narrator decides to use it for his own and subsequently carries it with him from Paris to Marseille. One night, the narrator is confronted by the "tödliche Langweile" (25; “deadly boredom”)\(^5\) associated with his exilic stance and decides to read the manuscript he finds at the bottom of Weidel's suitcase. This story, which appears to offer a nostalgic pathway of inner escape from the outer chaos of World War II, acts as one of Seghers's "island kingdoms." Because Weidel fled into exile and then committed suicide, however, the story has been left unfinished. Instead of flowing from beginning to end, the text simply stops at the blank page. Escape into the closed universe of the text, therefore, is impossible. Instead, the blank page at the end of the story comes to represent a catastrophic caesura and an extension of exilic space. It is the encounter with the blank page, I maintain, that sets the stage for the rest of the events in the novel. Disillusioned by his failed escape into the text, the narrator decides to become "der Erfinder" (109; "the originator") of his own 'real life' adventures in transit. As such, he begins to vacillate between two identities: Seidler, the name on a set of papers acquired by chance, and Weidel, the suicided German author. The goal of this game is ultimately the author’s estranged wife, Marie, whom the narrator desires, and who must find her husband in order to flee Marseille (with her new lover, a doctor). Known to Marie as “Seidler,” and operating under the identity of “Weidel,” the narrator

\(^5\) The English translation of Transit is out of print and, therefore, not readily available. Accordingly, all translations of Transit from the original German are my own.
ultimately becomes the vanishing object of, as well as the eye-witness to Marie’s futile quest. It is a game (Weidel “offstage,” Seidler “onstage”) that continues until the narrator—transit, visa and ticket in hand—is faced with the concrete choice: to go or to stay. At this point, the narrator abandons his exilic adventures and allows Marie and her lover to depart on the Montreal unmolested.

In vacillating between Seidel and Weidel, the narrator engages in what I will call *storymaking*: creating, that is, a story for the sake of recommencement in the oblivion of the exilic caesura. This activity stands in contrast to *storytelling*: telling the tale for the sake of reconnection to the shores of human history. It is this latter activity in which the narrator engages after having decided to remain on the shores of southern France. At this point, he wants to tell the tale once and only once from beginning to end (6), thereby imposing closure on his adventures in transit—for "abgeschlossen ist, was erzählt wird" (251; “telling the tale brings closure”). It is this belief—the belief, namely, that the first-person narrator can impose closure on his exilic existence and reconnect to the shores of human history—that forms the basis for what I see as the narrator's self-imposed Odyssean exceptionalism, an idea that I have borrowed from François Hartog.

As Hartog points out in *Memories of Odysseus*, Odysseus was made exceptional by his ability to endure and escape his exilic adventures, rather than by the actual adventures themselves:

What is in the future, to make Odysseus an emblematic figure is not so much his wide experience of the world, but rather his ability to escape from it: not the voyage itself, but the endurance of it and all its perils, and the final deliverance from it. (35)

In keeping with this idea, it is the first-person narrator's belief that he can endure and escape exilic space that, I argue, prompts the narrative act. This idea, namely, will allow the narrator to
pose as a witness to, rather than a participant in the chaos of exile and transit. I will, therefore, explore the narrator’s relationship to the blank page—which acts as a catastrophic caesura and an extension of exilic space—in terms of his self-imposed position of Odyssean exceptionalism. I will ultimately ask whether this exceptional position is not simply another “island kingdom” that appears to offer the narrator a space of inner retreat from the outer chaos of World War II. Because of the complexity of this argument, I will engage in a close reading of the novel.

In the sections that follow, I will first explore the narrator's position of storyteller and will then turn to the narrator's stance of Odyssean exceptionalism. This discussion will be succeeded by a consideration of the narrator's relationship to the blank page as a catastrophic caesura and extension of exilic space. I will then move on to a discussion of the narrator's position of storymaker and will examine how the need to reconnect coexists with the desire to recommence. Finally, I will ask whether the narrator's stance of Odyssean exceptionalism is, in fact, another "island kingdom" to which he seeks to escape, or if first-person narration can indeed act as a prelude to reconnection.

**Storytelling**

In *Transit*, narration takes place at a crossroads, at the intersection between horizon and hearth, forgetfulness and remembrance, oblivion and history, storytelling and storymaking—at a small pizzeria in Marseille. Because the pizzeria offers two perspectives, allowing patrons to either choose a view of the harbor or the hearth, it becomes a significant crossroads, a place to which the narrator has often returned to ponder the important questions posed by a life lived in transit: 1) to stay or to go, and 2) what, if anything, holds you fast. As the narrator recounts:

Mir schien es das letzte Feuer, die letzte Herberge in der Alten Welt, die uns Obdach gewährte, ja, und eine letzte Frist, um uns zu entschieden: fort oder bleiben. Die Wände
To me it [the pizzeria] seemed the last fire, the last place of refuge in the old world, yes, even a final deadline by which to decide: to go or to stay. The walls were filled with countless such deadlines, which had been granted to countless people so that they could sit before the fire and ponder the most important thing: what held them fast.

According to Edward Said, the question of what holds us fast can only be answered by those who, like the narrator, have experienced the condition of displacement with no hope of return ("Reflections" 185-6). (Because the narrator is a German refugee, return to the lost homeland is impossible.) "Such a person," Said argues, "would also find it impossible to derive satisfaction from substitutes furnished by illusion or dogma" (186). According to this logic, the experience of displacement inoculates the individual against taking satisfaction from substitutes or simulacra, an idea seemingly exemplified by Transit's first-person narrator/protagonist. For, refusing to be seduced by the allure of the vanishing horizon—which, as an extension of exilic space, is characterized in the novel by historo-mythical imagery, an idea to which we will return—the narrator is "held fast" by his desire to leave exilic space and reconnect to the world of dwelling. As the novel unfolds, the narrator clings to those vestiges of the 'real' (an idea he associates with the world of dwelling) that yet persist in oblivion. Despite his desire for reconnection, however, the exilic caesura still separates the narrator from the 'real' world. As he also laments: "Ich fühlte, wie mich das gewöhnliche Leben von allen Seiten umspannte, doch gleichzeitig fühlte ich auch, daß es für mich unerreichbar geworden war" (65; "I felt that normal life surrounded me on all sides. At the same time, I felt that for me it had become unreachable").

Storytelling is a way to reach the unreachable. Set in Marseille during the winter of 1940-41, the novel unfolds from the first-person perspective of a narrator who, like thousands of others, has made his way to the shores of southern France. While most refugees are desperate to
depart European shores for "safe havens" over the horizon, the narrator wants to remain in France and reconnect to a world where dwelling is possible. As such, he seems like the proverbial rock in the stream, a stark contrast to the torrent of refugees flowing horizonward through Marseille. Telling his story from beginning to end is a way to bridge the exilic caesura and reconnect to a "normal" life.

As the narrator, therefore, declares on the first pages of the novel:


I’d like to tell it all once from beginning to end. If only I wasn’t afraid of boring the listener. Aren’t you sick to death of these dramatic stories? Haven’t you had it up to here with suspenseful tales of hairbreadth escapes and breathless flight? For my part, I’m heartily sick of them all. Today, if something were going to perk my interest, it might be the story of a metalworker, how much metal he'd worked over a lifetime, what tools he'd used, or even the round pool of light by which a couple of school kids do their homework.

As these words demonstrate, the narrator wants to reconnect to a world where stories (the life of a metalworker, for example) can be told from beginning to end; where scenes of "normalcy" are the rule, rather than the exception. These stories pose a stark contrast to other tales heard in exile: stories that begin in medias res with "hairbreadth escapes and breathless flight," only to vanish, sans ending, over the horizon. Telling the tale from beginning to end emulates (or simulates) the idea of "normalcy" for which the narrator longs, allowing him, among other things, to impose a linear structure upon the chaos of his exilic adventures. (Most of these adventures recursively take place in a variety of waiting rooms—hotels, consulates' offices, the pizzeria, etc.—where refugees go about the business of transit or go about killing time.) Telling
the tale once and only once, however, allows the narrator to put these exilic adventures into the past tense, thereby underscoring his (present) hope for reconnection. As the narrator, once again, declares in the Now Time of first-person narration: "Denn abgeschlossen ist, was erzählt wird" (215; “For telling the tale brings closure”). With this short phrase, the narrator signals to the audience the master narrative that will ultimately shape his narrative strategy—the belief, that is, that telling the tale to a willing audience will 1) allow him to transform the "figure of rupture" into a "'figure of connection’’ (Seidel x) and 2) allow him to reconnect to the world of human history. As such, the narrator views first-person narration as a final transit out of exilic space.

At the same time, the narrator's story takes place against the backdrop of the vanishing horizon and in the context of exilic space. Even as he asks the reader to sit and “listen” to his narrative, he invites us to choose, just as he once chose, between the pizzeria's two perspectives: the hearth (where pizzas are cooked on an open flame) and the harbor (where the sun is just sinking behind Fort Saint-Nicolas) (5). Both perspectives—one belonging to a “normal” life, the other belonging to a life lived in transit—are present throughout the novel, framing narration and underscoring the idea that narration takes place at a significant crossroads. This structure is also embodied in the relative positions of narrator vs. audience. While the narrator chooses to sit facing the hearth, his audience "takes a seat" facing the harbor. In this respect, the reader (or "listener") is cast into the position of a person "in transit": a refugee in transit through Marseille, as well as a reader in transit through the unfolding present.

Both ideas, the particular (Marseille) and the universal (the unfolding present), are

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As Jürgen Barkhoff correctly notes, Seghers “begnügt sich mit der Schaffung einer Erzähler-Hörer-Beziehung. Sie geht nicht so weit, im geschriebenen Text durchgängig den Eindruck von mündlicher Mitteilung erwecken zu wollen” (“contents herself with the creation of a narrator-listener-relationship. In the written text, she does not go so far as to try and give the impression of oral narration”; 220-21).
associated in the novel with the idea of transit. From his place facing the hearth, the narrator is in a position to bear witness to both, a fact that Salman Rushdie once again suggests gives the displaced individual a form of narrative authority:

\[ T \]he past is a country from which we have all emigrated, . . . its loss is part of our common humanity. Which seems to me self-evidently true; but I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being 'elsewhere.' This may enable him to speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal.

(12)

The narrator's ability to "speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal" places him into the position of “witness” to the world of exile and transit. It is an authority he uses to bridge the exilic caesura and attempt to reconnect to human history.

However, in telling the tale from beginning to end, the narrator is not attempting to establish a linear connection between his pre-exilic past and his post-exilic present, but rather between his exilic past and his post-exilic present. Indeed, we know nothing about the narrator's pre-exilic past, save that he is a German refugee. We never even learn his real name. The impossibility of return to the lost homeland makes the caesura that separates the narrator from his former life absolute. Instead of beginning at the beginning with the lost homeland, then, the narrator begins his story with his own tale of “hairbreadth escape and breathless flight”—first from a German concentration camp and then from a French work camp. The fact that we learn so little about the narrator's pre-exilic life emphasizes, once again, that the narrator’s ultimate goal is reconnection, not return. (After all, return to the lost homeland is impossible.) Telling the tale is an attempt to reconnect to the "normal" life that surrounds him on all sides and that once appeared to him unreachable. Indeed, because this "normal" life takes place on the shores of southern France, where heretofore he has lived in exile, telling the tale is meant to transform
exilic space into habitable ground.

In this respect, we can say that the act of putting the narrator’s exilic adventures into the past tense, within a "been there, done that" framework, transforms the exilic past into an "elsewhere" from which the narrator (via the process of narrative transit) can “emigrate.” The world of transit thereby becomes transitional, and the post-exilic present becomes a concrete destination, rather than a vague hope: a viable alternative to the world of transit. As Frank Wagner remarks, the process of storytelling thereby casts the transit world “im Zeichen der Zeitenwende” (“as a turning of the tides”; 219), rather than of a final destination. Reconnection acts as a substitute for return, even as the exilic past is opened up to the audience as a matter of present concern.

The Magic Ring

At this point, it should be emphasized that the narrative process by which the exilic past is opened up to the audience as a matter of present concern is central to Anna Seghers's overall creative project. As Seghers emphasizes in numerous essays, and perhaps most famously in "Aufgaben der Kunst” (“The Task of Art”), the purpose of art in times of crisis, and particularly in the fight against Fascism, is to make the individual conscious of 'reality'; or, rather, to bring 'reality' into the individual's consciousness. ('Reality', for Seghers, is rooted in the idea of a common human history that transcends national borders.) Indeed, as Seghers will repeatedly argue, 'reality' continues to exist, despite Fascism's best efforts to pervert and distort it. In “Volk und Schriftsteller” (“The People and the Writer”), for example, Seghers cleverly illustrates this idea through the use of Kierkegaard's metaphor of the magic ring from a Thousand and One
Nights. In keeping with Kierkegaard’s interpretation, Seghers remarks that whoever possesses the ring controls the ring’s spirit, be that spirit a good or an evil one (191). Although the ring can be used to create the deceptive appearance of a new kind of ‘reality’, true ‘reality’—which is based on human connectedness—still persists, despite the power that has been (mis)used to corrupt it. Therefore, the task of the writer in the fight against Fascism is twofold. First, s/he must undo the enchantment by reclaiming concepts such as "folk" and "culture" from a corrupt Fascist rhetoric, and then s/he must recontextualize these concepts back within their proper framework—that is, within the realm of shared human history and experience (193-97). As Ruth Dinesen points out, Seghers’s "contribution to the resistance against the Nazi regime” can, therefore, be considered to be “of a linguistic nature" (135).

As Birgit Maier-Katkin emphasizes in Acts of Memory, furthermore, it was for the sake of recontextualizing words and ideas that (re)confirm human connectedness that Seghers was interested in bringing the ruptures present in exilic narrative to light. In highlighting these ruptures—for example, the rupture between the history of political events and an individual's private recollection of the same (39)—Seghers was able to give "lived' memory" a voice (39-40). In this way, the caesuras framed by the tale function as mnemonic space, thereby transforming narration into an “act of memory” accessible from different times and different cultures (15). Not only does this narrative strategy reconfirm Seghers’s connection to the German people (41), but it also allows the reader to participate in a "dialogue about historical experience" (40) that spans generations.

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7 Kierkegaard 21.

8 For an interesting discussion on the Fascist corruption of language and the subsequent struggle of postwar German literature to come to terms with the "break in civilization" occasioned by the Holocaust, see Ernestine Schlant, The Language of Silence. Her "Introduction" gives particularly a good overview of the issues faced by postwar German authors in this context.
If we turn back to *Transit*, we find that the narrator's project, which is undertaken for the sake of reconnection, seems to epitomize Seghers's ideas about the role that narration can play in reconnecting the displaced individual to a 'reality' that is rooted in a common human history. Indeed, as mentioned above, the narrator's desire to dwell on the shores of southern France ostensibly inoculates him against the “enchantment” of the surreal, chaotic transit world. (As Mary Lyons has noted, this world, with its labyrinthine bureaucratic structure, not to mention "the sense of alienation and dehumanization experience by the refugees" (101), resembles the totalizing, nightmare world of Kafka's stories.) Instead of succumbing to the siren song of the vanishing horizon, the narrator clings to those vestiges of the 'real' (the remnants of a "normal" life, which posits human connectedness) that yet persist in oblivion. In telling his tale, and in weaving the stories of other refugees together with his own, the narrator establishes the exilic caesura as a "speaking" space, as a space characterized by "'lived' memory." The particular and the universal aspects of being in transit are thereby opened up to the reader as matters of present concern. The reader, who actively participates in the unfolding of "'lived' memory," thus enables a dialogue that spans generations. This idea also resonates with themes we have explored in Isak Dinesen's short story "The Blank Page" and in Walter Benjamin's essay "Der Erzähler" ("The Storyteller").

Indeed, as Helen Fehervary has suggested, "The Storyteller" could have been written with Seghers's “style and manner in mind” (150). Gertraud Gutzmann makes a similar observation, arguing that: “In *Transit* . . . , Benjamin’s reflections are woven into a dialogical model of narration, directed toward a fictive listener, a configuration of the author’s readers whom she, for the time being, was unable to reach” (“Literary Antifascism” 88). Whereas Benjamin regarded storytelling as a dying genre, however, Seghers believes that storytelling is possible, and indeed
critical, in times of crisis (Barkhoff 226).

If we read the novel in this way—that is, as an example of how storytelling is still possible in times of crisis—then we are, in fact, in agreement with most critics. Marike Janzen, for example, notes that the novel is “a particularly strong example of the political power of shared personal narratives,” serving to illustrate the way in which storytelling can be used to “create a critical public sphere” (175). As mentioned above, the novel openly invites such interpretation. However, it is also worth asking if storytelling can actually function as a final transit out of exilic space. Can storytelling, that is, act as a prelude to reconnection? Does it have the power to transform exilic space into habitable ground? Or will this idea prove to be another chimerical "island kingdom," a master narrative into which the narrator seeks (and fails) to flee? Is the narrator, like Odysseus, truly an exception to the rule of exile and transit?

At first glance, it seems that the narrator indeed occupies an exceptional position. As mentioned above, his position and purpose in front of the hearth form a stark contrast to most tales heard in transit. For although these stories begin, like the narrator's, with the aforementioned "hairbreadth escapes and breathless flight," they also vanish over the horizon, which extends exilic space indefinitely.

**The Primeval Wilderness**

It is, in fact, with one such story that the narrator opens: with speculation, that is, upon the fate of the *Montreal*, a ship on which he was set to sail and which may or may not have sunk in transit. It is worth looking at this narrative moment, for the fate of the *Montreal* and those aboard not only form a stark contrast to the narrator's situation, but will also prove central to the novel's plot and the narrator's plotting.
As the narrator, therefore, begins:


I’d like to know if the Montreal actually sank. If they really landed, what are all those people doing over there? Beginning new lives? Finding jobs? Joining committees? Clearcutting the virgin forest? You know, if there really was an "over there," the primeval wilderness, say, that rejuvenates anything and everything it touches, I can almost regret not going. I had a paid ticket, I had a visa, I had a transit. Nonetheless, I suddenly decided to stay behind.

As we can see from this passage, the receding horizon, which acts as an extension of exilic space, is characterized by a blending of mythical imagery (i.e. the primeval wilderness) with scenes taken from 'everyday' life (e.g. finding jobs, joining committees): two parallel lines that seem to intersect at the horizon's vanishing point. This same vanishing perspective, which blends mythical imagery with scenes taken from 'everyday' life, is present throughout the novel, underscoring the caesura between exilic space and the “normal” life for which the narrator longs.

At the same time, even if the vanishing horizon acts as a backdrop for the narrator's tale—another idea that underscores the contrast between horizon and hearth—the narrator's sudden decision to stay behind also frames the narrative act. (Indeed, this decision, like Odysseus's decision to leave Calypso's island, will act as a prelude to storytelling.) In this way, first-person narration does indeed seem to be a bridge that connects the adventures had in exile—the way in which the narrator ended up with a paid ticket, visa and transit, a feat almost as unbelievable as tangling with the Cyclops and winning, or sailing past Scylla and Charybdis
unscathed\textsuperscript{9}—to the climactic moment at which the narrator "nonetheless" decided to stay behind on the shores of southern France. The vanishing horizon is, therefore, recontextualized within the framework of the narrator's tale; a tale, moreover, that forms a stark contrast to the vanishing horizon, since it is told from "beginning to end." (At the same time, "beginning" here is understood to refer to the flight from the French work camp and "ending" to the moment at which the narrator suddenly decided to stay behind.) If the vanishing horizon remains an open possibility on the part of the reader, then, it acts as a closed question on the part of the narrator. The horizon is something upon which the narrator has turned his back.

However, it should also be noted that the German word "doch"—"Ich hatte eine bezahlte Karte, ich hatte ein Visum, ich hatte ein Transit. Doch zog ich es plötzlich vor, zu bleiben" (“I had a paid ticket, I had a visa, I had a transit. Nonetheless, I suddenly decided to stay behind”)—signals an abrupt about-face on the narrator’s part. (“Nonetheless” only partially conveys this sense.)\textsuperscript{10} The text, that is, highlights the disjunct between the adventures had in exile and the narrator's sudden decision to remain on the shores of southern France. Telling the tale from beginning to end may provide the narrator a means of transit—a transition—from one world to the other. At the same time, even if the open horizon (as a closed possibility) is recontextualized within the framework of narrator's tale, there is still an implicit caesura between the adventures had in exile and the narrator's decision to stay on the shores of southern France.

Keeping this caesura in sight, even while providing a suture between the narrated past and the open-ended present—a suture that contextualizes the open-ended present within the framework of a tale told "from beginning to end"—is also part of the narrator's narrative strategy.

\textsuperscript{9} In this case, the rock and a hard place involves trying to secure the necessary documentation before the documents one already has in hand have expired.

\textsuperscript{10} "Doch" can also be translated "despite that" or "but."
By establishing the exilic past as an "elsewhere" from which he (via a process of narrative transit) can emigrate, the narrator seemingly closes the door on this past, an act that underscores the presence of the exilic caesura, even as it offers a narrative suture from one world to the other. If the caesura "speaks," then, it does so in the context of the narrator's ability to endure and then ostensibly escape exilic space. In this way, the caesura speaks to the narrator's stance of Odyssean exceptionalism. (The audience, who “sits” facing the harbor and who looks to the horizon as a matter of present, pressing concern, further highlights the narrator's exceptional status.) If storytelling provides a suture from the narrator's exilic past to his post-exilic present, it also emphasizes that there is a caesura that ineluctably separates the exilic world (which the narrator relegates to the past) from the world of dwelling. Keeping the caesura intact, while struggling to bridge the gap between exilic past and post-exilic present, becomes a matter of narrative positioning, one that will rely upon a master narrative of Odyssean exceptionalism, as well as upon the belief that storytelling, like the genie’s ring, can transform exilic space into habitable ground.

In order to explore the nature of this transformation, however, and to ask whether this idea is not simply another “island kingdom” into which the narrator seeks to flee—or, instead, whether a Calypso’s island can, in fact, become an Ithacan shore—it is necessary to take a closer look at the narrator’s position of Odyssean exceptionalism.

**The Odysseus Connection**

When we first encounter the narrator, he occupies a position similar to that of Odysseus in Books Nine through Twelve of the *Odyssey*. Displaced into an exilic context, he tells an end-directed tale for the sake of reconnection. If Odysseus's narrative is bookended by reference to
Calypso's island, however, first-person narration in *Transit* takes place in a setting that conceptually resembles Calypso's island: at the aforementioned crossroads where myth and history, horizon and hearth, exilic space and the world of dwelling meet. Once again, this idea is underscored by the relative positioning of the narrator (facing the hearth) and the reader (facing the harbor), a contrast that serves to keep the vanishing horizon (with its vanishing perspective) in sight. At the same time, it also emphasizes what I am choosing to call the narrator's position of Odyssean exceptionalism: the fact, that is, that the narrator can ostensibly endure and, through the act of storytelling, escape exilic space.

It is not uncommon for critics to draw a parallel between *Transit*’s first-person narrator and the figure of Odysseus. In the first place, the novel itself contains imagery that calls to mind an epic journey through oblivion. Aside from the voyage across an "unmenschliche Leere und Öde" (43; "an inhuman emptiness and waste") that awaits the refugees streaming through Marseille, the narrator often uses maritime imagery to characterize his exilic experience. One of the most poignant examples of this idea occurs when the narrator visits the Saint Victor Abbey, a structure the narrator terms a "Kircheng Schiff" (99; "church-ship"). In keeping with this image, the mass, which takes place in the crypt, occurs "unter dem Meer" (under the sea).

While working on *Transit*, furthermore, Seghers composed a short prose piece entitled “Der Baum des Odysseus” (“Odysseus’s Tree”) that describes the hero’s return through

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11 It should be noted, however, that the mythical imagery in *Transit* has been taken from a number of Greek, Christian and Jewish sources. The purpose of this imagery is to emphasize the surreal nature of exilic space, not to force an absolute identification with any one particular source. For a general discussion of the importance of myth in Seghers's writing, see Fehervary. For a discussion of the use of myth in Seghers's lesser-known texts, see Maeng-Im Koh. Although Koh's consideration makes a good contribution to Seghers's criticism, however, it does tend to be overly diagrammatic.
Penelope’s eyes, thereby emphasizing the identity problematics surrounding homecoming.\textsuperscript{12} Although further discussion of this short text is beyond the scope of the present consideration, it does demonstrate that, while working on the novel, Seghers had Odysseus's saga in mind. (This fact, however, is unsurprising, considering that Odysseus’s problematic return was a common theme of German exilic literature during and around the time of World War II [Riedel, 302-03].)

Finally, the narrator’s position as storyteller, and the fact that his eyes are firmly fixed upon the hearth, invites critics (myself among them) to compare the relative positions of Odysseus and \textit{Transit}'s first-person narrator.\textsuperscript{13} As Gutzmann, for example, remarks: “As [the narrator’s] gift for storytelling unfolds, he becomes a brother, so to speak, of Odysseus the exile and spinner of tales” (“Crisis and Transition” 813).

However, if critics do not draw an outright comparison between Odysseus and \textit{Transit}'s first-person narrator, they tend to emphasize that the narrator's position is indeed exceptional, largely because it exemplifies the idea that reconnection via storytelling in times of crisis is still possible. With these and similar thoughts in mind, for example, Sonja Hilzinger argues that \textit{Transit} is a type of \textit{Erziehungsroman}, where the first-person narrator, displaced into the egotistical world of exile and transit, must ultimately relearn the value of human solidarity. As Hilzinger, for example, suggests:

\textsuperscript{12} For an in-depth discussion of “Der Baum des Odysseus,” which is part of three short texts entitled “Die drei Bäume” (“The Three Trees”), see Koh 87-92.

\textsuperscript{13} There are other essays that would prove helpful in this context. However, they are published in \textit{Argonautenschiff}, a journal put out by the Anna Seghers Gesellschaft, which is located in Berlin. Unfortunately, I have not been able to obtain these articles through Interlibrary Loan, nor have my repeated queries to the journal's editorial staff received an answer. In order to access this journal, a trip to Berlin might be required. However, I have also noticed that articles in this journal receive only minimal citation from other critics. I do not know whether this fact could be due to the difficulty of obtaining the articles or due to the quality of scholarship. (My guess is that it is due to the former.)
In dieser verkehrten Welt muß, wie im Märchen, das Richtige getan werden, um von einem zerstörischen Zauber erlöst zu werden; dies gilt für den Erzähler wie auch für die anderen Figuren. Am Beispiel des Erzählers zeigt sich am deutlichsten, was das Richtige ist: er muß lernen, Echtes non Unechtem zu unterscheiden, und als wichtigsten Wert in der flüchtigen, egoistischen Transit- Welt muß er Solidarität bewahren . . . .

(“Nachwort” 286)

In [Transit’s] topsy-turvy world, as in a fairy tale, you have to do the right thing in order to be freed from a destructive enchantment; this goes for the narrator, as well as for the other characters. The narrator exemplifies what the right thing is: he has to learn to distinguish truth from falsehood, and to preserve [human] solidarity as the thing of greatest value in the transient, egoistical world of transit . . . .

Helen Fehervary goes further and argues that the narrator, seated in front of the hearth and telling his tale for the sake of reconnection, occupies a prophetic position similar to that of “Isaiah, Jeremiah, the Maccabees, the Essenes, John the Baptist, Jesus the Nazarene and his disciples . . . .” (170).

In focusing on the narrator’s position of Odyssean exceptionalism—the way in which he endures and ostensibly escapes the world of exile and transit—it is not my intention to retread what is already well-covered ground. Although no one, to my knowledge, has described the narrator’s position in quite this way, I nonetheless take the similarities between Odysseus and the narrator, as well as the narrator’s position of exceptionalism, as an essential (and intentional) component of the plot. Instead, I want to use the idea of Odyssean exceptionalism to explore the narrator's overall project of self-positioning; the way, that is, that he continually thrusts himself into the position of witness to, rather than participant in the world of exile and transit. This reading raises some important questions, which I believe have been largely ignored by the critical discussion. For example, is the narrator’s position of Odyssean exceptionalism, which culminates in the act of storytelling, simply another “island kingdom” to which the narrator seeks to flee? Is reconnection, therefore, an ersatz notion, a simulacrum of dwelling that the narrator pursues in order to escape exilic space? In asking these questions, I am once again departing
from a critical discussion that fails to problematize the narrator’s stance of exceptionalism, and
tends to read the novel as an indisputable example of how reconnection via narration in times of
 enclave is possible.

**Odyssean Exceptionalism**

When we first encounter the narrator, he has already decided to remain on the shores of
Southern France. It is a decision that prompts him to tell the tale from "beginning to end," and to
weave other refugees' stories together with his own. As a result, Hilzinger suggests that the
novel can be read in a variety of ways: as a quasi-documentary of the extreme situation in
southern France; as a Kafkaesque presentation of the forlornness of human existence; and as the
story of an individual's loss and self-redemption (*Anna Seghers* 183). On each level, the narrator
acts as witness to the world of exile and transit. Without his act of witness, many stories,
including the narrator's own, would have been lost to oblivion. In bearing witness to the world
of exile and transit, furthermore, the narrator also stands out as an exception to this world.
Unlike his fellow refugees—unlike Seghers herself, who, one again, wrote *Transit* while in
transit from France to Mexico—he is headed away from the horizon, rather than toward it. His
position facing the hearth underscores this fact, as does his desire to tell the tale once from
beginning to end. Singled out by this desire to reconnect to a "normal" life, as well as by his
ostensible ability to escape exilic space, the narrator seems to possess a form of Odyssean
exceptionalism.

Even before the act of storytelling begins, however, we find, by the narrator’s own
admission, that he has strategically used the idea of Odyssean exceptionalism to set himself apart
from his fellow refugees. Many of his adventures in exile are the direct result of his ongoing
attempt to show that he is an exception to the rule of exile and transit: that he is a witness to, rather than a participant in the exilic world. His position facing the hearth is, therefore, the culmination of a strategy of self-positioning that takes various forms throughout the novel, as the narrator consistently struggles to balance on the threshold between hearth and horizon. Indeed, Odyssean exceptionalism becomes an overarching narrative, one to which the narrator clings throughout his various adventures in exile.

It is a narrative that allows the narrator to provisionally dwell while in transit. For example, as he recollects at one point:

Ich lebte ruhig und ziemlich allein in dieser Horde abfahrtssüchtiger Teufel. Ich trank meinen bitteren Kaffee-Ersatz oder meinen süßen Banjuls auf meinen hungrigen Magen und horchte entzückt auf das Hafengetratsch, das mich gar nichts anging. Es war schon kalt. Ich saß aber immer im Freien, im Winkel eines Fensters, geschützt vor dem Mistral, der einen von allen Seiten zugleich angriff. (64)

I lived peacefully and for the most part alone among this horde of departure-hungry devils. I drank my bitter coffee substitute or my sweet banyul to calm my hunger and, charmed, eavesdropped on harbor-buzz that had nothing to do with me. It was already cold. I always sat out in the open, in a corner of a window that protected me from the mistral that attacked you from all sides at once.

Scenes such as this one, regularly occurring throughout the novel, demonstrate how the narrator sets himself apart from the departure-hungry horde by clinging to the idea of dwelling in transit. His stance as witness to, rather than participant in the life of transit is underscored by the corner shelter that protects him from the mistral. (In the novel, the mistral is symbolic of a refugee's chaotic existence. For example, refugees often appear with “mistralverzehrrte Gesichter” (130; "mistral-distorted faces"). However, this particular window corner can only offer the narrator a temporary refuge. Eventually, he must return to mistral-swept streets. In much the same way, the stance of Odyssean exceptionalism, which allows the narrator to act the part of charmed tourist, eavesdropping on harbor-buzz—the rumors of ships arrived, departed or sunk—that has
"nothing to do with [him]," can only provide a provisional shelter. (This is an idea to which we will return.)

At the same time, the narrator's stance of Odyssean exceptionalism seems to function as a type of inoculation against what the narrator terms “die Abfahrtskrankheit” (222; “the departure bug”): the deadly disease that affects and afflicts the departure-hungry hordes around him. In describing the refugees flowing through Marseille, for example, the narrator admits:


I took them for departed [souls], who had left their real lives behind in their forgotten lands . . . . They could pretend to be among the living with their colorful ensembles, their visas for exotic lands, their stamps of transit. But I wasn’t deceived as to the nature of their passage. I was only astonished that the prefects and the higher-ups and the city officials still acted like the river of the departed was something that could be curbed with human might. As I watched, I feared that I myself could be drawn into this river, I, who was filled with life, who desired nothing more than to remain, as if I could be drawn into this river through some coup de force or through some seduction.

Though he fears being drawn into the river of departed souls, the narrator counts himself as one among the living. Though he, too, occupies a position of displacement, he is still connected to the 'real' world, the world of the living, through his desire to dwell, rather than to depart. It is this desire to dwell that allows the narrator to maintain his position as witness to, rather than participant in the world of transit.

At the same time, the narrator's ability to dwell in transit is dependent upon a recursive process of postponement. In order to legally remain in Marseille, the narrator must paradoxically
prove to the authorities that he is trying to depart. As he remarks at one point, for example: "... jetzt war ich bereit, jedwede Forderung zu erfüllen, damit man mich bleiben ließ, die unsinnigsten Abfahrtsbeweise zu beschaffen" (130; “now I was ready to fulfill every demand, to come up with the most absurd proofs of departure, just so they'd let me stay”). Attempting to secure the documents needed for departure postpones the mandatory date for departure a little longer. This process, in turn, allows the narrator to provisionally dwell in transit. (It is, for example, during one such "grace" period that the narrator was able to live "peacefully and for the most part alone among this horde of departure-hungry devils.") The fact that he must constantly provide proofs of departure, however, makes the narrator, despite himself, a participant in the same totalizing process—i.e. the endless pursuit of documentation—that blows his fellow refugees hither and thither through the mistral-swept streets. It is a process, we find, that is not unlike the voyage towards a vanishing horizon. As one character, for example, describes it: no sooner do you have one document in hand than another has expired, “und so immer weiter, immer weiter, immer weiter” (47-48; “and so on, and on, and on”). The narrator, like other refugees, is caught up in an endless cycle of postponement. What for other refugees is a matter of life and death, however, becomes a game for the narrator. Indeed, in order to provisionally dwell in transit, he willingly pushes the boulder up the bureaucratic hill and watches it roll down again. This recursive activity, which reflects the totalizing nature of the narrator's exilic context, allows him to tread water against the horizon-bound current, and so maintain his position on the threshold as witness to, rather than participant in the life of exile and transit. It is this position of witness that enables the narrator, who desires to dwell rather than to depart, to cling to the master narrative of Odyssean exceptionalism.

The Blank Page
Before storytelling happens, the narrator's position of Odyssean exceptionalism is enabled by a cycle of recursive postponement that directly reflects the totalizing nature of the narrator's exilic context. At the same time, this narrative affords the narrator a threshold shelter from the chaotic life of exile and transit. However, its provisional nature becomes apparent when the narrator comes face-to-face with the blank page, which acts as a catastrophic caesura and extension of exilic space. In order to set the stage for this encounter, which happens relatively early in the novel, it is necessary to go into some plot detail.

On his journey to Marseille, the narrator happens upon a suitcase belonging to the German author Weidel, a man who committed suicide while living in exile. Not knowing what else to do with it, the narrator carries the suitcase from Paris to Marseille. One night, however, the narrator decides to combat the "tödliche Langweile" (25; “deadly boredom”) associated with his exilic stance by reading a manuscript he finds at the bottom of Weidel's suitcase. This story, which appears to offer a nostalgic pathway of inner escape from the outer chaos of World War II, acts as one of Seghers's "island kingdoms." Because Weidel fled into exile and then committed suicide, however, the story has been left unfinished. Instead of flowing from beginning to end, the text simply stops at the blank page. Escape into the closed universe of the text, therefore, is impossible. As a result, the blank page at the end of the story represents a catastrophic caesura and an extension of exilic space. Because of its importance to the discussion, it is worth reproducing this scene nearly in full.

As the narrator relates:


I began to read out of pure boredom. I read and read. Perhaps because up until this point I’d never made it all the way through a book. I was enchanted. ... I forgot my deadly boredom. ... And as I continued on line by line, I felt more and more that this was my language, my mother tongue. I was like a baby on the breast. It didn’t grate and grind like the language pouring from Nazi throats in murderous orders, in abominable declarations of fidelity. ... It was serious and still. To me it seemed like I was once again alone with the things that were mine. ... I came across words I’d once used and had since forgotten. ... There were also new words that I sometimes still use today. The story was rather complex and had rather complex people. I also discovered that one of them resembled myself. The story was about—but no. I won’t bore you with the details. You’ve read enough stories in your lifetime. For me it was the first, so to speak. I’d experienced more than enough, but I’d never just sat down and read.... It was only as a child that I’d read, or rather listened like that. I felt the same wonder, the same fear. The forest was just as impenetrable. However, it was a forest made for adults. ... But suddenly, somewhere around the three hundredth page, it all ended for me. I never discovered the outcome. The Germans had invaded Paris, the man had packed all his things, his few clothes, his notebooks. And he’d left me alone at the nearly blank page. At this point, the narrator is thrust out of the nostalgic space of a text that recalled to him a pre-exilic world. The intervention of the total war has cut off his retreat, leaving him stranded at the "nearly blank page." The fact that the page is only "nearly blank," however, underscores the idea that vestiges of ‘reality’ yet persist in oblivion. (It is also worth noting that “leer” can also mean “empty,” which lends itself to the companion idea of a “nearly empty” space.) As a result,

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14 It should be noted that "leer" can also be translated as "empty."
he suffers a form of narrative displacement that echoes his physical displacement. The caesura that separates him from his pre-exilic past is indeed absolute.

It is interesting to note, however, that the narrator blames Weidel for his predicament. ("The Germans had invaded Paris, the man had packed all his things, his few clothes, his notebooks. And he’d left me alone at the nearly blank page.") Because the author failed to complete the "island kingdom," the narrator, his would-be reader, is stranded in a place devoid of narrative authority. It is a form of "betrayal" that resonates with the ideas expressed in Dinesen's short story, "The Blank Page."

As we remember, Dinesen's storyteller prefices her own tale with the following: "Where the story-teller is loyal, eternally and unswervingly loyal to the story, there, in the end, silence will speak. But where the story has been betrayed, silence is but emptiness. But we, the faithful, when we have spoken our last word, will hear the voice of silence" (100). Like the canvas on the convent wall, the blank page at the end of Weidel's text represents—at least where the narrator is concerned—a break with the master narrative of home and hearth. As a result, the blank page, which Weidel's suicide renders unable to "speak," appears to be a deserted space, a space that is devoid of narrative authority and that, therefore, echoes the “gottlose Leere” (24-25; "godless void") of exilic space. “Leere” (void) here echoes the emptiness of the leere Seite (blank page)

Although the blank page represents a catastrophic caesura, however, it also proves to be a place of open possibility, a space where originary stories can happen—a space, that is, that allows for the assumption of narrative authority. As the narrator, for example, exclaims: “Erloschen, zerbrochen lag sie bei ihm, die Wunderlampe, die alles für immer erhellte, worauf er [Weidel] sie je gerichtet hielt . . . . Wer die Lampe hat, so heißt es doch, nicht wahr, dem gehorcht der Geist der Lampe” (134; “There it lay, extinguished, broken—the magic lamp that
would’ve forever shed light on everything he [Weidel] cast it on . . . However, as the saying goes, whoever holds the lamp controls the spirit of the lamp”). The imagery present in this passage, which is reminiscent of the Seghers uses in her essay "Volk und Schriftsteller" (“The People and the Writer”) to describe the Fascist perversion of 'reality'. In this essay, we remember, Seghers uses the metaphor of Kierkegaard's magic ring from a *Thousand and One Nights* to illustrate the idea that whoever possesses the ring controls the ring's spirit, be that spirit a good or an evil one (191). In a similar way, Weidel's suicide places the narrator in a position to seize narrative authority and wield the (broken) lamp.

It is a position of which the narrator takes willing advantage. When confronted on another night with the empty void of exilic waiting, the narrator considers reading Weidel’s book again. However, he now discards the truncated text as insufficient. As he remarks:

Ich spürte den alten Unwillen meiner Knabenzeit gegen Bücher, die Scham vor bloß erfundenem, gar nicht gültigem Leben. Wenn etwas erfunden werden mußte, wenn dieses zusammengeschusterte Leben gar zu dürftig war, dann wollte ich selbst der Erfinder sein, doch nicht auf Papier. (109)

I felt the old childhood reluctance to pick up a book, the dislike of completely fictional, wholly artificial life. When something had to be dreamed up, when this botched life wasn’t enough, then I wanted to be the originator—only not on paper.

The decision to become the originator of his own 'real life' adventures sets the stage for storymaking, a process I will argue that the narrator undertakes: 1) for the sake of recommencement in a space of open possibility; 2) in order to forge a narrative over which he has total control; and 3) to maintain a threshold where he can shelter as witness to, rather than participant in the chaos of exile and transit. At the same time, it is a decision that actively casts the narrator into exilic space, which itself takes on the character of an unwritten page, a place where originary stories can happen. (The imagery surrounding the narrator's assumption of narrative authority—i.e. the (broken) lamp and its genie—also signals that the seizure of
narrative authority belongs to the historo-mythical world of exile and transit.) After deciding to become the "originator" of his own adventures, furthermore, the narrator begins to vacillate between two identities: Seidler, the name on a set of papers acquired by chance, and Weidel, the suicided German author. The goal of this game is ultimately the author’s estranged wife, Marie, whom the narrator desires, and who must find her husband in order to flee Marseille (with her new lover, a doctor). Known to Marie as “Seidler,” and operating under the identity of “Weidel,” the narrator ultimately becomes the vanishing object of, as well as the eye-witness to Marie’s futile quest.

**Storymaking: Seidler, Weidel and the Vanishing Threshold**

If the narrator’s sudden decision to stay behind on the shores of southern France acts as a prelude to storytelling and seems to confirm the narrator’s position of Odyssean exceptionalism, then the narrator’s encounter with the blank page acts as a prelude to storymaking and seems to problematize the narrator's exceptional stance. In becoming the “originator” of his own adventures, the narrator increasingly falls prey to the seductive pull of the vanishing horizon; becoming, as he puts it, lost in “[der] Nebel meiner eigenen Verzauberung” (111; “the fog of my own enchantment”).

As the narrator, for example, further recollects:

Damals fing ich . . . an, in Konsulatsfristen zu rechnen, eine Art von Planetenzeit, in der man irdische Tage für Millionen von Jahren setzt, weil Welten verbrannt sind, ehe das Transit abläuft. Ich fing auch schon an, meine Träume ernst zu nehmen, warfen sie denn nicht ihre echten Schatten auf die Weißen Seiten der Dossiers? (145)

Back then I’d . . . started measuring time in terms of consulate’s deadlines, a planetary time that replaces earth days with millions of years, because whole worlds are destroyed

15 Like boredom and the mistral, the state of "being lost in a fog" is symbolic of the refugee existence.
before the transit has expired. I’d also started to take my dreams seriously. Didn’t they throw real shadows across the white pages of the dossiers?

The novel is full of such statements, which point to the way in which the narrator is ineluctably drawn into the world of exile and transit after his encounter with the blank page. The narrator’s assumption of narrative authority is a first step in this direction, a strategy that is specifically designed to cast his shadow across the “white pages of the dossiers”: white pages that document fragmented identities, ritually rubberstamping the deadly caesura between exilic present and pre-exilic past. “Visum zu Visum, Papier zu Papier, Dossier zu Dossier” (56, 135; “Visa to visa, paper to paper, dossier to dossier”) is a common mantra throughout the book. In this respect, perhaps it is fitting that the "shadow" the narrator casts is that of Seidler/Weidel, a false name paired with a dead man's ghost.

Having resolved to seize narrative authority, then, the narrator launches what he terms “papierene Abenteuer” (“paper adventures”), adventures whose goal is “de[r] Durchbruch durch einen Urwald von Dossiers” (124; “the penetration of a primeval forest of dossiers”). This wilderness, which is populated by historo-mythological figures, such as cyclopean doorkeepers (31) and bureaucratic kobolds (114), further connects the totalizing, bureaucratic process that consumes the refugees in Marseille with the exilic world the narrator projects over the horizon. As we will see, however, penetrating this wilderness involves becoming part and parcel of the departure-hungry hordes, who look to the horizon with longing, with Fernweh (54).

Although storymaking problematizes the narrator’s position of Odyssean exceptionalism, however, I will also argue that storymaking is a way for the narrator to maintain his threshold stance. Adopting the double identity of Seidler/Weidel allows the narrator to vacillate between

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16 An approximate English translation of this word is “wanderlust.” However, Fernweh, which denotes a longing for faraway places, is the opposite of Heimweh, literally “homesickness.”
witness and protagonist, to enter and exit the stage at will, thereby preserving an essential component of Odyssean exceptionalism: the ability, namely, to endure and escape exilic space. The narrator's double face, furthermore, mirrors his double stance. Seidler emerges as the "living" face turned towards the hearth, while Weidel becomes the vanishing face turned towards the horizon. Indeed, Seidler/Weidel ironically echoes the respective positions of narrator/audience.

Before we explore the narrator's double face further, however, we should once again remark that the goal of the narrator's foray into storymaking is Marie, Weidel's estranged wife, who needs her husband to help her secure the documents required for transit. Known to Marie as "Seidler," the narrator also obtains documents in Weidel’s name, thereby creating the liminal bureaucratic identity of Seidler/Weidel. In this way, the narrator helps Marie to secure the documents she needs for departure. (At the same time, he uses this game to postpone his own departure date.) As for Marie, the rumor that her husband is alive in Marseille sends her on an obsessive, futile chase that underscores a common metaphor in the book: namely, the figure of the refugee blown hither and thither by desire. In this way, the narrator becomes the vanishing protagonist of Marie’s desperate quest. It is a game (Weidel “offstage,” Seidler “onstage”) that continues until the narrator—transit, visa and ticket in hand—is faced with the concrete choice: to go or to stay. At this point, the narrator abandons his exilic adventures and allows Marie and her lover to depart on the Montreal.

However, the narrator's ability to "originate" this game—Seidler onstage, Weidel offstage—is dependent upon Weidel's death remaining firmly behind the scenes, an idea that puts us in mind of Benjamin's novelist figure. As we remember, Benjamin's novelist operates in an open space that is characterized by the absence of death. For this reason, Benjamin argues,
the novelist takes his or her authority from the ability to append "Finis" to the story, just as the storyteller takes his or her authority from the position of witness to the presence of death in the tale. The absence of death on the scene, however, also introduces a new aesthetics: the aesthetics, namely, of vanishing. This idea, too, speaks to the narrator's predicament. For as we find, the narrator begins to take on the vanishing perspective implicit in his game—a game, after all, that embodies the pursuit of the vanishing threshold. In order to explore these ideas further, we will now take up each of the narrator's faces individually, beginning with that of Seidler.

As already indicated, "Seidler" functions as the narrator's public face. It is the name by which most people, including Marie, know him. (It is, in fact, only a few bureaucrats who know him by the name of "Weidel.") It is as Seidler, for example, that the narrator visits the Binnets, a French family who, despite the war, manage to lead a relatively "normal" life. As a result, the narrator associates the Binnets with the 'reality' for which he longs. At one point, for instance, the narrator recollects that while pursuing Marie (who was pursuing her husband) through the streets of Marseille, they “kamen sogar an dem Haus vorbei, in dem Binnets wohnten. Seine Tür mit dem bronzenen Klopfer erschien mir wie eines der Stücke Wirklichkeit, die sich mit Träumen vermischen” (102; “even passed the house where the Binnets lived. Its door with the bronze knocker seemed to me like one of those pieces of reality that blend with dreams”).

If Seidler is the narrator's public face, however, it is also his "living" face, an identity that contrasts starkly with Weidel, the shadow of the departed. This idea becomes especially clear in the narrator’s interaction with the novel’s various bureaucrats. For example, at one point the narrator recalls the way in which the American consulate " . . . musstete mich, den Lebenden, der zwischen ihm und dem Schatten stand, mit hochmütiger Genauigkeit" (133; “ . . . scrutinized me, the living [man], who stood between him and the shadow, with haughty precision”). The novel
abounds with such statements.

Indeed, in this context it is interesting to note that the narrator considers the bureaucrats he meets along the way to be equals in the game. (His fellow refugees, on the other hand, are mere shadows.) This fact leads Mary Lyons to observe that: "Like Kafka's functionaries, the clerks and officials in Seghers's novel seem to dwell in an alien, insular realm of their own, far removed from the chaos that is in full flow around them" (108). In positioning himself as a witness, rather than participant in the chaos of exile and transit, the narrator places himself in a similar sphere. Indeed, as we have already seen, the "shadow" of Weidel makes the contrast between the narrator and his fellow refugees all the starker. Weidel's absence serves to create a personal, private threshold upon which the narrator (the "living man") stands.

Even after his encounter with the blank page, then, we find that the narrator has not resigned his position as the “living” eyewitness to the world of exile and transit; he has only renegotiated this position to account for the existence of the blank page as a perpetual, present absence. Assuming the double mask of Seidler/Weidel, furthermore, enables the narrator to originate a narrative over which he seemingly has total control, one that allows him to enter and exit the (blank) stage at will, thereby keeping the threshold between hearth and harbor, witness and participant intact.

As mentioned above, however, the narrator does not simply become the vanishing protagonist of Marie’s desperate quest. Instead, he comes to embody the vanishing perspective suggested by this game. For example, at one point the narrator admits that: “Ich mußte die Erde verlassen, die mir lieb war, mich jenen Schattenschwärmen anschließen, als sei ich einer von ihresgleichen, nur um Marie einzuholen” (238; “I had to leave the earth, which I loved, and attach myself to that swarm of shadows, as if I were one of them, only to recover Marie”). Even
though the narrator insists on the conditional nature of this statement—the "as if"—it is worth remarking that the narrator's ultimate identification with the “swarm of shadows” is more than mere pretense. This idea is demonstrated by the fact that after the narrator assumes Weidel's identity, he comes to embody some of Weidel's idiosyncrasies. As such, he becomes the living shadow of a dead man.

As we find, for example, Weidel was infamous for boring two tiny holes in a newspaper, an act that allowed him to observe a room without being observed. Given his penchant for adopting the stance of a witness on the threshold, it is perhaps unsurprising that the narrator assumes this same trait. As the narrator at one point recounts:


I sat in a corner of the cafe, where nobody bothered me. If someone I knew entered, I’d quickly stick a newspaper in front of my face. I even bored two small holes in my newspaper so that I could see everything without being seen. When time became too odious, I went up to the Binnets.

In this scenario, the narrator is no longer “the living man” who poses a stark contrast to the shadow situated behind him. Instead, he is a liminal identity, a dead man walking. This idea is the ultimate, ironic confirmation of the narrator’s threshold positioning: no longer separated from the hordes around him, he is now the shadow of a shadow, a phantom hovering on the edge of happening. At the same time, this scene demonstrates the ease with which the narrator leaves the dream world of transit and enters the ‘real’ world of dwelling. When the game loses its charm, the narrator simply retreats to the Binnets.

Even though the narrator comes to embody the vanishing perspective implicit in his double game, however, the narrator's ability to enter and exit the stage at will enables him to
maintain his increasingly tenuous grip on the vanishing threshold. Even if he is drawn into the world of transit through a trick of (self)-seduction, he yet desires to see the ground beneath his feet transformed into habitable space. Penetrating the primeval wilderness of dossiers goes hand-and-hand with postponing his date for departure. Even if the blank page—or rather, the blank stage, given that storymaking seems to be a performative art—represents a “figure of rupture,” a place of open possibility, the narrator yet desires to return to the world of dwelling. In fact, the desire to dwell coexists rather unproblematically with the narrator’s growing sense of Fernweh, an idea underscored by the seeming ease with which the narrator vacillates between Seidler and Weidel.

Indeed, it is not until the narrator must concretely choose between the harbor and the hearth that he suddenly appends "Finis" to his adventures in transit and decides to remain on the shores of southern France. As we find, it is a critical moment that locates the narrator on a metaphorical Calypso’s island:

Wie, wenn ich wirklich zu wählen hätte zwischen dem letzten Schiff und unverrückbarem Hierbleiben? Da sah ich nicht mehr um mich herum die Häuser von Bleibenden vollgepfropft, mit ihrem Rauch aus zahllosen Schornsteinen, die Arbeiter in den Fabriken und Mühlen, die Fischer, Barbiere und Pizzabäcker, ich sah mich allein, als sei ich auf einer Insel im Ozean, ja auf einem Sternchen im Weltall. (254)

What would I do, [he asks,] if I really had to choose between the last ship and irrevocably staying behind? At that thought, I no longer saw the houses filled with dwellers, the smoke from countless chimneys, the workers in the factories and the mills, the fishers, the barbers and the pizza bakers. I saw myself alone, as if I was on an island in the middle of an ocean, on a tiny star in the middle of outer space even.

The narrator’s foray into storymaking, which eventually enables his departure from Marseille, has resulted in his utter isolation from the world of dwelling. The concrete question “to stay or to go” locates him in the middle of an oblivion from which there is no respite, no escape. The originary world over which he had “total control" has stranded the narrator "on an island in the
middle of an ocean," just as Weidel's truncated novel strands him at the "nearly blank page."

Both are shown to be failed acts of escape. It is at this point that the narrator abandons the activity of storymaking. As we have already seen, this is a decision that sets the stage for storytelling.

**From Storymaker to Storyteller**

When the narrator morphs from storymaker to storyteller, his relationship to Weidel's death, and therefore to the blank page, changes. Whereas the author's suicide was once an event the narrator kept carefully hidden behind the scenes, an absence that enabled the narrator to seize the "magic lamp" of narrative authority, Weidel's death now becomes a figure of connection. Indeed, the sudden decision to stay behind allows the narrator to forge a new identity with the dead author. As he relates:


. . . [S]uddenly, I don’t know why it was exactly now, I was gripped by grief for the dead man, whom I’d never known in life. Together we'd remained behind, he and I. And in this land, which had been torn apart by war and betrayal, no one was there to mourn him, no one was there to perform even a smattering of the so-called last rites . . .

At this point, Weidel is no longer the phantom of the departed, a stand-in for the legions of the departed, who present a stark contrast to the narrator, the "living man." Instead, the narrator is now connected to Weidel by virtue of the fact that Weidel, too, suddenly chose to remain behind. He, too, appended a final "Finis" to his adventures in exile. If Weidel's suicide was once regarded as an act of betrayal, then, the author's desperate act now becomes a means of connection.
It is this newfound sense of connection that leads the narrator to surrender Weidel's suitcase, along with his last unfinished manuscript, to the Mexican consulate in the hopes that the contents will eventually reach Weidel's friends overseas. As a result, the blank page no longer represents a deserted, unspeaking space, but rather a caesura that "speaks" of the intervention of the war and the tragic fate of its author. In abandoning the identity of Weidel, furthermore, the narrator also abandons the precarious threshold of Seidler/Weidel that helped him to maintain his position as a "living man" among the shadows of the departed. Instead, the narrator's decision to stay behind once and for all places him in the camp of "the living." (Indeed, the Binnets even help the narrator to find a job on a farm located somewhere near Marseille.)

At this point, the narrator truly seems to be an exception to the rule, someone who has accomplished the impossible on both sides of the exilic caesura. Not only has he successfully penetrated the wilderness of dossiers and secured a valid ticket, visa and transit, but he has also managed to endure and escape exilic space. Returning to the pizzeria, the metaphorical Calypso's island with its double view of harbor and hearth, and telling the tale once from "beginning to end" represent a last act of transit, a means to impose closure on his exilic existence, thereby transforming the ground beneath his feet into habitable space.

In this context, it is telling that whereas the narrator once claimed that the harbor-buzz around him had nothing to do with him, on the last pages of the novel, after storytelling is done, he describes listening to harbor-buzz that has nothing more to do with him: “Ich hörte mir all den Hafenklatsch an, der mich gar nichts mehr anging” (280; “I listened to the harbor-buzz that had absolutely nothing to do with me anymore”). The vanishing horizon is something upon which he has turned his back once and for all.
This idea, furthermore, indicates a shift in positionality: away from passive "eyewitness" (i.e. the eyewitness to Weidel's suicide, the eyewitness to his own adventures in transit) to active "I witness." As storyteller, the narrator actively bears witness to histories (his own, Marie's, Weidel's . . . ) that otherwise would have been lost to oblivion. Indeed, in actively bearing witness to the world of exile and transit, the narrator seems to operate in the guise of a reformed storytaker, a storyteller in the Benjiminian sense, a Ulysses who, though seduced by the lure of the vanishing horizon, has ultimately learned "Echtes von Unechtem zu unterscheiden, und als wichtigsten Wert in der flüchtigen, egoistischen Transit-Welt . . . Solidarität [zu] bewahren . . .” (Hilzinger, “Nachwort” 286; “to distinguish truth from falsehood, and to preserve [human] solidarity as the thing of greatest value in the transient, egoistical world of transit . . .”). In this way, the narrator's transformation from eyewitness to "I witness" seems to confirm his position of Odyssean exceptionalism. The temporary narrative home has become a permanent one. The distance between storymaker and storyteller, between narrated past and narrative present seems to be absolute.

As mentioned in the first section, however, the narrator tells the tale in order to establish a connection between the exilic past and the post-exilic present. As such, the tale is arguably told from recommencement (a recommencement that takes place in exilic space, when the narrator becomes the "originator" of his own adventures) to recommencement anew on the shores of southern France. In coming full circle, the narrator has cast his exilic adventures into the past tense, which gives to the history he relates a semblance of closure. At the same time, it could also be argued that appending "Finis" to his time in transit resembles the way in which the narrator appends closure to his exilic adventures. Even if he appears to be the embodiment of Benjamin's storyteller figure, then, someone who demonstrates that storytelling in times of crisis
is still possible, it is also fair to postulate that storytelling is simply another "island kingdom," an attempt to escape exilic space by clinging to a self-imposed narrative of Odyssean exceptionalism.

Indeed, after appending a second "Finis" to his adventures in exile, the narrator is arguably left facing another blank page, this time in the form of a blank wall. As the narrator relates of his penultimate return to the pizzeria:


I sat with my back to the door, because I wasn't expecting anything more. And each time the door opened, I still started like I used to. I had to force myself not to turn my head. And each time I evaluated the new thin shadow on the white-washed wall. Marie could turn up again, like shipwrecked souls suddenly appear on some coast after a miraculous rescue, or like a shade is ripped from the underworld through offering and fervent prayer.

If Weidel's death was transformed from a "figure of rupture" to a "figure of connection" through the narrator's identification with the dead author's sudden, final act of "Finis," Marie now plays the role of the departed shadow. Indeed, if the narrator has moved beyond the historo-mythical world of transit, Marie (as the shadow of the departed) is still stuck in this world, caught in a perpetual process of vanishing. The question of her fate, as well as the fate of the Montreal—the question, we remember, with which the narrator frames his tale—once again locates death off-stage, over the horizon. The blank page of exilic space is still a place where stories happen. If the narrator was once dependent upon the shadow of Weidel to preserve his exceptional stance, he is now dependent upon the reader, as well as upon the shadow of Marie.
It is my contention, therefore, that Odyssean exceptionalism can indeed be considered to be another "island kingdom" into which the narrator tries (and perhaps fails) to flee. In this respect, storytelling can be read as an act that enables the narrator to reconnect to the master narrative of Odyssean exceptionalism—a narrative position, after all, that storymaking increasingly called into question—rather than to a "normal" life. Though picking cherries in the vicinity of Marseille, the narrator is still located at the front of a total war. As a result, *Transit* seems to problematize the assumption that storytelling (as a means of reconnection) is still possible in the face of a total war. Instead, Odyssean exceptionalism seems to be a form of ersatz dwelling, a temporary refuge before the narrator (willfully or no) returns to mistral-swept streets.

Indeed, this latter idea is suggested by the narrator himself. At the beginning of the novel, even before storytelling happens, he admits that: “Mir hat es schon immer Spaß gemacht, durcheinandergeratetes Garn zu entwirren, und umgekehrt hat es mir immer Spaß gemacht, ganz glattes Garn durcheinander zu bringen” (21; “I’ve always enjoyed unraveling tangled yarn. Conversely, I’ve always enjoyed tangling up smoothed-out yarn”). The tangling and untangling of yarn that the narrator dramatizes here speaks to the narrator's transformation from storymaker to storyteller. (In this case, storytelling becomes a means of unraveling the tangled yarn of the narrator's adventures in exile.) However, taken together, the tangling and untangling of yarn (or tales) can be viewed as a totalizing pastime, something to do while you wait. Indeed, as the narrator also exclaims in the Now Time of first-person narration: "Wie zäh ist die Zeit zwischen zwei Abenteuern! Wie langweilig das gefahrlose Leben!” (185; “How trying is the time between two adventures! How boring is the life without risk!”).
At the end of the novel, the narrator is again suspended on the threshold between storymaking and storytelling, a balancing act in which he invites the reader to participate, a vanishing act that he asks the reader to enable. It is not, however, a disappearance into the text that the narrator celebrates, but rather one into a master narrative of Odyssean exceptionalism, one that propels him toward the shores of a "normal life," an ideal to which he has clung in the face of a "total war."
CHAPTER THREE

Bastards, Ghosts, “...And Zembla”: The Narrator’s Rented Castle

Beauty plus pity—that is the closest we can get to a definition of art.

-Vladimir Nabokov, “The Metamorphosis” 251

The idea of the second origin gives the deserted island its whole meaning, the survival of a sacred place in a world that is slow to re-begin. In the ideal of beginning anew there is something that precedes the beginning itself, that takes it up to deepen it and delay it in the passage of time. The desert island is the material of this something immemorial, this something most profound.

- Gilles Deleuze, 14

In "Good Readers and Good Writers," an essay I will use as a springboard for my consideration of Pale Fire (1962), Nabokov remarks:

I use the word reader very loosely. Curiously enough, one cannot read a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader. And I shall tell you why. When we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation. . . . In reading a book, we have to have time to acquaint ourselves with it. We have no physical organ (as we have the eye in regard to a painting) that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its details. But at a second, or third, or fourth reading we do, in a sense, behave towards a book as we do towards a painting. (3)

For Nabokov, the good reader is the rereader: one who is willing to undergo the laborious “process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about,” only to transcend the book’s physical limitations and, as Nabokov terms it a page later, “enter[] into the spirit of the game” (4). This “game,” furthermore, is independent of the reader’s present or past context and instead involves viewing ‘reality’ through the eyes of the good writer: “as the potentiality of fiction” (2).

In the eyes of the good writer, the 'everyday' world contains a vanishing perspective—so much so that, as John Updike observes: “For Nabokov, the world—art’s raw material—is itself
an artistic creation, so insubstantial and illusionistic that he seems to imply a masterpiece can be spun from thin air, by the pure act of the artist’s imperial will” (xxvi). It is not just "the artist's imperial will" that enables a masterpiece to be created from "thin air," however, but also the presence of the rereader. For, having transcended the "line after line" and "page after page" experience of the text, the rereader is now, as Nabokov puts it, in a position to watch "the artist build his castle of cards" and "the castle of cards become a castle of beautiful steel and glass" (6). This transformation is both a recommencement and a recreation.

In *Pale Fire*, the first-person exilic narrator, Charles Kinbote, will use the principle of rereading to write himself into John Shade’s autobiographical poem, “Pale Fire.” As in *Transit*, we know very little about the first-person narrator of *Pale Fire*. Although we are introduced to him as "Charles Kinbote,” it is safe to assume that that name is a pseudonym. He remains deliberately vague about his past. (Critics speculate, however, that Kinbote, like Nabokov, hails from Russia.) Instead of identifying himself with any known country of origin, Kinbote instead identifies himself with an "imaginary homeland”—namely, the fantastical land of Zembla. All that we really know for sure about Kinbote’s past, therefore, is that Kinbote is an exile. Like in *Transit*, the emphasis is not upon the first-person narrator’s story of origin, but rather upon his position as originator.

After the American poet John Shade is murdered—a murder Kinbote witnesses first-hand—Kinbote seizes John Shade's autobiographical poem, "Pale Fire" and proceeds to write a "commentary" to the poem. Using the authority of the commentator, Kinbote argues that Shade's autobiographical poem, which is written in heroic couplets and centers around themes of dwelling, was in fact inspired by tales Kinbote told the poet about Charles the Beloved (a.k.a. Charles Kinbote), the exiled king of the aforementioned imaginary land of Zembla. In order to
further prove this connection, Kinbote writes the biography of Charles the Beloved into the footnotes of the poem, thereby rewriting the poem's content. It is a rewriting that takes place from the threshold and between the lines. The rewriting is, furthermore, is enabled by the fact that the poem only has 999 lines. Because the poem is written in heroic couplets, Kinbote will argue that Shade's untimely death left the poem is unfinished. The missing line 1,000 thereby emerges as a catastrophic caesura. The fact that Kinbote, the "commentator," uses the missing line as an excuse to enter the poem renders the missing line an extension of exilic space.

Three things, according to Kinbote, give him the authority to write this commentary: 1) the fact that he witnessed the poem's composition (he lives next door to John Shade and indulges in spying); 2) the fact that he witnessed Shade’s murder; and 3) the belief that Kinbote, rather than Shade, is the poem’s true protagonist. (In the context of the latter, Kinbote will once again assert that Shade’s autobiographical poem was, in fact, inspired by stories he told the poet about Charles the Beloved [a.k.a. Charles Kinbote], Zembla’s exiled king.)

As we will see, furthermore, Kinbote positions himself as a rereader throughout the commentary. Transcending the poem's details—the “line after line, page after page” experience of the text—Kinbote views the poem’s text like the good writer views ‘reality’: “as the potentiality of fiction.” Adopting the guise of the commentator who simply bears witness to what the writer originally intended, Kinbote proceeds to weave an exilic fantasy that takes place between the poem’s 999 lines.

At the same time, Shade’s autobiographical poem resists Kinbote's appropriation. Composed in heroic couplets and devoted to themes of dwelling, as well as to an exploration of death and the beyond, the poem presents a stark contrast to Kinbote's exilic fantasies. As a result, the novel develops an ongoing tension between dwelling and exile, center and threshold,
history and oblivion: the blank page as a "speaking" space and the blank page as an empty, deserted space where fantastic stories can happen.

It is, once again, through the blank page that Kinbote enters the poem. When he first reads the text, Kinbote finds that the aforementioned line 1,000 is missing. Because the poem is composed in heroic couplets and because Shade’s murder arguably prevented the poet from appending the last line, Kinbote regards the manuscript as an unfinished text. This idea enables Kinbote to seize narrative authority in the poet's absence. (As he remarks in his “Foreword”: “for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word” [29].)

As we saw in *Transit*, furthermore, the seizure of narrative authority is the direct result of the first-person narrator's loss of a (potential) narrative home. Having expected to find an epic dedicated to the exploits of Charles the Beloved, an epic that would have provided Kinbote with a fantastical narrative shelter, proof of the connection between himself and the murdered poet—Kinbote instead discovers an autobiography so firmly entrenched in the poet’s habits and habitus that, dramatizing his first reading of “Pale Fire,” he remarks: “Instead of the wild glorious romance—What did I have? An autobiographical, eminently Appalachian, rather old-fashioned narrative in a neo-Popian prosodic style” (296). In other words, Kinbote considers the poem “void of . . . magic, of that special rich streak of magical madness which I [Kinbote] was sure would run through it and make it transcend its time” (296-7).

At the same time, Kinbote finds that there is "a symptomatic family resemblance in the coloration of both poem and story" (81), a discovery that, in fact, marks his transformation from disappointed reader to insightful rereader. Not only does this transformation prove to be an important component in *Pale Fire*'s plot, but it also demonstrates the way in which Kinbote will come to view the 'everyday' stuff of Shade's poem as the "potentiality of fiction." Having lost his
place in a (potential) narrative home, the blank line 1,000 at the poem's end proves to be a site of reconnection (where the commentator can insert the last word), as well as a space for recommencement.

In the previous chapter, I examined the way in which Transit’s first-person narrator engaged in a project of self-positioning that allowed him to retain a toe-hold on the stance of Odyssean exceptionalism, even after losing his place in a (potential) narrative home. As we saw, this project of self-positioning culminated in the act of storytelling, a fact that problematized the idea that storytelling can act as a final transit out of exilic space. (In this case, it was the reader, who—stuck in the world of transit, facing the horizon rather than the hearth—played the role of the Phaeacians, ostensibly providing the narrator, a storytelling "Odysseus," with the means to leave exilic space behind.) However, even if the narrator's "Calypso’s island" could be transformed into Ithacan—that is to say, habitable—ground, the narrator was still left facing a “nearly blank page,” a shadow-touched wall, at the end of the tale.

In this chapter, I will interrogate Kinbote’s relationship to the blank page in terms of his relationship to history, both individual and communal. It will be my contention that Kinbote, like Transit's narrator, vacillates between two narrative desires: the desire for reconnection (that is, the desire to become a legitimate dweller in the firm walls of another man’s autobiography) and the need for recommencement (the need to create a new world to rule). As we will see, Kinbote, too, engages in a project of self-positioning, one that allows him to occupy the stance of witness to, rather than protagonist in the poem's rewriting. However, even though Kinbote positions himself as a critical witness on the threshold, a commentator who is merely bringing out what lay in the poem a priori, he also considers himself to be the “protagonist, and the main, if only potential, victim” (299) in the poem’s unfolding drama. Furthermore, even if he takes
narrative authority from his position as witness to the poem's composition and to Shade's death, the success of Kinbote's narrative relies upon Shade’s death being relegated to the threshold. (As Michael Seidel observes in this context: "Death is a contingency for the contingent world" [183] and it is the contingent world that Kinbote wishes to escape.) This idea introduces a vanishing perspective into the poem's text, as well as into the person of Shade himself.

In this context, it is also worth remarking that I will not indulge in speculation about whether or not Shade is Kinbote or Kinbote Shade. Much critical energy has already been devoted to this question, and while this discussion is interesting and even entertaining, my reading of the work is based upon the assumption that Kinbote and Shade are two separate individuals. Indeed, the critical obsession with the question of whether Kinbote and Shade are two distinct characters can, in my opinion, be attributed to the success of Kinbote’s narrative strategy, which struggles to introduce the aforementioned vanishing perspective into Shade's text and, by extension, into Shade himself.

Before proceeding with a discussion of Pale Fire, however, it would be helpful to contextualize Kinbote’s plots and plotting in the framework of Nabokov’s own aesthetic ideas regarding the character of the rereader (whom we have already met), the rewriter (whom we have not yet met), and the relationship both have to the author’s comments surrounding exile and

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17 For example, in Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years, Brian Boyd posits a "Shadean" theory of composition, arguing that both the poem and the commentary are the brain child of John Shade. In Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery, however, Boyd rejects the one-author theory, and after an exhaustive exploration of both poem and commentary, concludes that the novel is designed to teach us about the pleasure of artistic discovery. (At the same time, Boyd suggests that these pleasures are only accessible after the reader has engaged in a rigorous pursuit of clues present in the poem, the commentary, not to mention in various extra-textual sources.) However, as a regular visit to the Nabokov ListServ will demonstrate, there is no theory that has not been put forward concerning the identity and motivation of Pale Fire's two narrative selves. As Emma Lieber humorously puts it: "Nearly every possible position regarding questions of identity and authorial activity, at all levels of the novel, has been proposed and explored, and each position necessarily stands in opposition to one or various other readings."
aesthetics. This discussion will prove foundational for a consideration of Kinbote’s narrative strategies. I will, therefore, devote a considerable amount of space to Nabokov's commentary before I turn to a close reading of the novel. With this idea in mind, I will return to Nabokov’s essay, “Good Readers and Good Writers,” before turning to Nabokov’s autobiography, Speak Memory.

Rereaders and Rewriters

In "Good Readers and Good Writers," Nabokov characterizes the good reader as the rereader: a person who is able to overcome the “line after line, page after page” (3) experience of the text and "enter[] into the spirit of the game” (4). The rereader, that is, retains a sense of the complete text in his or her memory, even as s/he moves through the novel's landscape. In this way, the rereader appears to be " . . . lifted out of the localized, linear, and temporally bound reading process in a manner resembling the way characters’ epiphanies remove them from the quotidian flow of events within the world of the text" (Alexandrov 7). This perspective also teaches the rereader to view ‘reality’ through the eyes of the good writer: “as the potentiality of fiction” (Nabokov, “Good Readers and Good Writers” 2).

At the same time, even if ‘reality’ exists as “the potentiality of fiction" in the eyes of the writer and, hence, the rereader, the artwork itself is no re-presentation of ‘reality’, but rather acts as a literal departure into unknown spaces:

We should always remember that the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is to study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know. When this new world has been closely studied, then and only then let us examine its links with other worlds, other branches of knowledge. (1)
The good reader approaches the world of the book as a closed totality, as a chronotope a good deal more tangible than the confused chaos of 'reality' itself. The recognition that there is an absolute caesura between the old world and the new world is, therefore, integral to the experience of reading. Indeed, it is only after the 'reality' of this new world has been established that the rereader can begin to connect the book to “other worlds, other branches of knowledge.” It is, furthermore, only through acts of repeated departure and return that the rereader is able to watch this brand new world come together, as the artist's "castle of cards" is transformed into a "castle of steel and glass” (2). At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that this castle exists in a world all its own, on the far side of caesura.

If the rereader acts as a witness to the text's transformation, however, it is the good writer who actually takes ‘reality’s’ raw stuff and changes it:

[T]he real writer, the fellow who sends planets spinning and models a man asleep and eagerly tampers with the sleeper’s rib, that kind of author has no given values at his disposal: he must create them himself. The art of writing is a very futile business if it does not imply first of all the art of seeing the world as the potentiality of fiction. The material of this world may be real enough (as far as reality goes) but does not exist at all as an accepted entirety: it is chaos, and to this chaos the author says “go!” allowing the world to flicker and to fuse. It is now recombined in its very atoms, not merely in its visible and superficial parts. The writer is the first man to map it and to name the natural objects it contains. Those berries there are edible. That speckled creature that bolted across my path might be tamed. The lake between those trees will be called Lake Opal, or, more artistically, Dishwater Lake. (2)

If the good reader is the rereader, the good writer, who “sends planets spinning and models a man asleep,” is the rewriter. Indeed, the rewriter also occupies the place of recreator, for it is the rewriter who calls new worlds and landscapes into being: landscapes open to travel (“the writer is the first man to map it and to name the natural objects it contains”) and situated for dwelling (“The lake between those trees will be called Lake Opal, or, more artistically, Dishwater Lake”). On the other hand, coming on the heels of the rewriter, it seems as if the rereader emerges as a
combination of privileged tourist (seeing the sights) and explorer (trekking off into the Great Unknown). In this sense, perhaps it is more useful to suggest that the rereader is more at home than the tourist and less originary than the explorer. After all, the “first sight” of these natural objects belongs to the rewriter. As such, the rereader seems to exist somewhere on the cusp of travel and dwelling.

At the same time, according to Nabokov, the activity of rewriting is not simply aimed at recreation for its own sake. Instead, it is directed toward establishing, or indeed enabling, human connection. For example, when describing the passage of the rewriter through the book’s landscape, Nabokov exclaims:

That mist is a mountain—and that mountain must be conquered. Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and on the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever. (2)

In this way, the task of creation (or rather, recreation) is likened to a struggle up a mountain, an idea that echoes the struggle of the rereader, who overcomes the “line after line, page after page” experience of reading to attain the whole picture. The reward for both activities seems to be the moment of connection: the spontaneous embrace that occurs between rereader and rewriter.

At the same time, this happy meeting is a fleeting occurrence. No book lasts forever. Everyday life will interrupt the text’s flow. Eventually, all stories must end. According to Nabokov, it is the consciousness of ending that lends the meeting, and indeed the artwork itself, its significance: “Beauty plus pity—that is the closest we can get to a definition of art” (“The Metamorphosis” 251). As the author goes on to explain: “Where there is beauty there is pity for the simple reason that beauty must die: beauty always dies, the manner dies with the matter, the world dies with the individual.”
For Nabokov, the work of art—although it exists in a world all its own—is nonetheless connected to this world by the inevitability of closure. The novel ends; beauty vanishes, for pity’s sake. It is in the recognition of this fact that we attain aesthetic appreciation, an appreciation rooted in the consciousness that the text, though divorced from ‘reality’, is yet connected to the ‘real’ world through the universal truth that all things must end. At the same time, the activity of rereading, which transcends the text’s (timebound) “line after line, page after page” form, allows the meeting between the rereader and the rewriter to reoccur.

In Speak, Memory, we find yet another dramatization of the meeting between rereader and rewriter. As Nabokov writes:

Now and then, shed by a blossoming tree, a petal would come down, down, down, and with the odd feeling of seeing something neither worshiper nor casual spectator ought to see, one would manage to glimpse its reflection which swiftly . . . rose to meet it; and, for the fraction of a second, one feared that the trick would not work, that the blessed oil would not catch fire, that the reflection might miss and the petal float away alone, but every time the delicate union did take place, with the magic precision of a poet’s word meeting halfway his, or a reader’s, recollection. (212)

At this point, the meeting of poet and reader seems to exist somewhere between the secular and the sacred, somewhere between a “trick” of perspective and the lighting of a blessed fire. It is, however, not the total reflection of poet in reader (or vice versa) that the author dramatizes here, but rather something more subtle: the union of the “poet’s word” with the substance of the poet’s, or of the reader’s, recollection. In this case, we might infer that, via the avenue of autobiography (where the self unfolds into the “chaos” of real life, meeting in the going another’s “recollection”), something of the work is able to speak, even if the observer looks away. The closing of the work, as well as the individual connection enabled by the work, allows us (in the suspended moment of reflection) to attain something of the “total picture” in the reflected life of another. In this way, connection persists, even if beauty must perish.
Ultimately, the success of the work—and the moments of human connection enabled by the work—appear to rely upon the rereader maintaining a double vision. In traveling back and forth between ‘reality’ and the book, the rereader brings to bear knowledge and memory belonging to both worlds: establishing, therefore, the world of the book as a closed universe amidst the fluid ‘reality’ of everyday life. Indeed, an absolute separation between the old world and the new can never be completely realized, for ‘reality’ and text are inevitably taken in snatches, side by side. In this way, through the mist of “insubstantial and illusionistic” reality, through the unarticulated structures of everyday experience, the book comes to seem like an island the traveler encounters on his way: read and reread throughout time’s passage, yielding moments of recreation where the void of things achieves a new name. At the same time, ‘real’ life continues to flow around it.

**Untrammeled Extensions**

At this point, it would be useful to situate Nabokov’s ideas concerning the rereader and the rewriter in the author’s discussion of exile, as it appears on the pages of *Speak, Memory*. As we will see, many of the ideas Nabokov associates with the rereader and the rewriter are directly connected to the author’s perceptions of exile as an experience that results in aesthetic gain. This idea, in turn, will prove to be seminal to a discussion of Kinbote's narrative self-positioning in *Pale Fire*.

If we turn to the first pages of *Speak, Memory*, then, we find that:

Nature expects a full-grown man to accept the two black voids, fore and aft, as stolidly as he accepts the extraordinary visions in between. . . .

I rebel against this state of affairs. I feel the urge to take my rebellion outside and picket nature. Over and over again, my mind has made colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life.
Initially, I was unaware that time, so boundless at first blush, was a prison. In probing my childhood (which is the next best to probing one’s eternity) I see the awakening of consciousness as a series of spaced flashes, with the intervals between them diminishing until bright blocks of perception are formed, affording memory a slippery hold. . . . All this is as it should be according to the theory of recapitulation; the beginning of reflexive consciousness in the brain of our remotest ancestor must surely have coincided with the dawning of the sense of time. (9-10)

If we remember the “physical work” the reader first performs upon the text, laboring “line after line” and “page after page,” we can equate the process of learning what the book is about to the dawning of a “sense of time.” However, as consciousness “awakens” to the stuff of the “brand new world,” then “bright blocks of perception” are formed, affording memory (memory for the text, in this case) “a slippery hold.” Eventually, the rereader is able to confront the stuff of the book as a subject for memory, a total picture present for “recapitulation.” In this respect, rereading becomes a mode of autobiographical awareness equated with early childhood; one that allows for the “probing [of] one’s eternity.”

In this context, it should also be noted that the comparison of life to text is encouraged by Nabokov’s own aesthetic outlook. As Julian W. Connolly suggests: “[Nabokov] preferred to view his life in aesthetic terms. Indeed, one of the most important, recurring images in his fiction is the notion of life as a ‘text’” (“Introduction” 2). We have already discussed the importance of the rereader's double vision, the way in which s/he takes in both text and 'reality' until 'reality'—the raw stuff out of which new worlds are made—becomes an important pretext to the text: separate from, but integral to the experience of rereading. Furthermore, even if the text itself is independent of the rereader's present or past context, there is still an experiential element, a moment of self-reflection that occurs in the activity of rereading, an idea that is

18 Although the rereader is a common figure in Nabokov criticism, I have not encountered any discussion that associates Nabokov’s description of rereading with the discussion of autobiographical awareness as it is presented in *Speak, Memory.*
embodied in the meeting of the rereader and the rewriter. Indeed, the importance of the rereader's double consciousness is reflected in the form of Nabokov's novels. As Lucy Maddox observes: “all of [Nabokov’s] eight novels in English are narrated in the first-person, and five are cast as personal memoirs” (3). As such, there is an important critical interplay within the text between the first-person narrator's autobiographical memories/moments and the rereader's double consciousness.

As Maddox further argues, such instances of critical interplay result in “the real conflict in a Nabokov novel,” which “can be said to take place between the narrator and his narrative, and”—as Maddox suggests—“if there is a winner, it is the narrative.” (In this context, we can add that the act of rereading enables and perpetuates this conflict, casting the rereader into the role of mediator and critical witness.) Indeed, as Maddox continues:

The creative imagination is, in one sense, the villain in Nabokov’s novels, since by its consistent meddling it succeeds in keeping his characters from ever confronting reality with the inverted commas removed. On the other hand, the imagination makes up for its treachery by making possible the creation of the other, more accessible world of fictional artifice. In writing their commentaries Nabokov’s characters are of necessity victims of their own creative imagination . . . . Memory and imagination work together to rearrange and recombine the actual into patterns and shapes that are more satisfying than the fragmentary shapes of the given world. (6)

In this context, we can observe that, because Pale Fire is cast as a personal memoir from two perspectives (that of Kinbote and that of Shade), the conflict between narrator and narrated or between narrator and (re)reader is broadened to include a conflict regarding the proper orientation of the first-person narrator towards history. In this case, "Pale Fire" becomes substitute for 'reality', a castle of cards (John Shade's poem is literally composed on note cards) that reflects "the fragmentary shapes of the given world," and that, in the absence of the author, become raw material for Kinbote to reshape and recreate, rewriting both Shade's autobiography and his own.
At the same time, I do not completely agree with Maddox’s assessment that “Nabokov’s characters are of necessity victims of their own creative imagination” and would instead say that many of Nabokov's characters consciously allow their creative imaginations to victimize them. They, like Kinbote, create the conditions that make their victimization possible. At the same time, the observation that the creative imagination serves as a “villain” in Nabokov’s novels is a crucial one. By demanding that the rereader take a critical stance to a given text—judging, for instance, whether a narrator is reliable or unreliable—the author assures that the rereader limits (or enables) the narrator’s reach. In this respect, one could postulate that it is the rereader’s responsibility not to allow the unreliable narrator’s creative imagination to victimize him or her. Instead, the rereader is encouraged to maintain the aforementioned double vision, not only noticing “life as text,” but also observing the life within the text. At the same time, one cannot observe the life within the text without first recognizing the text's basic connection to the outside world, an idea that is rooted in the fact that the book must end. Ending, in this case, serves as a "figure of connection," bringing together the world of the book and the unarticulated structures of everyday life.

If we return to the theme of “timelessness,” as it occurs on the first pages of Speak, Memory, however, as well as to the act of “bruising one’s fists” against time’s too-sturdy walls, we find that these ideas extend beyond the first equation of childhood and eternity to become a reoccurring thread that is bound up with the author’s experience of exile. Nabokov, for example, speaks disparagingly of “more anesthetic destinies, [of], let us say, a smooth, safe, small-town continuity of time, with its primitive absence of perspective, when, at fifty, one is still dwelling in the clapboard home of one’s childhood . . .” (195). (Arguably, this “anesthetic destiny” can also be applied to the reader who never becomes the rereader; who, therefore, never overcomes
the “line after line, page after page” experience of reading the book for the first time.). In fact, according to Nabokov, the same “fate” that “one day bundled up pell-mell” the things of his pre-exilic self (“Tamara, Russia, the wildwood grading into old gardens, . . . ”) and “tossed [them] into the sea”—this same fate enacted an ultimate caesura that both “severed” the author from “boyhood” and enabled him, through virtue of this “break” (196), to adopt a new perspective: “a syncopal kick that I [the author] would not have missed for worlds.” Playing on the idea of "syncopy"—which can either mean a temporary loss of consciousness or the omission of sounds from a word—the “syncopal kick,” which introduced caesura into Nabokov's life, thereby separating him from "more anesthetic destinies," also enables him to embrace “homesickness” as “a sensuous and particular matter.”

As a result of the “sensuous” contact with the void, Nabokov gains a sense of a timelessness that is dependent upon, but largely separate from the framework of the present moment. This doubled awareness manifests itself in several ways throughout Speak, Memory. For example, at one point Nabokov admits that while he was a student in Cambridge, he walked about with a double face. On the surface, he was a student. At the same time, he was “the keeper of a secret” (209): “composing verse in a tongue nobody understood about a remote country nobody knew.” (In Nabokov's case, the tongue in which he was composing verse was Russian.)

At another point, Nabokov specifically describes the “untrammeled extension of time” (210) yielded by the experience of exile. As the author recollects:

[nothing one looked at was shut off in terms of time, everything was a natural opening into it, so that one’s mind grew accustomed to work in a particularly pure and ample environment, and because, in terms of space, the narrow lane, the cloistered lawn, the dark archway hampered one physically, that yielding diaphanous texture of time was, by contrast, especially welcome to the mind, just as a sea view from a window exhilarates one hugely, even though one does not care for sailing.]
The idea of an "untrammeled extension of time" is key to an understanding of Nabokov's aesthetics, as well as seminal to the author's experience of exile. For example, many critics use the “untrammeled extension of time” and its connection to homesickness to discuss the linguistic shift Nabokov made from Russian to English and back again. As Michael Seidel notes, for example, Nabokov finally “felt at home in England” (167) when “his imagination freed itself to present his homeland [namely, Russia] to him complete” (166). According to Seidel, this imaginative freedom allowed Nabokov to embark on a lifelong project of linguistic recovery.

At the same time, Alexander Dolinin points out that Nabokov’s linguistic exile, as well as his project of linguistic recovery, also included a conscious abandonment of the Russian language19—when, for example, Nabokov discarded the pen name of V. Sirin in favor of Vladimir Nabokov. “Once again,” Dolinin remarks, "Nabokov lost his native land—the homestead of Russian literature . . . —and had to reinvent himself, to transmute the new painful loss and rupture into aesthetic gain” (50). However, this loss, which also translates to “aesthetic gain,” gave Nabokov a privileged position “outside the [English] language” (55)—something that, once again, opens up an “untrammeled extension of time.” Clearly, the subject of Nabokov's linguistic oscillation and its association with exilic loss and aesthetic gain enriches the metaphor of extension. However, further exploration of this topic lies beyond of the boundaries of the current discussion.

If we return to the passage with which Nabokov opens Speak, Memory, then, where “time, so boundless at first blush” (19) acts as “a prison”—and compare this idea to the image of

19 In “Nabokov’s Transition from Russian to English,” Brian Boyd directly disputes Dolinin’s claim, arguing instead that Nabokov’s linguistic shift did not imply an abandonment of the author’s Russian works.
time in "untrammeled extension"—we find that an interesting transformation has taken place. With the interposition of the exilic caesura, the nature of time—as Nabokov represents it—has changed its character: no longer a threatening presence, time has become landscape, a "retrospective space" (Seidel, 170). Instead of experiencing time as a prison (akin to narrow city spaces that “hamper[] one physically”), an exilic perspective ensures that “[n]othing one looked at was shut off in terms of time.” This process, furthermore, recollects the change in perspective that rereading affords, where the “total picture” becomes accessible after the linear experience of time (the “line after line, page after page”) has been overcome.

At this point, we can also draw a comparison between Nabokov’s “natural opening” and the blank canvas framed on the wall of Dinesen’s tale: a blank page that depends upon, but extends beyond the historical moment. In Speak, Memory, that is, the perception of time in "untrammeled extension" is dependent upon the closed spaces that frame it, just as the rereader's perception of the book as a closed totality is dependent upon the idea that extratextual 'reality' acts as a pre-text to the narrative. However, Nabokov's "untrammeled extension of time" also presents the viewer with a choice: either to travel or to dwell. If the window into something other represents an open possibility, it is also a “sea view” glimpsed by an observer who, though exhilarated, “does not care for sailing.”

As we discover, however, this "natural opening" is itself contested ground, an idea Nabokov describes in the following way:

As I look back on those years of exile, I see myself, and thousands of other Russians, leading an odd but by no means unpleasant existence, in material indigence and intellectual luxury, among perfectly unimportant strangers, spectral Germans and Frenchman in whose more or less illusory cities we, émigrés, happened to dwell.

As Nabokov further notes:
These aborigines were to the mind’s eye as flat and transparent as figures cut out of cellophane, and although we used their gadgets, applauded their clowns, picked their roadside plums and apples, no real communication of the rich human sort so widespread in our own midst, existed between us and them. It seemed at times that we ignored them the way an arrogant or very stupid invader ignores a formless and faceless mass of natives; but occasionally, quite often in fact, the spectral world through which we serenely paraded our sores and our arts would produce a kind of awful convulsion and show us who was the discarnate captive and who the true lord. (216)

As we see, the spectral and illusionistic world—the world of dwelling—through which the exilic individual “serenely paraded” both sores and arts contains a vanishing perspective. The only authentic past, the only authentic humanity seems to be the exile’s own. In this case, the present, spectral moment acts as a frame from which to hang the exile’s nostalgia: a nostalgia with the power to present time in untrammeled extension. At the same time, exilic space, which seems to embody an open possibility, is also subject to “awful convulsions” that awaken violent metaphors of struggle and dominance: master and slave, conqueror and conquered.

In the midst of this struggle, furthermore, we begin to see the way in which Nabokov’s description of exile can be related to the position of the rewriter. Indeed, it would not be going too far to say that the (exilic) rewriter’s inspiration is not just recreative genius, but also the imperative of resistance. As Nabokov, for example, has famously declared: “Not all of us consented to be bastards and ghosts” (216). With this idea in mind, we might ask, what does the exilic rewriter resist? In the first place, it would seem to be the very forces that cause the “illusionary” world to contract, threatening the (exilic) individual with the loss of identity and proving, perhaps, who is the man and who is the monster. In this case, narration becomes the struggle to maintain the authenticating body.

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20 In my view, this statement is ironic, since Nabokov also admits to viewing non-exiles as "ghosts."
As such, the exile’s memory of and nostalgia for the lost homeland disembodies a “spectral world” that does not participate, except as a temporary dwelling place, in the exilic sense of ‘reality’. On the other hand, the national body and the right of belonging often intrude into this void, demanding legitimization through documentation and citizenship. Without papers in order, or indeed without papers at all, the exile—embodied by memory—is able to fit into one world, while appearing as a “bastard or ghost” in another. As Nabokov ironically observes in this context:

Somewhere at the back of their glands, the authorities secreted the notion that no matter how bad a state—say, Soviet Russia—might be, any fugitive from it was intrinsically despicable since he existed outside a national administration; and therefore he was viewed with the preposterous disapproval with which certain religious groups regard a child born out of wedlock.  

The struggle of the exilic rewriter—as Nabokov presents it—appears to be twofold. In the first place, there is the will to resist what Nabokov terms “the awful pressure of metamorphosis, the aura of a disgraceful fit in a public place” (101). This conflict becomes especially apparent at the point of boundary crossing, where the exile appears caught between the “spectral world” of timelessness on the one hand, and the day-to-day, even hour-to-hour certainty of “utter physical dependence” upon the other. If we ask, therefore, what the exilic rewriter resists, the first answer might be the pressure to transform. The second front of resistance, in my opinion, follows from the first and consists in the struggle to maintain the void erect (or, as we will see in Kinbote’s case, the blank page deserted). After all, it is here that the exilic rewriter is truly able to try his hand at recreation. (And, as Nabokov remarks: “the sense of enjoying absolute mental freedom” was directly related to the fact that he and other exiles

Brian Boyd makes an interesting observation in this regard. According to Boyd, unlike the Germans who fled Hitler, and who “were at once recognized as the true heirs of their culture, the Russian émigrés of twenty years earlier, more numerous and more varied, had been overlooked as the active inheritors of Russian culture,” Vladimir Nabokov 16.
were “working in an absolute void” (*Speak, Memory* 219.) It is, therefore, unsurprising that Nabokov locates “the real clash” in “first-rate works of fiction . . . not between the characters but between the author and the world” (228) so that, comparable to a chess problem, “a great part of a problem’s value is due to the number of ‘tries’—delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray.”

At the same time, Nabokov proceeds to locate the true “ecstatic core” that underlies the (re)creative process—not in the “clash” between the author and a world taken literally, but rather in the originary process of rewriting, where

the author, in a fit of lucid madness, has set himself certain unique rules that he observes, certain nightmare obstacles that he surmounts, with the zest of a deity building a live world from the most unlikely ingredients—rocks, and carbon, and blind throbbing.

According to Nabokov, this process is also akin to another process of exploration and naming: that is, “the charting of dangerous seas.” This comparison, furthermore, returns us to the idea that the “natural opening,” which presents itself to the exile’s doubled vision, is itself akin to a blank page, which offers the individual a choice familiar to us from *Transit*: “to stay or to go”; to dwell in view of an open window or to travel the aforementioned “dangerous seas.” At the same time, the exilic individual is also surrounded by a (spectral) world that is liable to contract at any moment.

With these ideas in mind, we realize that it is not metamorphosis that Nabokov desires, but rather the pleasures of mimicry (“delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play”) that decenter, displace, and lead the “would-be solver” astray. Indeed, as Nabokov observes in what is probably one of the most famous passages from *Speak, Memory*:

> The mysteries of mimicry have always had a special attraction for me. . . . ‘Natural selection’ in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behavior, nor could one appeal to the theory of the ‘struggle for life’ when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety,

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exuberance, and luxury far in excess to a predator’s power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception. (94-5)

In these ideas, we also encounter what we might call the first and second experiences of time or nature. For although Nabokov locates the urge to reshape the world in the experience of childhood—“. . . [T]here is in every child the essentially human urge to reshape the earth, to act upon a friable environment . . .” (237)—in exile, the urge to reshape the world assumes exaggerated, even grotesque form. In this respect, we can postulate that the experience of exile endows the rewriter with an experience of ‘second nature’: an experience that exists alongside the first, but that represents an exilic perspective that renders the present moment (at least for the moment) “spectral.” However, although it may be threatening, this “spectral” world with its vanishing perspective is also the material out of which other fantastic worlds are made, yielding a recommencement more significant than the first, since, in the words of Gilles Deleuze, "it gives us the law of repetition, the law of the series, whose first origin gave us only moments" (13).

In terms of the mimetic, furthermore, we can observe that both first and second nature—time seen as threat and time posited as landscape—exist side by side in Nabokov’s discussion of the mimetic. It is worth observing in this context that I have not found any critical discussion that takes up the theme of "first" and "second" nature in Nabokov's works as I present them here. At the same time, it is commonly noted that Nabokov often opposes an “otherworld” (attainable through the creative process) to the “real world.” However, the idea of “first” and “second” nature differs from the dichotomy of “otherworld”/”real world.” The “otherworld,” namely,
refers specifically to the products of the creative process. In contrast, the "untrammeled extension of time" of which Nabokov speaks is a direct result of the exilic experience.  

In regards to a "first nature" and its relation to the mimetic, as Nabokov presents it, then, mimicry appears as a “protective device” developed as a defense against predation. However, this struggle, although it may initiate the mimetic moment, is only the beginning of the mimetic act. In terms of “mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury,” we see a “nonutilitarian” landscape “of intricate enchantment and deception” open up—far exceeding the “predator’s power of appreciation” and yielding what Dieter E. Zimmer calls “aesthetic surplus” (49).

If we relate these ideas to the exilic rewriter, we might say that the exilic struggle for identity provides only the first impetus for artistic creation. And yet, the presence of a first nature, where time is a predatory force and the world a prison, proves a foundation for the “castle of steel and glass,” preserving the artwork from the banality of art for art’s sake. In this way, there is a clear separation of the desire for mimicry and the drive for metamorphosis. The former recollects the games rereader and rewriter play with text and world respectively; the latter underscores the need to escape into something absolutely other. In fact, it is at the cusp between mimicry and metamorphosis that contested boundaries in Pale Fire will be drawn.

If we leave Speak, Memory, then, and turn to Nabokov’s essay on Kafka’s Metamorphosis, we find that the difference between mimicry and metamorphosis is directly related to what Nabokov sees as the essential "definition” of art, which involves the absolute separation of the work of art from the 'real' world. Mimicry, that is, should not become

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22 For a more in depth discussion of this dichotomy (“otherworld”/”real world”), as it emerges in Speak, Memory, see Michael Wood’s The Magician’s Doubts. (However, it should be noted that Wood’s discussion is somewhat limited by the fact that the critic tries to prove himself to be Nabokov’s ideal rereader.) For a consideration of the dichotomy of “otherworld”/”real world” as it emerges in Nabokov’s oeuvre, see Vladimir E. Alexandrov, Nabokov’s Otherworld.
metamorphosis. As Nabokov, for example, observes: “In Gogol and Kafka the absurd central character belongs to the absurd world around him but, pathetically and tragically, attempts to struggle out of it into the world of humans—and dies in despair” (254-5). In this way, what appears monstrous in one world (“the absurd central character”) passes unremarked in another (“the absurd world around him”). Indeed, because the “absurd central character,” be he man or monster, fits within “the absurd world” that lies around (or within) him, the wish to struggle out of one world and into another seems, ultimately, to belong to a misdirected desire.

The idea of a “misdirected desire” in Nabokov’s aesthetics has received much critical attention, especially in terms of its ethical implications. (As Connolly observes: “aesthetics and ethics are inextricably intertwined in Nabokov’s artistic world” [“Introduction” 7].) Indeed, Ellen Pifer suggests that the reader actually shares the moral burden of artistic desire in Nabokov’s texts: “Readers inattentive to the dual, and duplicitous, nature of the narrator’s language in Nabokov’s fiction . . . are bound to become mis-readers. . . . All the puns, patterns, and worldplay spawned by his narration both engage our attention and warn us to keep our critical distance from th[e] most unreliable of narrators” (187). For Nabokov, this critical distance is arguably achieved by the reader becoming the rereader.

It is, furthermore, in rereading—in the critical and aesthetic distance gained by rereading—that pity assumes one telling form: as we watch the “absurd central character” attempt to struggle out of the fiction and into the “world of humans,” or vice versa. (We can imagine, however, that it would be every bit as ridiculous if an individual from the “world of humans” were to attempt to pass into the “absurd” world of fiction). Whatever the case, pity is called forth as we watch these struggles; pity, indeed, is fittingly enough an underlying theme in the novel *Pale Fire*, whose first-person narrative agent, Charles Kinbote, is not merely absurd,
but monstrous. However, if the desire to struggle out of the text could be regarded as monstrous, then there is another monstrous act highlighted by the above discussion, an act that also represents a misdirected desire: the drive to transfer the novel’s “brand new world” into the everyday world of unmapped, unnamed chaos.

In terms of the rereader, then, who has a privileged entry from one world and an inevitable departure back into another, it is again imperative that s/he accept the condition of absolute separation as a premise upon which the “brand new world” is founded. The rewriter, too, though s/he wears the mask of absolute (re)creator, is eventually compelled to close the book, unless s/he goes on recreating *ad infinitum* and engages in tricks of postponement. (In my opinion, these tricks would not only prevent the rereader’s departure, but would prevent the need to append *Finis* to the creative act, perpetuating both exilic void and narrative license, as well as struggling with other dominant narratives that threaten the collapse of narrative freedom.)

However, as noted above, no book lasts forever. Mimicry is not metamorphosis; the castle of steel and glass is ultimately composed of fragments. Eventually, all would-be dwellers are forced to depart.

**Text and Pre-text**

At this point, we can turn to *Pale Fire* in order to contextualize Kinbote's plots and plotting within the foregoing discussion. We will further interrogate Kinbote's vacillating relationship to the blank page—to the poem's missing line 1,000—which Shade's death (in Kinbote's eyes) opens up as a catastrophic caesura and an "untrammeled" extension of exilic space, thereby transforming it into a site of reconnection and a space of recommencement.
In the last chapter, we found that storytelling took place at a crossroads, an idea that was embodied in the first-person narrator’s vacillating relationship to the blank page, as well as in the relative positions of narrator (facing the hearth) and reader (facing the harbor). It was a crossroads that called to mind Odysseus’s choice on Calypso’s isle: to stay or to go. *Pale Fire*, too, unfolds at a crossroads that calls to mind Odysseus's choice between horizon and hearth, forgetfulness and remembrance, oblivion and history. Whereas *Transit’s* narrator sought to reconnect to a "normal" life that was found on the shores of southern France, Kinbote seeks sanctuary within the firm walls of another man’s (a dead man’s potentially incomplete) autobiography. At the same time, he also attempts to rewrite history in the "deserted" space between "Pale Fire's" lines. If *Transit’s* narrator struggled to transform exilic ground into habitable space via the act of storytelling, then, Kinbote struggles to transform habituated ground into deserted space through the recursive, totalizing activity of storymaking. As such, he attempts to re-create a world over which he has total control, a world that perpetually presents him with the aforementioned choice: to stay or to go.

At the same time, the success of Kinbote's narrative enterprise also relies upon the reader—or, rather, upon the rereader—who witnesses and, therefore, enables the transformation of Shade's "clapboard house" of cards into Kinbote's castle of steel and glass. (At the time of his death, John Shade was still dwelling "in the clapboard home of [his] childhood” [Speak, Memory 195].) As Kinbote, therefore, declares in the "Foreword":

> Although [my] notes, in conformity with custom, come after the poem, the reader is advised to consult them first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through the text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture. I find it wise in such cases as this to eliminate the bother of back-and-forth leafings by either cutting out and clipping together the pages with the text of the thing, or, even more simply, purchasing two copies of the same work which can then be placed in adjacent positions on a comfortable table—not like the shaky little affair on which my typewriter is precariously enthroned now, in
this wretched motor lodge, with that carrousel inside and outside my head, miles from New Wye. (28)

The act of rereading, as Kinbote imagines it, will recontextualize the poem within Kinbote's notes, completing the picture, as the narrator puts it, and transforming Kinbote's precarious perch into something more substantial. However, it is also worth remarking that Kinbote envisions the process of rereading to take place at a "comfortable table," which presents a stark contrast to the "shaky little affair" on which he composes his commentary. In this way, Kinbote seems to draw an implicit distinction between his exilic state and the rereader's rooted condition, a distinction upon which Kinbote, like Transit's narrator, will rely in order to maintain his position of exceptionalism.

Unlike Transit's narrator, however, who occupied a position of Odyssean exceptionalism, one that (ostensibly) enabled him to endure and then escape exilic space, Pale Fire's narrator bases his own exceptionalism upon the experience of exile that separates him from "anesthetic destinies" (Speak, Memory 195) such as John Shade's. It is in this context that Kinbote will often make comparative statements such as the following:

Surely, it would not be easy to discover in the history of poetry a similar case—that of two men, different in origin, upbringing, thought associations, spiritual intonation and mental mode, one a cosmopolitan scholar, the other a fireside poet, entering into a secret compact of this kind.

At this point, Kinbote, the "cosmopolitan scholar," forms a stark contrast to Shade, the "fireside poet," an idea that ensures their relationship will occupy a place "in the history of poetry." At the same time, Kinbote's cosmopolitan gaze irrevocably localizes Shade. As Julia Kristeva puts it, the cosmopolitan can "feel as appertaining to everything, to the entire tradition, [a] . . . weightlessness in the infinity of cultures and legacies [that] gives him the extravagant ease to
innovate" (*Strangers to Ourselves* 32). This idea echoes Nabokov's celebration of the "syncopal kick" (*Speak, Memory* 196) that allowed him to transcend the aforementioned "anesthetic destinies," and instead gave him a viewpoint that was dependent upon, but largely separate from the framework of the present moment. Even if Kinbote and Shade have entered into a "secret compact" regarding the poem’s fantastic underside—an idea that Kinbote will repeatedly voice—Shade's "home-and-hearth" perspective, then, ultimately becomes a backdrop, a pre-text for Kinbote's "magical madness." Indeed, the experience of exile opens up the poem—the spaces in between the poem's lines, that is—as an extension of exilic space, a place where stories can happen. At the same time, Kinbote is still dependent upon the poem as pretext. Just as it was the enclosed spaces of Cambridge that enabled Nabokov, a Russian exile, to enjoy time in untrammeled extension (210), so Shade's poem, composed in heroic couplets, becomes an enclosed space that opens up the blank page, the place between the lines, as a place where "magical madness" becomes apparent.

Whereas Odyssean exceptionalism was the master narrative to which *Transit*'s nameless narrator clung, then, Kinbote relies upon another familiar theme from the *Odyssey*: the figure of the king in beggar's cloak. In Kinbote's case, the beggar's cloak is the banality of the 'everyday' world, a ‘reality’ that serves to mask the fantastic world within. At the same time, it is only by preserving the contrast between the two—the contrast, that is, between the 'everyday' and the fantastic—that the latter, embodied in Kinbote's "magical madness," can be made manifest.

As mentioned above, however, the success of Kinbote's narrative enterprise ultimately depends upon the rereader, who, from their "comfortable table," watches as Kinbote transforms

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23 While I do find Kristeva’s discussion of cosmopolitanism and Nabokov to be an excellent one, I object to her claim that, because we are all “strangers to ourselves,” the conditions surrounding exile are something in which we all participate.
Shade's house of cards into a kingly castle of steel and glass. For this reason, Kinbote will denounce in disparaging terms the "pedestrian reader" (Pale Fire 231) who cries "Simple chance!" in answer to his intricate game of reflections and resemblances; the reader, that is, "for whom romance, remoteness, sealskin-lined scarlet skies, the darkening dunes of a fabulous kingdom, simply do not exist" (85). It is, therefore, only with the aid of a rereader who, like Kinbote, is willing to commit the aesthetic fallacy of overlooking the small, 'everyday' details that "lend individuality and uniqueness to people and things" (Connolly, “The Major Russian Novels" 137) that Kinbote will succeed in dismembering and re-membering the poem within the context of his own commentary, thereby endowing Shade's poem—and, indeed, Shade himself—with a vanishing perspective.

As Kinbote declares in the context of this vanishing perspective:

Let me state that without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all since the reality of such a poem as his (being too skittish and reticent for an autobiographical work), with the omission of many pithy lines carelessly rejected by him, has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide. To this statement my dear poet would probably not have subscribed, but, for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word. (28-9)

According to Kinbote, the physical absence of the poet deprives the poem of its "human reality." As a result, the poem becomes a deserted space, a "spectral world" through which Kinbote, the commentator, can "serenely parade[]" both sores and arts. (Speak Memory 216). It is, however, only in the context of the commentator's notes that the disembodied poem can become "embodied." As such, the clash between the poem's text and Kinbote's "magical madness" (Pale Fire 296), a clash that calls to mind the struggle between the 'everyday' world and the (exilic) rewriter's brand new world, becomes the struggle for the authenticating body.
This struggle, however, also emerges as a game of dependence, one that will conjure violent metaphors of struggle and dominance: master and slave, conqueror and conquered, commentator and poet. Even if Kinbote insists that his magically mad vision allows the poem to transcend its spectral character, replacing the poem's anesthetic, clapboard walls with an aesthetically imagined fortress of steel and glass, Kinbote's brand new world is, nonetheless, utterly dependent upon the poem and the rereader (or, rather, the mis-reader) for its existence. Just as the 'real' world becomes the raw material with which the rewriter works, the necessary pretext to the good writer's text, so the poem becomes the necessary pretext to Kinbote's commentary. At the same time, because the poem is entrenched in themes of dwelling, it resists Kinbote's narrative appropriation. (This very act of resistance, however, also underscores Kinbote's exilic vision as something extraordinary.)

In order to interrogate these ideas further, we will now turn to the poem "Pale Fire." We will then focus upon Kinbote's vacillating relationship to the blank page, as well as his relationship to history. As we will see, Kinbote desires both reconnection in order to establish himself as a "natural" dweller within the poem's firm walls, and recommencement so that he might create a brand new world over which the king in the beggar's cloak can rule.

Small-Town Continuity . . .

If we turn to "Pale Fire," we find that John Shade wrestles in every Canto with questions of death and the afterlife:

Like a genial host, Shade invites us right into his home, his spacious life, his ample past, but at the same time concentrates intently on a single theme. . . . He has dedicated his art and his life to exploring and fighting death’s abyss, and he relates his resolute but

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24 For a more in-depth exploration of "Pale Fire" than I have space for, see Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire* 25-36.
frustrated forays into the abyss with the passion of a wry detachment. (Boyd, Vladimir Nabokov 439)

This struggle occurs in much the same way as it does on the opening pages of *Speak, Memory*, where we discovered that “the prison of time is spherical and without exits” (10) as well as that “[n]ature expects a full-grown man to accept the two black voids, fore and aft, as stolidly as he accepts the extraordinary visions in between” (9). As Shade, for example, proclaims in Canto One: “Infinite foretime and / Infinite aftertime: above your head / They close like giant wings, and you are dead” (122-24). And again: “Space is a swarming in the eyes; and time, / a singing in the ears. In this hive I’m / locked up” (215-17).

Given his lack of fore- and aftersight, then, Shade narrates in Canto Two that:

There was the day when I began to doubt
Man’s sanity: How could he live without
Knowing for sure what dawn, what death, what doom
Awaited consciousness beyond the tomb?

And finally there was the sleepless night
When I decided to explore and fight
The foul, inadmissible abyss,
Devoting all my twisted life to this
One task. Today I’m sixty-one. Waxwings
Are berry-picking. A cicada sings. (173-82)

Despite death's caesura, and despite the poet's struggle against his lack of fore- and aftersight, these lines indeed seem to reflect what Nabokov characterizes as “small-town continuity” (*Speak, Memory* 195), which iambically, progressively takes the poet (sans syncopal kick) from “the sleepless night / When I decided to explore and fight” to the age of sixty-one. (This comparison, once again, is strengthened by the fact that Shade still dwells in his childhood home.)

Despite the poet's struggle against it, however, the entrance of death into the poem's body does not disturb the text's flow. Instead, caesura becomes an integral part of the poem's
structure. For example, in Canto One, Shade characterizes a “favorite young shagbark” (49) where:

    White butterflies turn lavender as they
    Pass through its shade where gently seems to sway
    The phantom of my little daughter’s swing.

    The house itself is much the same. One wing
    We’ve had revamped. . . . (55-59)

The caesura in-between lines 57 and 58 testifies to the presence of death amidst life, to the entrance of tragedy (Hazel Shade’s suicide) into the poem's familiar space. Despite death's caesura, however, “swing” and “wing” form a closed heroic couplet. There is, therefore, an implicit "and . . . and . . . and" to poem's flow, an idea that calls to mind Benjamin's concept of "natural history": the way in which death flows into life and back again. Indeed, as we progress through the poem, we find that Shade’s visions of life and death are firmly embodied: locked, that is, into the cadence of iambic pentameter and enclosed (except for line 999) by heroic couplets.

    Even within this familiar, enclosed space, however, oblivion is still an active force, appearing not only as the “foul, inadmissible abyss,” which seems unknowable, but more pointedly in the guise of ‘everyday' details that taper off into banality. As the poet exclaims:

    For we die every day; oblivion thrives

    Not on dry thighbones but on blood-ripe lives,
    And our best yesterdays are now foul piles
    Of crumpled names, phone numbers and foxed files. (519-22)

Oblivion becomes the discarded fragments (crumpled names) and unremembered text (foxed files) that crowd our basement shelves. Nonetheless, even with the mortal uncertainty death brings—and even in the presence of oblivion: the product of banality—the poem unfolds within
firm walls. Indeed, one of the best examples of this idea occurs in Canto Four, where speculations about death and the beyond are combined with the physical activity of shaving.

As a result, “Pale Fire” appears to be an autobiography of dwelling so informed by its domestic moments that, as the poet ironically remarks, it is difficult to dream the wild dreams that would make the afterlife “seem / sufficiently unlikely; for the most / We can think up is a domestic ghost” (228-30). If we apply this idea to the poem’s opening lines—“I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane” (1-2)—we might postulate that the “false azure” here slays not only waxwings, but also frustrates those who seek to peer into “infinite foretime” and “infinite aftertime” and find not only a measure of sense, but also a measure of otherness. This idea is underscored by lines 131-32, where the poet confesses: “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By feigned remoteness in the windowpane.” It seems the sense of “remoteness” here is only the mimicry of reflection and glass.

Nonetheless, in Canto Three Shade attributes the final “sense-making” act to a form of rewriter who not only organizes the events of the world—“Making ornaments / Of accidents and possibilities” (828-29)—but who also dwells in an “abode” (818) separate from ours: “ . . . aloof and mute, / Playing a game of worlds, promoting pawns / To ivory unicorns and ebon fauns” (819-20). In these lines, the familiar and the fantastic appear to have one connection, despite the caesura that separates them. They are, namely, connected by the “game of worlds,” which gives shape to senseless events (even senseless death) in the name of imagination and possibility. This “game of worlds,” moreover, is very much in keeping with Nabokov’s own aesthetic ideas, which call to mind the “syncopal kick” of the post-exilic perspective, as well as the perspectival shift granted by rereading.
Do these lines, then, belie the staid tone of Shade’s verse? Do they open up four walls in favor of something beyond? In composing “Pale Fire,” after all, Shade himself is “Making ornaments / Of accidents and possibilities”—and is, therefore, weaving “Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense” (810) from the stuff of his own life. Indeed, it seems that Shade is not insensible to the poetic lure of “wild dreams,” nor to the transformation of a reflected sky into a sea view stretching utterly.

At the same time, if we consider the poem as a whole, it does appear that Shade’s complaint about the domestication of our “wild dreams” touches his own composition as well. Composed in iambic pentameter and firmly embodied by heroic couplets, “Pale Fire” arguably exhibits the lack of vision that is, once again, associated with "small-town continuity." In Canto Four, for example, Shade humorously imagines that the universe itself must reflect the poem’s closed form:

I feel I understand
Existence, or at least a minute part
Of my existence, only through my art,
In terms of combinational delight;
And if my private universe scans right,
So does the verse of galaxies divine
Which I suspect is an iambic line. (971-77)

Macrocosm reflects microcosm, just as the afterlife seems to be an extension of this life. "Galaxies divine" ironically rhymes with "an iambic line." Whatever "flimsy nonsense" the poet encounters or imagines, therefore, is enclosed within the sturdy walls of iambic verse. In this sense, Shade appears content with his “minute” portion of knowing, content with the domestic pace of his life, as the latter is expanded by art and defined in the process of composition.

Unsurprisingly, then, the final images in the poem are ones of domesticity: the poet gazing at his neighbor’s house out of the windows of his childhood home, at his wife’s shadow,
at a “dark Vanessa.” This home-and-hearth perspective also extends to the poem's final lines, which reflect a sense of continuity and habit: Shade, the unobserved, observing the familiar scene as it peters into night:

And through the flowing shade and ebbing light
A man unheedful of the butterfly—
Some neighbor’s gardener, I guess—goes by
Trundling an empty barrow up the lane. (996-99)

Although "Pale Fire" ends upon this familiar note, the reader is left with a hanging question. What are we to make of the poem's lack of closure? Is “Pale Fire,” in fact, a fragment? For although line 999—“Trundling an empty barrow up the lane”—echoes the rhyme of lines 1 and 2 ("I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane"), it is uncoupled, completed only by the blank page. Of all the poem's lines, it is the only uncoupled phrase. The closed world of the poem—which centers around themes of dwelling—is thereby opened up, inviting alternative readings, such as Kinbote’s.

In my opinion, then, answer to this question—whether or not the poem is a fragment—lies in the type of reader who takes up the poem. If we expect the poet's autobiography to grant a firm sense of closure—conforming, namely, to a set of preconceived aesthetic expectations—then, through an aesthetic fallacy, we arguably enable Kinbote’s narrative appropriation. If we expect symmetry, that is, from another man's autobiography and allow aesthetic considerations to outweigh the poem's details—which are, after all, the details of a man's life—then the caesura at the end, which otherwise might "speak," emerges as empty, deserted space.

On the other hand, if we return to Canto Four, we find that the poem’s lack of closure can also be interpreted according to Shade’s ideas regarding autobiographical composition. As the poet writes: “Man’s life as commentary to abstruse / Unfinished poem. Note for further use” (939-40). In this reading, man's life and death take place between the lines. As a result, the
"missing line," akin to the caesuras present in the poem's body, testifies to continuity. Silence, indicative of the unspoken life lived between the lines, acts as a necessary pretext to the text, enabling a suspended moment of reflection and demonstrating that connection can persist, even if beauty must perish. As David Rutledge puts it, therefore, line 1,000 “should not be considered a fill-in-the-blank with an obvious answer.” Instead, it can be read as the tantalizing “shadow of line one” (84).

Even if the work appears unfinished, then, it still bears witness to the flow of events; the cessation of the narrative voice does not keep the story from unfolding. In this reading, the "missing line" achieves some measure of sense: recollecting, only to take us beyond, the poem’s beginning. The poem is enriched, altered, even informed by its lack of closure. As such, the blank line 1,000 acts like the blank page framed on the wall of Dinesen’s tale, a “speaking” space that opens up the past as a matter of present concern.

**Eons of Transparent Time, Naturally**

For Kinbote, on the other hand, line 1,000 acts like a deserted space, a void into which he, as commentator, might step, transforming the poem into a deserted landscape and Shade's autobiography into a backdrop for his own exilic fantasy. (In this fantasy, we remember, Kinbote will argue that he is not simply “a ‘chance witness’ but the protagonist, and the main, if only potential, victim” (299) in this entire work of plotting.) Instead of acting like a speaking space, then, the missing line, in Kinbote's reading, suggests a lack of closure. Indeed, it provides an opening into the poem’s closed body. This opening, furthermore, is akin to the "natural opening" of which Nabokov speaks; the “untrammeled extension of time,” which, according to Nabokov, forms a striking contrast to "the narrow lane, the cloistered lawn, the dark archway
Kinbote will be "physically" hampered by the closed form of Shade's verse.)

In order for Kinbote to undergo the transformation from “chance witness” to protagonist and potential victim, however, his commentary, as commentary, must also appear to be a legitimate extension of the poem's text; the footnotes must seem to be a 'natural' outgrowth of the poem itself. For this reason, Kinbote will repeatedly appeal to his position of critical witness, a position, he argues, that gives him the narrative authority to write the commentary, as well as to append the poem’s last line:

Nay, I shall even assert (as our shadows still walk without us) that there remained to be written only one line of the poem (namely verse 1000) which would have been identical to line 1 and would have completed the symmetry of the structure, with its two identical central parts, solid and ample, forming together with the shorter flanks twin wings of five hundred verses each, and damn that music. Knowing Shade’s combinational turn of mind and subtle sense of harmonic balance, I cannot imagine that he intended to deform the faces of his crystal by meddling with its predictable growth. And if all this were not enough—and it is, it is enough—I have had the dramatic occasion of hearing my poor friend’s own voice proclaim in the evening of July 21 the end, or almost the end, of his labors. (15)

Kinbote mis-reads the poem aesthetically, with the aforementioned “inattention to details” (Connolly, “The Major Russian Novels” 137). At the same time, he also stresses that, in appending the poem's last line, he is only bringing to light what was inherent in the poem itself. His commentary, therefore, is in keeping with the poem's “predictable growth.” It is a claim he strengthens by appealing to his position of critical witness: “I have had the dramatic occasion of hearing . . . .” Even as he claims that he is conforming to the poem's "predictable growth," however, he also manages to transform the poem into a symmetrical, recursive structure: an enclosed space and a deserted (crystalline) landscape through which he can travel and in which he can dwell.
At the same time, this passage demonstrates a phenomenon that often occurs in *Pale Fire*—namely, the point at which the 'everyday' world (in this case, the music from an amusement park outside Kinbote's lodgings) interrupts the flow of Kinbote’s thought, transforming smooth commentary into run-on sentences: "and damn that music." These interruptions are reminiscent of the violent contractions Nabokov attributes to exilic space, contractions that thrust Kinbote out of the narrative and back into the banality of day-to-day existence. If the footnotes are structured to be read as a meaningful chronology, then, a natural outgrowth of (or, rather, a natural outgrowing of) the poem's text—"and . . . and . . . and"—everyday 'reality' still has the power to interrupt and recontextualize this litany within the framework of Kinbote's exilic oblivion. At this point, the litany simply becomes the run-on happenstance of ‘everyday’ banality.

As Kinbote, for example, writes of his "cave in Cedarn," the place where he sits and composes his commentary: “Now it is quieter, except for an irritating wind rattling through the withered aspens, and Cedarn is again a ghost town, and there are no summer fools or spies to stare at me, and my little blue-jeaned fisherman no longer stands on his stone in the stream, and perhaps it is better so" (235). At this point, the polysyndetic construction, "and . . . and . . . and," simply reflects the loneliness of Kinbote's exilic existence.

It is, in fact, this string of chance associations—the irritating wind, the ghost town, the isolated streets . . . —that Kinbote wishes to escape. He wishes, that is, to escape the emptiness of his exilic existence. As a result, he will append an implicit “and I” or “I, too” to the poem's most intimate details. For instance, at one point Shade addresses his wife with the following: “I love it when you call me to admire / A jet’s pink trail above the sunset fire” (285-86). Kinbote, footnoting the words: “A jet’s pink trail above the sunset fire,” is quick to point out that: “I, too,
was wont to draw my poet’s attention to the idyllic beauty of airplanes in the evening sky” (174). By dismembering and re-membering the poem's text within the context of his commentary, Kinbote attempts to show, by virtue of these resemblances and associations, that he is a legitimate dweller within the poem's firm (symmetrical) walls. In this way, the poem, opened up by the poet's absence, comes to reflect Kinbote's presence. As a result, the disjunctive fragments of Kinbote's own life lose their character of chance occurrence (just as Kinbote, in the context of his commentary, loses his character of "chance witness"), and enter into the poem's flow as 'natural' extensions, as outgrowths of the poem itself. Within the framework of this overarching narrative structure, the minute-after-minute, day-after-day banality of Kinbote's exilic existence becomes a "significant season, a kairos poised between beginning and end" (Kermode, 46). At the same time, the recursivity of this structure, which allows beginning to become recommencement and ending to be postponed, ensures that Kinbote's "significant season" continues to exist in a world all its own.

Despite Kinbote's efforts, however, day-to-day banality—the irritating wind, the ghost town, the isolated streets . . . —continues to threaten Kinbote’s "brand new world" with collapse. It is, therefore, imperative that Kinbote work to ensure that the poem remains a closed, deserted space. To this end Kinbote will often make declarations such as the following: “The calendar says I had known him [Shade] only for a few months, but there exist friendships which develop their own inner duration, their own eons of transparent time, independent of rotating, malicious music” (18-19). The eons of transparent time of which Kinbote speaks are located in an inviolable past, a past that is "independent of rotating, malicious music.”

However, if the 'everyday' threatens Kinbote's "brand new world" from without, the poem, in both form (closed heroic couplets) and content also resists Kinbote's narrative
appropriation. As a result, Kinbote faces a narrative struggle on two fronts. As such, he must also ensure that his place as the "beholder" and the "only begetter" (17) of the poem's fabulous underside appears to be legitimate. For it is only under the guise of legitimacy that his commentary, a 'natural' outgrowth of the poem itself, can act as a bridge from the world without to the world within.

In keeping with this idea, Kinbote will repeatedly dramatize the critical insight that allowed him to see what no one else could see. For example, as Kinbote recollects of John Shade:

His [Shade’s] whole appearance constituted a mask. . . . His misshapen body, that gray mop of abundant hair, the yellow nails of his pudgy fingers, the bags under his lusterless eyes, were only intelligible if regarded as the waste products eliminated from his intrinsic self by the same forces of perfection which purified and chiseled his verse. He was his own cancellation. (26)

Kinbote, positioned on the outside looking in, is nonetheless able to witness the process by which the poet, caught in a dialectic of the 'everyday' and the fantastic, became "his own cancellation." By documenting this dialectic from the threshold, Kinbote acts as a mediator between the world without (the poet's 'everyday' mask) and the world within (the “intrinsic self” that Shade manifested in verse). Acting as the bridge between the outside world and the inside world, between the poem's text and its fantastic underside, Kinbote also vacillates in his commentary between first-person narration (which often takes the form of a confession or a witness statement) and third person narration, where he tells the story of Zembla’s exiled king. The “misshapen body” of his commentary, therefore, comes to house its own “intrinsic self”: the (auto)biography of Zembla’s exiled monarch.

It is the story of Zembla's exiled monarch that Kinbote writes between the poem's 999 lines. According to Kinbote, Charles II, or Charles the Beloved, was deposed and imprisoned by
Communist revolutionaries. However, thanks to a secret passage and a series of ingenuous disguises, not to mention the help of his loyal countrymen, Charles the Beloved managed to flee Zembla. The sumptuousness of the king's life before his imprisonment and the adventurous aspects afterward are meant to draw the reader away from the "home and hearth" content of Shade's poem and tantalize him or her with "romance, remoteness, [and] sealskin-lined scarlet skies" (85). In this way, Kinbote's exilic, "cosmopolitan" perspective presents an alternative way of seeing, an idea that calls to mind the fact that the everyday world provides the raw material from which "imaginary kingdoms" are spun.

At the same time, it is important to remember that Kinbote will repeatedly claim that the tale he spins is no imaginative invention, but, rather, material that lay within the inner world of the poem *a priori*. In this case, ‘reality’ simply becomes the cloak concealing the fantastic world within. As a result, the dialectic Kinbote sketches here is the logic by which his commentary operates. In Kinbote’s reading, Shade’s autobiography, dis-membered by the footnotes and re-membered in association with his narrative, possesses the same characteristics that he outlines above. The physical text (the poem’s outward face) “only [becomes] intelligible if regarded as the waste products eliminated from [the poem’s] intrinsic self by the same forces”—in this case, Kinbote’s commentary and influence—“of perfection which purified and chiseled [the] verse.” Read in this way, Kinbote’s fictional world and the poem’s autobiographical world exist in a dialectic whose contrapuntal movement enables the narrative flow, as Kinbote, purifying and chiseling, works to maintain his world of “reflections” intact.

Even as Kinbote presents himself as the insightful observer, however, an idea that further legitimizes his self-positioning as critical witness, he also strives to maintain his position of exceptionalism. In this way, Shade's autobiography emerges as the "anesthetic" backdrop
against which gleams Kinbote's fantastical "sealskin-lined scarlet skies" (85). At the same time, it is once again left to the (misreading) rereader to set this dialectic, which endows both poem and poet with a vanishing perspective, in motion.

**Reader and Rereader**

As mentioned above, the success of Kinbote's narrative project relies upon a specific kind of reader—namely, a mis-reader. Because of his dependence upon the (misreading) rereader, Kinbote will attempt to control the way in which Shade's autobiography is taken up in the activity of reading. By insisting that this mediation is legitimate, Kinbote implicitly locates us, the reader, on the outside looking in: a witness to Kinbote, as he in turn witnesses (through the commentary) the poem's transformation from house of cards to castle of steel and glass. In this way, the reader is literally prevented "from ever confronting [the poem's] reality with the inverted commas removed" (Maddox 6). Continuously interrupted and thrown off course by Kinbote's commentary, the reader (if s/he follows Kinbote's course) will never get beyond a "line-after-line, page-after-page" encounter with the poem. Kinbote's interruptions and digressions, namely, prevent the poem's reader from becoming the poem's rereader. Instead, the poem, repeatedly thrust into the background, simply becomes the aforementioned pretext to Kinbote's text. The center becomes the threshold. The blank line 1,000 remains a deserted, unspeaking space; an aesthetically-defined mode of closure; a line that perpetually returns the reader to the poem's beginning, a fact that further ensures that the reader can never transcend the poem's (perpetually vanishing) body.

As mentioned above, however, the poem, in both form and content, resists Kinbote's appropriation. Kinbote, who is conscious of this resistance, not only emphasizes his fantastic
insight, but also makes his transformation from reader (on the outside looking in) to rereader (on the inside looking out) a central theme of his commentary. Indeed, the story of Kinbote's transformation arguably keeps other, similar transformations from taking place. Because of its importance to Kinbote's narrative project, it is worth looking at this plot: at the way, that is, in which Kinbote, the reader, becomes Kinbote, the rereader. It is, furthermore, this transformation that allows the blank page to become a site of reconnection and a space of recommencement.

As mentioned in the first section, Kinbote's first reading of the poem ends in disappointment. Instead of "the wild glorious romance" (296), the romance of Zembla and Zembla's exiled king Kinbote expected to find, he discovers a text devoid "of . . . magic, of that special rich streak of magical madness which I [Kinbote] was sure would run through it and make it transcend its time" (296-97). Kinbote, it seems, has lost his place in the potential narrative home. It is a narrative displacement that echoes his physical displacement, confirming as it does his position on the outside looking in. However, in telling the story of his transformation from reader to rereader, Kinbote also elides the process of poem's composition with the fact of his physical displacement, thereby interweaving the poem's composition with his own exilic experience.

As Kinbote confesses, for example, it was from the depths of solitude, of “loneliness and distress . . . that I got used to consulting the windows of my neighbor’s house in the hope of a gleam of comfort” (96). At this point, Kinbote occupies the position of a beggar at the gate—or, rather, a beggar at the window. However, we find that it is not just loneliness that drives Kinbote to window-spying, but rather “the urge to find out what [Shade] was doing with all the live, glamorous, palpitating, shimmering material I had lavished upon him” (87). This “urge,” in fact, gives rise to “an orgy of spying which no considerations of pride could stop.” As a result,
Kinbote takes in at “peeps and glimpses, and window-framed opportunities” (86) various hints of the poem’s composition with such abandon that, as he notes at one point: “[i]ncidents of perspective and lighting, interference by framework or leaves, usually deprived me of a clear view of [Shade’s] face; and perhaps nature arranged it that way so as to conceal from a possible predator the mysteries of generation” (89). However, instead of apologizing for this predatory stance, Kinbote seems to delight in the “falcon eye” (86) that saw what no one else could see. For, as he readily admits: “Windows, as is well known, have been the solace of first-person literature throughout the ages” (87).

These peeps and glances, which Kinbote associates with a first-person narrative perspective, and which provide a framework from which to consider his first-person narrative project, call to mind the autobiographical awakening that we find on the first pages of Speak, Memory, where consciousness first awakens "as a series of spaced flashes, with the intervals between them diminishing until bright blocks of perception are formed" (9-10). In Kinbote’s case, these "bright blocks of perception" take the form of a "brand new world."

Even before the poem was finished, we find that Kinbote had already begun to read himself between the lines:

By the end of May I could make out the outlines of some of my images in the shape his genius might give them; by mid-June I felt sure at last that he would recreate in a poem the dazzling Zembla burning in my brain. I mesmerized him with it, I saturated him with my vision, I pressed upon him, with a drunkard’s wild generosity, all that I was helpless myself to put into verse. (80)

Although positioned on the outside looking in, Kinbote was able to catch the tantalizing glimpse of a "brand new world," a place of recommencement coming ever closer to completion. It is, perhaps, for this reason that Kinbote underscores his dependence on Shade’s genius.
Presumably, it is only with the aid of Shade's genius that Kinbote's exilic vision could attain an aura of legitimacy, giving the cosmopolitan wanderer a temporary home in a foreign land.

As we have already seen, however, Kinbote's expectations were disappointed. The theme of Kinbote's disappointment runs throughout the footnotes, until at the end of the novel Kinbote gives full vent to his frustration. As he exclaims:

We know how firmly, how stupidly I believed that Shade was composing a poem, a kind of *romaunt*, about the King of Zembla. We have been prepared for the horrible disappointment in store for me. Oh, I did not expect him to devote himself completely to that theme! It might have been blended of course with some of his own life stuff and sundry Americana—but I was sure his poem would contain the wonderful incidents I had described to him . . . . (296)

As Kinbote, however, asserts a page later: “Gradually, I regained my usual composure. I reread *Pale Fire* more carefully. . . . Here and there I discovered in it and especially, especially in the invaluable variants, echoes and spangles of my mind, a long ripplewake of my glory” (297). At this point, Kinbote, the disappointed reader, has become Kinbote, the insightful rereader. Transcending the physical limitations of the text, he has taken in the total picture and discovered "a long ripplewake of my glory." Once a threat to his vision, time—which is incorporated by the poem's closed, "line after line, page after page" structure—has become landscape. The window-glimpses that allowed Kinbote to imagine a Zembla coming closer to completion are actualized in the poem's blank spaces. Armed with the critical distance rereading affords—a distance arguably echoed by the third person perspective from which Kinbote narrates the King of Zembla's tale—Kinbote 'legitimately' rewrites Zembla between the poem’s lines.

Appending the poem's last line, furthermore, transforms “Pale Fire” into a closed, recursive space. This act allows the blank page to become a site of reconnection, where Kinbote, the reader and “beholder,” becomes the rereader, the fantastic underside's “only begetter” (17).
As a site of reconnection, the blank page also becomes an untrammeled (deserted) space of recommencement.

At the same time, Kinbote's transformation from reader to rereader is no smooth metamorphosis. Instead, it illustrates that the clash between Kinbote's vision and Shade's poem is, in fact, a struggle for the authenticating body. Throughout the commentary, Kinbote remains caught between the "spectral" world of timelessness, on the one hand, and the line-by-line, page-by-page certainty of physical dependence on the other. The "clash" between these two ideas ultimately becomes a question of dominance, a struggle that plays itself out in the poem's blank spaces. At the same time, this struggle also postpones Kinbote's confrontation with his own exilic 'reality'. (This is a subject to which we will return.)

As Kinbote, speaking now as the rereader, notes:

I now felt a new, pitiful tenderness toward the poem as one has for a fickle young creature who has been stolen and brutally enjoyed by a black giant but now again is safe in our hall and park . . . . The spot still hurts, it must hurt, but with strange gratitude we kiss those heavy wet eyelids, and caress that polluted flesh. (297)

Lacking in Kinbote's "magical madness," the poem, it seems, has been raped, sodomized, "brutally enjoyed." At the same time, this passage stands in stark contrast, but also in clear relation, to a moment found earlier in the footnotes when Kinbote proclaims that Shade “was ripe with my Zembla, bursting with suitable rhymes, ready to spurt at the brush of an eyelash” (80).

In the latter case, Zembla's creation is associated with mutual homosexual desire. However, this “embrace” is no longer the happy meeting envisioned by Nabokov, but rather a manifestation of sexual dominance. In the first case, it is Shade who has performed a perverse sexual act upon Kinbote’s content. In the second case, it is Kinbote who has brought Shade to the metaphorical edge of orgasm. In both cases, narration is associated with sexual prowess and power.
The idea of dominance and the question of dependence, however, extend to the reader as well. As we have already seen, not only does Kinbote try to assert control over the poem’s content, but he also attempts to control the reader’s perception of the poem; to dominate, that is, the poem's reading (and reread) moment. As discussed above, the fiction’s success depends upon the reader following Kinbote’s lead and, irrespective of contradictory details, consenting to submit to the "total picture" that Kinbote, through "delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play" (*Speak, Memory* 228), paints.

**Bastard and Ghost**

Despite Kinbote's efforts to legitimize his vision, however, he cannot escape the fact that he does not quite fit within the poem's firm walls. His game, one of reflections and resemblances, is played from the threshold; it takes place between the poem's lines. Indeed, despite his struggle to prove that he belongs on the inside looking out, Kinbote is perpetually caught on the outside looking in—an idea, however, to which he readily admits:

> Although I realize only too clearly, alas, that the result, in its pale and diaphanous final phase, cannot be regarded as a direct echo of my narrative . . . , one can hardly doubt that the sunset glow of the story acted as a catalytic agent upon the very process of the sustained creative effervescence that enabled Shade to produce a 1000-line poem in three weeks. There is, moreover, a symptomatic family resemblance in the coloration of both poem and story. (81)

The theme of symptomatic family resemblances, which Kinbote introduces in tandem with the admission that the poem “cannot be regarded as a direct echo of my narrative,” points to the way in which Kinbote, standing on the outside looking in, ultimately consents to become a bastard for the sake of appropriation. Indeed, even as he asserts that there is a “symptomatic family resemblance” between poem and narrative, Kinbote will also note that: “it is also true that Hazel
Shade resembled me in certain respects. In this way, Kinbote remains caught in a position of illegitimate legitimacy: a naturalized bastard, an implicit, subversive "and" appended to the Shade family tree.

At the same time, Kinbote's attempts to prove that he is a "natural" inhabitant of the poem's blank spaces comes to an end when Kinbote's commentary reaches the blank line 1,000. As the commentator writes: "Yes, better stop. My notes and self are petering out. . . . My work is finished. My poet is dead" (300). Shade's death, which Kinbote once regarded as a chronic absence, has now become an undeniable presence. In admitting that his work is finished and that his poet is dead, Kinbote is again thrust into a world ruled by chance with an open future and a present that is uncertain. Confronted by the blank page, Kinbote therefore exclaims:

I may assume other disguises, other forms, but I shall try to exist. I may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art. . . . Oh, I may do many things! History permitting, I may sail back to my recovered kingdom. . . . I may huddle and groan in a madhouse. (301-02)

Physically confronted by the blank page in the commentary, Kinbote's narrative chronology of "and I…and I…and I" has become an open-ended "I may…I may…I may."

It is with these words, indeed, that the commentator takes his leave, vanishing from our sight, both into the open horizon of "I may," as well as into the tale’s recursive structure. In my opinion, this idea calls to mind the vanishing act of which Tennyson's Ulysses dreams:

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Because of space, I do not focus on Hazel Shade in my consideration. However, there is ample critical discussion surrounding this enigmatic figure, ranging from Priscilla Meyer’s discussion of Nabokov’s preoccupation with “the spirits” to David Galef’s claim that Hazel Shade, acting as one of the “self-annihilating artists of Pale Fire,” in fact “represents the book’s confabulation in miniature, the mixed success of art and annihilation,” 421. (However, Galef also suggests that Kinbote is connected to Shade through an “oedipal link,” 430, an idea I do not think the novel supports.) In Nabokov’s Pale Fire, Brian Boyd takes the idea of Hazel Shade as an artist in her own right to another extreme, suggesting that Hazel Shade exercises “otherworldly” influence upon Kinbote’s narration.

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. . . Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew. (56-64)

Endowed with a vanishing perspective—a perspective that Kinbote once applied to Shade (as specter) and reader (as spectator)—Kinbote himself has become spectral. Confronted with the choice, to stay or go—to remain within the bounds of the poem or exit the commentary entirely—Kinbote settles for a middle way, one which blends the 'everyday' ('I may turn up yet, on another campus') with the fantastic ('I may sail back to my recovered kingdom').

At the same time, if we allow Kinbote, in the act of rereading, to continue to mediate between our gaze and Shade's poem, then we enable a meeting that is, in my opinion, the moment for which Kinbote longs, as well as a moment that Kinbote postpones for the sake of ongoing narration. As we already know, the expectation that Kinbote, the “panting and happy reader” (“Good Readers and Good Writers,” 2) will meet Shade, Zembla's recreator, for a spontaneous embrace that lasts “forever if the book lasts forever” has been doused by the fact that Shade did not script either Zembla or Kinbote into the poem. However, we also remember that there is a second moment that Nabokov paints in *Speak, Memory*, the moment at which “a petal would come down, down, down” until

one would manage to glimpse its reflection which swiftly . . . rose to meet it; and, for the fraction of a second, one feared that the trick would not work, that the blessed oil would not catch fire, that the reflection might miss and the petal float away alone, but every time the delicate union did take place, with the magic precision of a poet’s word meeting halfway his, or a reader’s, recollection. (212)
In preventing the meeting of Shade and reader, Kinbote both preserves and postpones the moment at which his (Kinbote’s) recollection almost touches Shade’s, with the caesura of blank spaces, the immense expanse of the exilic void, between them. In concentrating upon this collision of reflections, or rather upon this travesty of re-collections, however, Kinbote actualizes in a grotesque way the “syncopal kick” experienced by the exile.

At the same time, mimicry is not metamorphosis. Developed as a defense against predation—first, against the oblivion of exilic 'reality' and second, against the reader who would cry "Simple chance!" (231) to Kinbote's intricate art of resemblances—Kinbote's narrative, which yields a (deserted) landscape “of intricate enchantment and deception” (*Speak, Memory* 95), nonetheless vanishes when the blank page, the point of boundary crossing, is reached. After failing to escape into something absolutely other, Kinbote arguably settles for an (il)legitimate legitimacy and a spectral presence.

However, in reading Kinbote's commentary, we are also confronted by what Nabokov regards as the definition of art: “Beauty plus pity.” In our pity at Kinbote’s failed metamorphosis, in the recognition of Kinbote’s misdirected narrative desire, we can glimpse in the world between the lines a beauty belonging to the aesthetics of vanishing of which Benjamin speaks. At the same time, in yielding to Kinbote's vision, which can arguably be summed up as the totalizing aesthetic of: "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know’” (Keats 49-50)—we also consent to overlook the stuff of a man's life in favor of a recommencement that, in the words of Gilles Deleuze, is "more essential than the first, since it gives us the law of repetition, the law of series, whose first origin gave us only moments" (13).
CHAPTER FOUR

"Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” and the 'Style' of Narrative Desire

In "Historia de la eternidad" ("A History of Eternity"), Borges concludes that the exile, who looks to the past with nostalgia, views his "posibilidades felices" (433; "expectations of happiness"; 136) sub species aeternitatis, under the aspect of eternity. Nostalgia transforms the past into inviolable space, thereby divorcing the pre-exilic past from the present exilic experience of 'reality'. As Borges explains:

For the displaced individual, memory of the lost homeland becomes part and parcel of a past that is separated from the present by an absolute caesura. The awareness of this caesura gives rise to the contrapuntal sense described by Said where: "habits of life, expressions, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally” (“Reflections” 186). The memory of and desire for the inviolable past coexists with the fact of
the individual's displacement. Activities undertaken in the exilic present occur against the backdrop of the nostalgic past, creating the dialectical awareness of presence in absence and absence in presence.

In "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940), this contrapuntal experience is embodied in the narrative choice that confronts the first-person narrator, "J. L. Borges" at the end of the tale. Faced with the rise of a totalizing fiction and the end of human history, he must, from his position of inner exile, choose between two "eternities": Tlön's eternally present oblivion, a space where "stories happen," and the inviolable past, which the erasure of human history makes irretrievable. What, then, is the “style” of the narrator's desire at the end of the tale? Does he desire a new recommencement? To create, that is, a "new world to rule" within the caesura opened up by narrative displacement? Or does he desire reconnection, even if it is only to a vanishing human history?

In the last chapter, we became acquainted with ghosts, or rather, with the first-person narrator in Nabokov’s Pale Fire, who was content to become a bastard or ghost for the sake of the vanishing horizon between the lines. On the boundary between metamorphosis and mimicry, we distinguished in the beggar at the window the figment of a king in disguise. As we will see, the first-person narrator of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is also a beggar on the threshold, a result of the world that will be Tlön. As "J. L. Borges" writes:

Los cosas se duplican en Tlön; propenden asimismo a borrarse y a perder los detalles cuando los olvida la gente. Es clásico el ejemplo de un umbral que duró mientras lo visitaba un mendigo y que se perdió de vista a su muerte. (525)

Things duplicate themselves on Tlön; they also tend to grow vague or “sketchy,” and to lose detail when they begin to be forgotten. The classic example is the doorway that

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26 For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the first-person narrator of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" as "J. L. Borges," in contrast to J. L. Borges, the author.
continued to exist so long as a certain beggar frequented it, but which was lost to sight when he died. (78)

In exploring the narrator's relationship to the blank page—which, as a catastrophic caesura and an extension of exilic space, embodies the threshold on which the narrator stands—we will ask what 'reality' the narrator, who must negotiate between oblivion and history, forgetfulness and remembrance, recommencement and reconnection, is attempting to hold in being. As we will see, moreover, the narrator's relationship to the blank page as a catastrophic caesura and extension of exilic space directly reflects his relationship to history.

In the first section, I will briefly outline the story, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." As we will see, Tlön's first-person narrator stands at a critical crossroads similar to that which confronts Odysseus in the Odyssey. This idea manifests itself in part as a struggle between two modes of representation: id est ("it is") and als ob ("as if"), the nominal and the hypothetical or fantastic.

The second section will be devoted to a selection of Borges's essays, which, as he puts it in the "Historia de la eternidad" ("A History of Eternity"), explore the way in which the individual's orientation to language and text either allows the text to become "un espejo delicado y secreto de lo que pasó por las almas" (432; "a sensitive, secret mirror of what passes through every soul," 136), thereby reflecting and preserving universal human history, or to become an unreflective medium that "simula estar lleno y está vacío" (421; "simulates fullness and is empty" 126). Because many of the ideas present in Borges's non-fictional writings are dramatized in his fictions, this discussion will also include "The Library of Babel," which shows similarities with "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius."

The third section will take up "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" in the context of the foregoing discussion and will specifically focus on the narrator's relationship to the blank page as a site of
recommencement and/or a place of reconnection. We will also briefly explore Kafka’s parable, "Vor dem Gesetz" (“Before the Law”).

The Critical Chronotope

On the first pages of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” we find that we owe the discovery of Uqbar (a fictional country) and Tlön (a fictional planet) to the conjunction of two “eternities”: the encyclopedia, whose form calls to mind Zeno’s paradoxes, and the mirror, which "simula estar lleno y está vacío" ("Historia de la eternidad" 421) ("simulates fullness and is empty" “A History of Eternity” 126). These “eternities” likewise invoke two different ways of knowing or representing the world, one objective and one subjective; one belonging to language’s propensity to name and categorize (id est), one depending upon the act of self-reflection, which calls to mind themes of memory and identity, as well as the inversion (or extension) of realities (als ob). However, there is another “eternity” that persists throughout the narrative and does not vanish until the end, when the first-person narrator abandons the stance of witness and adopts a tone of confession. This “eternity” is that of the “critical chronotope.”

Mikhail Bahktin defines the chronotope in the following way:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (84)

Using this definition as a springboard, we will see that in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” the critical chronotope represents a textual fusion, where the written word makes time “artistically visible,” and the blank page, which underlies the text, becomes “charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.” At the same time, this critical chronotope—a chronotope,
that is, made critical by the context in which it occurs—is no smooth meeting of time and space, text and blank page, but instead represents a problematic crossroads: a meeting that registers the first-person narrator’s shifting orientation toward history. Displaced out of an overarching narrative “home” by the rise of a totalizing fiction, the first-person narrator must decide how to negotiate his relationship to a vanishing human history. By focusing on those points in the text where the blank page breaks through, and by considering the narrator’s relationship to these moments of caesura, we will be able to examine the narrator’s situation at the aforementioned crossroads, where forgetfulness and remembrance, oblivion and history, recommencement and reconnection meet.

In the last chapter, we found that the caesura in the text was located in “Pale Fire’s” missing line 1,000: a blank space that allowed Kinbote to enter into the poem and attempt, through a recursive process of rereading and rewriting, to erect a totalizing structure impervious to penetration. Though the caesura allowed him entrance into the poem, however, the missing line also marked the point at which Kinbote was forced to confront ‘everyday’ reality, where the story, despite its totalizing structure, inevitably petered out. In “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” the primary caesura in the text occurs between the story’s two main parts: the article (dated 1940) and the postscript (dated 1947). Because the postscript was part of the original story, which was published in the literary periodical Sur in May, 1940, the postscript acts as a “prescripted postscript,” an anticipatory construction “viewed as recursive post factum from a future memory seven years hence” (Kadir, Memos 99). The caesura between the two sections thereby functions as both anticipatory and retrospective space, a fictional exploration of what Borges saw as a terrifying reality: the catastrophic rise of totalitarianism. As a result, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” which dramatizes the rise of a totalizing fiction and the subsequent erasure of human
history, acts as a “cautionary tale”27 (98), one that directly implicates the reader in its plot. The caesura between article and postscript therefore becomes a critical chronotope, a charged space where fiction and ‘reality’ meet. In order to set the stage for further discussion, I will briefly summarize the article and the postscript below.28

In the article, the first-person narrator, “J. L. Borges,” documents in a critical, objective tone the discovery of an article on Uqbar (a fictional country) in an apocryphal Encyclopedia Britannica, and the subsequent entrance of Tlön (a fictional planet) into the world via another encyclopedia: A First Encyclopedia of Tlön. Vol. XI. Hlaer to Jangr (71). Because the fantastic country of Uqbar is introduced in a mimetic fashion—in the guise of a fictional article appended to the Encyclopedia Britannica's id est chronology of ‘fact’—the boundary between ‘fiction’ and ‘reality’ seems, within the context of the article, to be relatively clear. 'Fiction' is still framed by the appearance of an extratextual 'reality'.

On the other hand, Volume Eleven of A First Encyclopedia of Tlön discards the disjunction between ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’ and instead sets forth a universe composed of 'unrealities'. Though conceptually belonging, like the Encyclopedia Britannica, to the world of id est, Volume Eleven contains a totalizing fiction that has no external reference but itself. At the same time, this encyclopedia is composed of fragments—that is, of individual articles—and is itself a fragment: one volume in a larger series. It is, namely:

un vasto fragmento metódico de la historia total de un planeta desconocido, con sus arquitecturas y sus barajas, con el pavor de sus mitologías y el rumor de sus lenguas . . . . Todo ello articulado, coherente, sin visible propósito doctrinal o tono paródico. (517)

a vast and systematic fragment of the entire history of an unknown planet, with its architectures and its playing cards, the horror of its mythologies and the murmur of its

27 See also Kadir, “Totalization, Totalitarianism, and Tlön.”
28 For a more thorough discussion of the events that take place in ”Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” see Cristina Parodi.
tongues . . . —all joined, articulated, coherent, and with no visible doctrinal purpose or hint of parody. (72)

Within the encyclopedia's framework, ‘reality’ and ‘fiction', *id est* and *als ob* appear to be one and the same thing. As a result, Tlön becomes the essence of a book that cannot be closed, a text that cannot be escaped. As such, María Díaz Pozueta notes that Tlön's form represents “an extreme case of intertextuality” (205), an eternally present oblivion where stories within stories happen, and where all sense of origin and ending vanish into the text.

The second part of the story is the 1947 postscript. Because the date on the article corresponds to the actual publication date of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” in the journal *Sur* in May, 1940, the postscript, as previously noted,ironically projects itself into the future. At the same time, the postscript refers to events that "está[n] en la memoria (cuando no en la esperanza o en el temor) de todo mis lectores (527; “lie in every reader’s memory [if not in his hope or fear]” 79). With these words, the reader is directly implicated in the story's plot.

In the course of this short postscript, furthermore, the origins of Tlön are laid bare. (This tale of origination forms a stark contrast to Tlön's eternally present oblivion.) As the narrator documents, a secret society, Orbis Tertius, first planned to create an imaginary country, Uqbar. However, according to the narrator, in 1824 the American millionaire Ezra Buckley dismissed this project with scorn:

. . . [S]e ríe de la modestia del proyecto. Le dice que en América es absurdo inventar un país y le propone la invención de un planeta. A esa gigantesca ideal añade otra, hija de su nihilismo: la de guardar en la silencio la impresa enorme. . . . Buckley descree de Dios, pero quiere demostrar al Dios no existente que los hombres mortals son capaces de concebir un mundo. (526)

. . . [He] laughed at the modesty of the project. He told the man that in America it was nonsense to invent a country—what they ought to do was invent a planet. To that giant of an idea he added another, the brainchild of his nihilism: The enormous enterprise must be kept secret. . . . Buckley did not believe in God, yet he wanted to prove to the nonexistent God that mortals could conceive and shape a world. (79)
Accordingly, Buckley donated his wealth to the furtherance of the project: "sus cordilleras auríferas, sus ríos navegables, sus praderas holladas por el toro y por el bisonte . . . " (526; “his gold-veined mountains, his navigable rivers, his prairies thundering with bulls and buffalo . . . ” 79). The result of this conspiracy was Tlön, a fictional world created by men.

It is the entrance of the fictional world into the 'real' world, however, that leads to the events that the narrator assures us belong to common memory:

El contacto y el hábito de Tlön han desintegrado este mundo. Encantada por su rigor, la humanidad olvida y toma a olvidar que es un rigor de ajedrecistas, no de ángeles. Ya ha penetrado en las escuelas el (conjectural) "idioma primitivo" de Tlön; ya la enseñanza de su historia armoniosa (y lleno de episodios conmovedores) ha obliterate a la que presidió mi niñez; ya en las memorias un pasado ficticio ocupa el sitio de otro, del que nada sabemos con certidumbre—ni siquiera que es falso. (528-29)

Contact with Tlön, the habit of Tlön, has disintegrated this world. Spellbound by Tlön’s rigor, humanity has forgotten, and continues to forget, that it is the rigor of chess masters, not of angels. Already Tlön’s (conjectural) “primitive language” has filtered into our schools; already the teaching of Tlön’s harmonious history (filled with moving episodes) has obliterated the history that governed my own childhood; already a fictitious past has supplanted in men’s memories that other past, of which we now know nothing—not even that it is false. (81)

Paradoxically, the events that belong to common memory are associated with forgetting. The “habit of Tlön” has obliterated the habit of history. Not only has “a fictitious past” replaced the history we knew, but it has also erased the boundaries separating 'fiction' from 'reality'. Indeed, Tlön’s systematic and fragmentary oblivion makes it impossible to distinguish fact from fiction, truth from falsehood. ‘Reality’ has become ‘unreality’; id est has become synonymous with als ob.

At the same time, it should be noted that Tlön’s harmonious and moving history does not replace one historical narrative with another, but rather one habit of narration with another. Instead of contextualizing history in human experience, Tlön’s history unfolds in an oblivion
where stories happen, where one thing succeeds another *ad infinitum*. Not only does it become difficult to remember the history that preceded the fiction, but it also becomes difficult to regard that pre-history as anything but another 'unreality'. If residual memory of the other past still lingers, it is memory without context, something "del que nada sabemos con certidumbre—ni siquiera que es falso" (529; "of which we now know nothing—not even that it is false" 81).

It is, therefore, against a backdrop of universal forgetting that the narrator's story unfolds. In recording the origins of Uqbar and Tlön, however, the narrative sets up the same paradoxical dichotomy that is present in Books Nine through Twelve of the *Odyssey*. The story of origin is opposed to endlessness; memory is opposed to forgetfulness; history is opposed to oblivion.

At the same time, the blurring of the boundary between 'reality' and 'fiction' also characterizes "Borges's" own narrative. For example, in the postscript we find that the 1940 article, which takes the form of a scholarly document, was also published in the *Antología de la literatura fantástica* (525; "Anthology of Fantastic Literature" 78). As a result, the article, with its critical tone, is a work of mimicry, much like the original article over Uqbar. If, however, we can recognize the article as a work of mimicry—an idea that suggests that the boundary between 'fact' and 'fiction' remains relatively intact—that line disappears in the postscript, where the concept of Tlön begins to break into the ‘real’ world. In this way, the blending of 'reality' and 'fiction' becomes an important plot component, forcing the reader to decide how s/he will read the story. Will the reader, for instance, approach the story as a fiction, or will s/he accept it as something that touches upon his or her own ‘reality’?

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29 First published in the literary periodical, *Sur*, in May, 1940, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" also appeared in *The Anthology of Fantastic Literature* that same year.
In the context of "Tlōn, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the question becomes critical. Not only does the postscript reference a past that, in 1940, had not yet occurred, but the narrator also makes the connection between the story's plot and the reader's historical moment clear:

Hace diez años bastaba cualquier simetría con apariencia de orden—el materialismo dialéctico, el antisemitismo, el nazismo—para embelesar los hombres. ¿Cómo no someterse a Tlōn, a la minuciosa y vasta evidencia de un planeta ordenado? Inútil responder que la realidad también está ordenada. Quizá lo esté, pero de acuerdo a leyes divinas—traduzco: a leyes inhumanas—que no acabamos nunca de percibir. Tlōn será un laberinto, pero es un laberinto urdido por hombres, un laberinto destinado a que lo descifren los hombres. (528)

Ten years ago, any symmetry, any system with the appearance of order—dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism—could spellbind and hypnotize mankind. How could the world not fall under the sway of Tlōn, how could it not yield to the vast and minutely detailed evidence of an ordered planet? It would be futile to reply that reality is also ordered. Perhaps it is, but orderly in accordance with divine laws (read: inhuman laws) that we can never quite manage to penetrate. Tlōn may well be a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth forged by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men. (81)

In comparing Tlōn to "cualquier simetría con apariencia de orden" ("any system with the appearance of order") capable of spellbinding mankind, the story not only implicates the reader in its plot, but it also forces the reader to reflect, in the context of a fantastical tale, upon his or her historical moment.

In this regard, the caesura that separates the article and the postscript represents the crisis of history’s ending, as well as the problematic meeting of ‘reality' and ‘fiction'. Though framed by a fantastic tale, the caesura becomes a mirror of the time in which Borges was writing, a mirror of the author and the reader caught up in, and potentially swept away by, current events. The stress in Borges’s story arguably falls on this moment of caesura, a caesura, furthermore, that is echoed in the sentences with which the narrator closes the tale:

Si nuestras previsions no erran, de aquí cien años alguien descubrirá los cien tomos de la Segunda Enciclopedia de Tlōn. Entonces desaparecerán del planeta el ingles y el francés y el mero español. El mundo será Tlōn. Yo no hago caso, yo sigo revisando en los quietos días del hotel de
Adrogué una indecisa traducción quevediana (que no pienso dar a la imprenta) del Urn Burial de Browne. (529)

If my projections are correct, a hundred years from now someone will discover the hundred volumes of The Second Encyclopædia of Tlön.

At that, French and English and mere Spanish will disappear from the earth. The world will be Tlön. That makes very little difference to me; through my quiet days in this hotel in Adrogué, I go on revising (though I never intend to publish) an indecisive translation in the style of Quevedo of Sir Thomas Browne’s Urne Buriall. (81)

Between the prediction that "El mundo será Tlön" ("The world will be Tlön") and the narrator’s admission that "Yo no hago caso" ("That makes very little difference to me"), there is a pause that recollects the caesura between article and postscript. Like the projective caesura between the article and postscript, a fictionally constructed pause that represents the end of history and the rise of a totalizing fiction, the hiatus between the prediction (that “The world will be Tlön”) and the confession (“That makes very little difference to me”) reflects the crossroads—ending and endlessness, remembrance and forgetfulness, history and oblivion—at which the narrator (and, arguably, the reader with him) stands. This crossroads, furthermore, is embodied in a work of translation that is intended for no audience. At the same time, the work that the narrator has chosen to translate is Thomas Browne's Urne Buriall, published in 1658, which reflects upon the presence of death in the midst of life, not to mention the futile lengths to which an individual will go to ensure his or her own immortality. In this way, the projected translation presents a contrast to, and arguably a way to resist, a world that heralds the erasure of history and the loss of individual identity.

As a result, the artfully constructed pause between the prediction that "The world will be Tlön" and the confession that "That makes very little difference to me" calls upon the reader to critically consider the narrator’s final act. Is the work of translation an attempt to reconnect to a vanishing historical narrative, which, set against the backdrop of an eternally present oblivion,
yet has death at its heart? Or, instead, is it an attempt to establish a world over which the narrator (as translator) has complete control? Does the translation provide the narrator with a means to reconnection or a space of recommencement?

Focusing upon these questions in the context of the narrator's relationship to the blank page, which represents a catastrophic caesura (the death of history) and an extension of (inner) exilic space, will allow us to consider the narrator's relationship to history at the end of the tale. As we will see, it is a consideration that, like the story’s plot, directly implicates the reader as well.

**The world, unfortunately, is real . . .**

Before exploring these ideas further, it would be helpful to place our consideration within the context of Borges’s non-fictional writings, particularly those that deal with the interplay of totalization and displacement as this is reflected in the individual’s relationship to a universal human history made accessible through the literary text. (The displaced narrator's vacillating relationship to this universal human history will prove central to our subsequent discussion.)

Because I do not have the space to adequately do justice to the large body of Borges’s non-fictional writings, however, I will concentrate on a selection of essays that directly relate to the discussion of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” These essays show how individual identity becomes an increasingly problematic chronotope in the face of totality. (As Bakhtin observes: "The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic" [85].) As we will see, furthermore, this struggle is ultimately registered in our relationship to language, because language is the medium in which we self-reflect. In this case, language can become, as Borges remarks in "Historia de la eternidad" ("A History of Eternity"), "un espejo delicado y secreto de lo que pasó por las almas"
"a sensitive, secret mirror of what passes through every soul," 136). In this case, language acts as a medium that redeems universal history and preserves personal identity. On the other hand, it can simply become the aforementioned mirror that "simula estar lleno y está vacío" (421; "simulates fullness and is empty" 126). The themes taken up in this section will also prove integral to a discussion of the narrator’s self-positioning at the end of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” as he negotiates between oblivion and history, forgetfulness and remembrance, recommencement and reconnection.

In this discussion, I will also reference a few other short fictions that are taken from Borges’s collection, Fictions (Ficciones, 1944). Like "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," many of these fictions feature a protagonist who is confronted by totalizing structures that threaten to render his human identity, which is entwined with the consciousness of death or ending, obsolete. This confrontation, as Brotherston and Hulme note, is directly related to the catastrophe of the World Wars and to the problematic position of the individual caught up in events that are beyond his or her control:

In the ‘war’ fictions, we are shown the powerlessness of the individual, of entire populations that are swept along by cries of hate and demands for unconditional surrender. Viewing it all, Borges intimates a great aversion to propaganda in all its forms, and, in the absence of Christian or other received belief, he clings to an idea of literature that begins to acquire almost religious dimensions. Correspondingly, threatened in body and mind, the heroes of his stories hold on to sanity by constructing their own ‘fictional’ reality, or through the illusion of communicating in and through literature. (xx)

However:

Living in literature in this sense, and during times of mass destruction, can even become a means of postponing or reconstructing one’s death, as Shahrazad repeatedly postpones hers in the Arabian Nights, and hence of avoiding the very truth of our mortality as humans. (xx-xxi)
The consciousness of mortality, which collides with totalizing structures such as the Library of Babel or Tlön, echoes “the powerlessness of the individual” who is faced with overwhelming historical events. Against the backdrop of totalizing structures that threaten to displace him or her, however, the individual is forced to confront what it means to be human, either embracing humanity, and especially mortality, as a means of resistance or constructing fictional ‘realities' that 1) postpone ending and 2) reflect the individual's totalizing context. Literature, in this case, can either become a means to resist the experience of displacement, a way to confirm the “truth of our mortality as humans,” or a means of postponement, enabling the protagonists to construct their own fictional ‘reality’. As a result, literature becomes a point of reconnection (to a common human narrative) or a site of recommencement (in a new world to rule). As we will see, the narrator's translation project at the end of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," which focuses upon "the truth of our mortality as humans," can also be read as a means of postponing a confrontation with "the world will be Tlön."

The confrontation between the individual and totality, furthermore, is a theme familiar to readers of both Borges’s fictional and non-fictional texts. Within this construct, totalizing structures, such as Tlön or The Library of Babel, ultimately lead to the annihilation of individual identity. In contrast, human mortality is associated with memory and embodiment. The individual, who is conscious of both at once—who is able, for example, to conjure totalities in fiction, while yet remaining aware of his or her own mortality—exists upon a critical threshold. Indeed, in opposition to totalizing ideas that are present in myth and religion, not to mention in "cualquier simetría con apariencia de orden" ("Tlön" 528; “any symmetry, any system with the appearance of order" 81)—in opposition to totalizing ideas, that is, mortality serves to connect the individual to a universal human history.
When all else fails, death, once again, acts as a common denominator of human experience. As Borges declares, for example, in "Nueva refutación del tiempo" ("A New Refutation of Time"):

And yet, and yet . . . Negar la sucesión temporal, negar el yo, negar el universo astronómico, son desesperaciones aparentes y consuelos secretos. Nuestro destino (a diferencia del infierno de Swedenborg y del infierno de la mitología tibetana) no es espantoso por irreal; es espontoso porque es irreversible y de hierro. El tiempo es la sustancia de que estoy hecho. El tiempo es un río que me arrebata, pero yo soy el río; es un tigre que me destroza, pero yo soy el tigre; es un fuego que me consume, pero yo soy el fuego. El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges. (115)

And yet, and yet . . . Denying temporal succession, denying the self, denying the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret consolations. Our destiny (as contrasted with the hell of Swedenborg and the hell of Tibetan mythology) is not frightful by being unreal; it is frightful because it is irreversible and iron-clad. Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges. (233-34)

In seeking to define time, we define ourselves; time forces a self-referential discourse. In this way, we emerge as both the object (standing outside of time as a destructive medium) and the agent (a parcel of our own destruction). The invocation of each metaphor ("time is . . .") is also the invocation of a mirror in which we meet ourselves in the coming. This mirror, which problematizes the way we reflect upon issues such as mortality and memory, and the way we represent these concepts in language, can either become, as Borges remarks in "Historia de la eternidad" ("A History of Eternity"), the "delicado y secreto" ("sensitive, secret") medium that redeems lost time, or an empty oblivion that "nos afantasma incómodamente" ("432; “rather uncomfortably makes ghosts of us” 136).

For "J. L. Borges" at the end of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," universal human history is in danger of becoming “lost time.” As previously mentioned, the story he tells takes place against a backdrop of universal forgetting. Within the context of the story, the world is
becoming Tlöń. Faced with a totalizing fiction, the narrator vanishes into the text. He withdraws from the world that will be Tlöń in order to engage in a futile project of translation. This idea leads the reader to question the narrator’s relationship to a vanishing human history. In embarking upon the translation project, for example, does the narrator desire to redeem “lost time,” to reconnect via language and text to a universal human history? Or does translation become a way to voyage towards a vanishing horizon, to recommence and, therefore, postpone contact with a world that will be Tlöń? As we will see, the project can be interpreted in both ways. Though it acts as a means of postponement, the narrator has yet chosen a text that has death at its heart.

Because the consciousness of mortality acts as a common denominator of human experience, it can become a tool—an "And yet . . . "—that allows us to resist events beyond our control. As Borges, for instance, writes in "El tiempo circular" (“Circular Time”): "En tiempos de auge la conjetura de que la existencia del hombre es una cantidad constante, invariable, puede entristecer o irritar; en tiempos que declinan (como éstos), es la promesa de que ningún oprobio, ninguna calamidad, ningún dictador podrá empobrecernos" (472; “In times of ascendancy, the conjecture that man’s existence is a constant, unvarying quantity can sadden or irritate us; in times of decline (such as the present), it holds out the assurance that no ignominy, no calamity, no dictator, can impoverish us” 228). In this respect, our everyday, "iron-clad" human reality—defined by such basic realizations as: "El tiempo es la sustancia de que estoy hecho" (“Time is the substance I am made of”)—can become a way to resist 'unrealities', such as Nazism, that seek to “impoverish” human experience. For, as Borges remarks in "Anotación al 23 de agosto de 1944" ("A Comment on August 23, 1994"): "El nazismo adolece de irreadlidad, como los infiernos de Erígena. Es inhabitable; los hombres solo pueden morir por él, mentir por él, matar
y ensangrentar por él" (77; “Nazism suffers from unreality, like Erigena’s hell. It is uninhabitable; men can only die for it, lie for it, wound and kill for it” 211).

The totalities Borges conjures in his fictions are likewise uninhabitable. If we turn to the "La biblioteca de Babel" (“The Library of Babel”)—a story that, like “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” dramatizes the confrontation between an individual and totality—we find that there is no place for basic humanity within the library's infinite walls. As the first-person narrator, in a critical, objective tone akin to that used in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” relates:

El universo (que otros llaman la Biblioteca) se compone de un número indefinido, y tal vez infinito, de galerías hexagonales, con vastos pozos de ventilación en el medio, cercados por barandas bajísimas. Desde cualquier hexágono, se ven los pesos inferiores y superiores: interminablemente. La distribución de las galerías es invariable. Veinte anaqueles, a cinco largos anaqueles por lado, cubren todos los lados menos dos; su altura, que es la de los pesos, excede apenas la de un bibliotecario normal. (558)

The universe (which others call the library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries. In the center of each gallery is a ventilation shaft, bounded by a low railing. From any hexagon one can see the floors above and below—one after another, endlessly. The arrangement of the galleries is always the same: Twenty bookshelves, five to each side, line four of the hexagon’s six sides; the height of the bookshelves, floor to ceiling, is hardly greater than the height of a normal librarian. (112)

The library, a totalizing structure that exists "ab aeterno“ (559), forms a stark contrast to the narrator’s basic human identity, an idea poignantly demonstrated by the simple fact that the narrator’s humanity—his consciousness of mortality and his feelings of utter isolation—takes the form of a footnote appended to the main body of the text:

Antes, por cada tres hexágonos había un hombre. El suicidio y las enfermedades pulmonares han destruido esa proporción. Memoria de indecible melancolía: a veces he viajado muchas noches por corredores y escaleras pulidas sin hallar un solo bibliotecario. (561)

In earlier times, there was one man for every three hexagons. Suicide and diseases of the lung have played havoc with that proportion. An unspeakably melancholy memory: I have sometimes traveled for nights on end, down corridors and polished staircases, without coming across a single librarian. (114)
Within the library’s totalizing, infinite space, there is nothing that satisfies the basic human need for community or even communication. Not only are "bibliotecarios" ("librarians") scarce, it is also pure chance if any of the books, which consist of random combinations of the twenty-four-letter alphabet, are understandable in any language known to man. As a result, the narrator cannot transcend the plot that encloses him. Instead, he will perish like the other librarians: a footnote to the library’s totalizing and seemingly infinite space. (In much the same way, “J. L. Borges” cannot transcend the plot that encloses him. The world, after all, will be Tlön.) At the same time, the footnote the narrator appends to his text, which testifies to his humanity, could well be regarded as a small space of resistance, a sensible scrawl in the margins of the library’s nonsensical universe. (The narrator’s translation in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” could be interpreted in much the same way.)

Accordingly, we can read both "La biblioteca de Babel" (“The Library of Babel”) and “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” as tales that underscores the problematic tension between the individual’s "iron-clad" human reality and the way in which that reality is reflected in language—or, rather, in our relationship to language. It is a struggle that assumes a prominent place in Borges’s non-fictional writings.

As Borges begins, for instance, in "Nota sobre (hacia) Bernard Shaw" (“A Note on [toward] Bernard Shaw”):

. . . Kurd Lasswitz, a fines del XIX, jugó con la abrumadora fantasía de una biblioteca universal, que registrara todas las variaciones de los veintitantos símbolos ortográficos, o sea, cuanto es dable expresar, en todas las lenguas. (93)

. . . Kurd Lasswitz, at the end of the nineteenth [century], toyed with the staggering fantasy of a universal library which would register all the variations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols, in other words, all that is given to express in all languages. (213)

However:
Those who practice this game forget that a book is more than a verbal structure or series of verbal structures; it is the dialogue it establishes with its reader and the intonation it imposes upon his voice and the changing and durable images it leaves in his memory. This dialogue is infinite . . . . A book is not an isolated being: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships. (93)

These relationships, we find, are actualized through the medium of the author’s and the reader’s combined human experience, which connects both to a universal human history and which forms a chronotope that begins with the novel (as space) and unfolds with the reader (as time). Indeed, if we call to mind Bakhtin’s definition of the chronotope, we can remark that this chronotope is not merely artistic, but also experiential, beginning with the text and encompassing both the personal history and the historical context of the author and the reader. In this case, the “intersection of axes and fusion of indicators” (Bakhtin 84) opens up a dialogue between reader and text, between author and world, that is (paradoxically) “infinite”—itself radiating possibilities.

Although language is the medium in which this meeting takes place, however, meaning is not solely created through language. Instead, it originates in the recognition that the text is a product of human experience:

Si la literatura no fuera más que un álgebra verbal, cualquiera podría producir cualquier libro, a fuerza de ensayar variaciones . . . . Cabría responder que la fórmula obtenida por eliminación, carecería de valor y hasta de sentido; para que tenga alguna virtud debemos concebirla en función de Heráclito, en función de una experiencia de Heráclito, aunque “Heráclito” no sea otra cosa que el presumible sujeto de esa experiencia. (95)

If literature were nothing more than verbal algebra, anyone could produce any book by essaying variations . . . . Here it is fitting to reply that the formula obtained by this process of elimination would lack all value and even meaning; for it to have some virtue we must
conceive it [the text] in terms of Heraclitus, in terms of an experience of Heraclitus, even
though “Heraclitus” is nothing more than the presumed subject of that experience. (214)

In order for a literary text to have meaning, we must assume that the book is experientially
grounded, even if that experience belongs more to a figment—to a narrator, perhaps, on the edge
of vanishing—than to an historical figure. For this reason, Júlio Pimentel Pinto remarks that
Borges's entire fictional oeuvre can be regarded as “un ejercicio de la memoria, de la voluntad de
recordar” (158; “an exercise in memory, in the will to remember”).

If we regard the literary text as a product of human experience, as a repository of
universal human history, then each time we approach the book, we enter into an “infinite
dialogue” that encompasses both the author and the reader. On the other hand, if language is
reduced to mere “verbal algebra,” and is, therefore, divorced from the notion of a text that
originates in human experience, then the idea that we can establish a meaningful dialogue with
the text becomes nonsensical. In this case, the reader is simply a spectator to the book’s play, a
tourist in a (Tlönian) theme park—or, if we turn to “La biblioteca de Babel” (The Library of
Babel”), an individual utterly displaced and isolated into a nonsensical library (which is the
“universe”).

In order to avoid misreading Borges's fictions—in order to avoid reading them, for
example, as nothing but “a reflection on language as a universal library, a labyrinth with no exit”
(Díaz Pozueta, 205)\(^{30}\)—the reader must consider Borges's writings in the context of his
historical moment. Indeed, as critics such as Edna Aizenberg, Djelal Kadir and Beatrice Sarlo
have convincingly shown, Borges was closely engaged with the events of his day, \(^{31}\) specifically

\(^{30}\) As Díaz Pozueta proceeds to point out, this reading is common among poststructuralist and
postmodernist critics.

\(^{31}\) This may seem like an obvious point. However, the contrary claim is still present in Borges
criticism.
wrestling, for example, with the questions of representation that emerged in the wake of the two World Wars.

As Aizenberg, for example, points out:

Borges's early, poetic voice was generated under the impact of expressionism, born out of the trenches of World War I; his mature narrative expression, poised between a cleaved history and a problematic representation, was the product of the Holocaust Era, seen with penetrating lucidity from his position as a 'mere' Argentine. (186)\textsuperscript{32}

In the context of our consideration, the position of the "mere" Argentine that Aizenberg characterizes here can be broadened to include the "mere" individual who, "poised between a cleaved history and a problematic representation," confronts Tlön's totalizing fiction and vanishes into a seemingly futile work of translation at the end of the tale. Considering the narrator’s problematic position in light of the fact that "el mundo será Tlön" ("the world will be Tlön") allows the text, despite its fictional nature, to function as a “cautionary tale” (see Kadir, “Totalization”). In this way, the text is brought back into tension with an external ‘reality’.

Indeed, it is by dramatizing the disappearance of the individual in the wake of totalizing structures that threaten to overwhelm him—and by inviting the reader to enter into the text at this point of vanishing—that Borges's fictions emphasize the importance of a historical, humanizing context. (In "La biblioteca de Babel" ["The Library of Babel"], for example, the narrator's footnote encourages this type of critical consideration, as does the narrator's final confession in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.") In considering the vanishing protagonist’s individual identity, which poses a stark contrast to the totalizing structures that surround him, the reader, from his or her own historical context, is able to append an "And yet, and yet..." to the story, a form of active reading that opens up a dialogue with the text. In this way, the fiction’s vanishing perspective, structured around a vanishing protagonist, proves to be a critical chronotope on two

\textsuperscript{32} It is worth pointing out that German Expressionism predated World War I.
fronts: where the totalizing structure meets both protagonist's and reader’s "iron-clad" human reality.

If we regard the text as a product of human experience, then, the past is opened up to the reader as a matter of present concern. At the same time, we must remember that it is a specific vision of the past. It is a past that has been interpreted by the author and must be understood as an extension of the author's engagement with his or her historical moment, a fact that once again endows the text with a human context.

As Borges attests in "Kafka y sus precursores" “Kafka and His Precursors,” for example, the writer shapes not only language but also our conception of the past as it emerges in the work of different writers:

El hecho es que cada escritor crea sus precursores. Su labor modifica nuestra concepción del pasado, como ha de modificar el futuro. En esta correlación nada importa la identidad o la pluralidad de los hombres. El primer Kafka de Betrachtung es menos precursor del Kafka de los mitos sombríos y de las instituciones atroces que Browning o Lord Dunsany. (66)

The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future. In this correlation the identity or plurality of the men involved is unimportant. The early Kafka of Betrachtung is less a precursor of the Kafka of somber myths and atrocious institutions than is Browning or Lord Dunsany. (201)

According to this idea, a writer not only influences our perceptions of the past and the future but also introduces an identity into human history that draws the works of the past into dialogue with the works of the present, and then presents them, differences aside, ideally. In this case, the dialogue instigated by the literary text transcends the individual participants and instead leaves us with an ideal of literature that, in the absence of an overarching narrative such as that provided

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33 The Kafkaesque precursors that Borges identifies here are united thematically through their use of “Zeno’s paradox against movement,” 199. This theme also appears under the guise of “the vertiginous regressus in infinitum” in Borges’s essay “Avatars of the Tortoise,” 207.
by religion, nonetheless allows us to conceptualize universal human experience. In reading the text as a product of human experience, we are, therefore, able to participate in the dialogue that the text establishes between different eras, readers and authors. At the same time, it is a dialogue that is itself a product of individual human experience; a product, that is, of the individual's engagement with his or her historical moment. As a result, Borges’s theory of influence is itself a means of resistance. Because it “revierte, subvierte e invierte los órdenes tradicionales” (Fernández Bravo 144; “reverts, subverts and inverts traditional orders”), it is, for example, able to resist “toda organización lineal, autoritaria, cerrada y paralítica” (“all lineal, authoritarian, closed and paralytic organization”).

At the same time, this ideal, subversive vision of a universal human history, which confirms the importance of individual identity, does not take into account the specific individuals involved. The author and the reader both emerge as figures on the threshold, while the text, which represents an open, infinite dialogue, occupies the center. Because the individual author plays an active role in shaping the direction this dialogue will take, moreover, the reader appears to be more of a threshold figure than the author. However, it is the reader who can ultimately brings the text back into tension with an external 'reality'.

In order for the text to be understood as dialogical, it must continue to exist in tension with an external 'reality'; the 'reality', for example, embodied by the individual reader and recollected in the idea(l) of the text as a product of human experience. Indeed, as we will see, the way in which the individual defines him-/herself in relation to text and language dictates his or her ultimate stance toward 'reality', an idea that can be demonstrated by a brief look at the essays “The Postulation of Reality” and “The Superstitious Ethics of the Reader.” These essays
will provide a springboard from which to consider the narrator’s relationship to the blank page in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.”

In “La postulación de la realidad" ("The Postulation of Reality"), Borges explores the notion of the classical as opposed to the romantic writer. To these terms, however, Borges appends the following assertion: “Distraigo aquí de toda connotación histórica las palabras clásico y romántico; entiendo por ellas dos arquetipos de escritor (dos procederes)” (253; "I am diverting the words classical and romantic from all historical connotations; I use them to mean two archetypes of the writer [two procedures]” 59). These “two procedures” also indicate two approaches to ‘reality’, an idea that will become clear in the subsequent discussion.

As we find, then, the classical writer "no desconfía del lenguaje, cree en la suficiente virtud de cada uno de sus signos" (253; “does not distrust language, but believes in the ample virtue of each of its signs” 59). Furthermore, the classical writer "[n]o es realmente expresivo: se limita a registrar una realidad, no a representarla. . . . Dicho con mejor precisión: no escribe los primeros contactos de la realidad, sino su elaboración final en conceptos" (254; “is not really expressive; he does no more than record a reality, he does not represent one. . . . To put it more precisely, he does not write reality’s initial contacts” 60). The idea that language does not articulate reality’s “initial contacts” underscores the notion that both the author and the reader are able to participate in the book’s infinite dialogue, while yet remaining on the threshold of the text. Indeed, as Borges tellingly concludes: "Para el concepto clásico, la pluralidad de los hombres y de los tiempos es accesoria, la literatura es siempre una sola" (255; "To the classical mind, the plurality of men and of eras is incidental; literature is always one and the same” 60).

The idea that “la pluralidad de los hombres y de los tiempos es accesoria" ("the plurality of men and of eras is incidental") recollects Borges’s assertion in "Kafka y sus precursores"
("Kafka and His Precursors") that the author creates his own precursors—a process, we remember, in which "nada importa la identidad o la pluralidad de los hombres" (66; “the identity or plurality of the men involved is unimportant” 201). If the text emerges as an idealized object, however, we must also remember that it is, in fact, idealized as a “dialogue,” as an object shaped in the act of writing and the experience of reading. Both ideas depend upon the fact that there is an external ‘reality’ that extends beyond the text and that exists in tension with it. Even if the text contains a representation of the individual engaged with the world, the world cannot be reduced to mere text. Or, as Kate Jenckes puts it: “[R]epresentation that seeks to bring the past fully into the present closes itself off to life and history, while representation that acknowledges its limits and excesses opens itself to a living history” (xvii). If the text is regarded as a product of "living history," it will continue, even in the author's absence, to have a human context. The moments of caesura within the text will continue to “speak.”

This idea, furthermore, recollects the approach of the classical author to his material. Indeed, as Dan Balderston notes, the classical method described here involves an important aspect of reading Borges—that is, “transgressing what formalist critics of whatever variety would consider the limits of the text and asking the reader to consider its silences and unrealized implications” (5). A consideration of a text’s “silences and unrealized implications” requires bringing the text into tension with an external ‘reality’, as well as recognizing that the text is unable to fully represent a given ‘reality’ in language. As such, the text acts like a “sinécdoque de la realidad” (Cuesta Abad 138; “a synecdoche of reality”), a partial reflection of an exterior

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34 As Jenckes also points out, this idea is a thread that runs through both Borges's and Benjamin's writings, “albeit with different intonations.” At the same time, even though Jenckes demonstrates that Borges and Benjamin were concerned with similar ideas, much of what Jenckes has to say seems to be a rehashing of what other critics, writing on each separate author, have said before.
‘reality’ that the author, who is actively engaged with his or her historical moment, attempts to represent.

In contrast to this idea, the “world that will be Tlön” represents the loss of the tension between text and ‘reality’. Instead of a dialogue, the text emerges as a totalizing concept: a labyrinth, an abyss, a deserted island. Nonetheless, as we briefly saw in the first section, the text’s “silences and unrealized implications” are yet visible in the precursively constructed caesura between article and postscript. This artful, futuristic caesura, once again, acts as a mirror of the time in which the author and his first readers were living, as well as of the way in which a totalizing fiction could come to encompass the globe. In recognizing this breakage as both a place of transit (something to move across, for example, a space connecting article and postscript, a space that belongs to the history in which it is embedded) and a site of oblivion (a space into which the narrator will vanish, the place where history ends), the reader is able to consider the way in which themes of totality come into conflict with the individual’s "iron-clad" humanity. The reader’s dialogue with the text, which includes a consideration of the silences within the text, however, is also predicated upon the fact that, as Borges puts it in “La postulación de la realidad” ("The Postulation of Reality"), language does not enable "los primeros contactos de la realidad" (254; “reality’s initial contacts” 60), but instead allows for an extra-textual consideration of the story. This consideration, furthermore, becomes critical when we realize that in Tlön’s totalizing universe the notion of an objective, external ‘reality’ has become obsolete; history has become a material that can be shaped and changed according to whim and will.

As a result, the tension between the reader’s ‘reality’ and the book's text forms a necessary and interactive caesura. Our recognition of the importance of this caesura, which
allows silence to “speak” after the text is closed, allows us (as readers) to resist those narratives that seek to impoverish human experience.

Indeed, the caesura that separates the reader from the text is also reflected in the separation of the book (as totality) from the writing act (which problematizes its origins and self-reflects upon its claims):

The action of this drama consists in the suspenseful oscillation between the two, where the book translates as natural totality, as metaphysical absolute, as transcendental completion, as inappellable inscription and implacable law, on the one hand, and, on the other, writing as tentative and differential/deferential performance with provisional claims that abstain from the attempt to contain exhaustively writing’s bequest within their own reflection. (Kadir, *The Other Writing* 46)

The locus of this drama becomes the reader, who mediates in the act of reading between the book’s totality and writing’s provisional performance. Indeed, the critic concludes: “If the author bequeaths, Borges seems to imply, the reader is the hermetic executioner, the hermeneutical executioner, of the bequest” (45).

In Borges’s texts, this drama is not only extra-textual, but often drives the story’s plot, an idea that is incorporated in the narrator’s position as translator at the end of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” It is at this point that the first-person narrator/translator paradoxically becomes “the heretic executioner, the hermeneutical executioner” of his own “bequest.” Recognizing this idea allows us to reflect upon the narrator’s stance toward language and text, and, therefore, upon the narrator’s orientation to ‘reality’. These are points, however, that we will take up below.

If we return to our discussion of the classical writer’s art, it becomes clear that Borges is not only characterizing the particular orientation of an author towards his or her text, but also a particular orientation of the individual toward ‘reality’. Indeed, Borges argues that, just as language for the classical writer does not complicate or obfuscate, but rather emerges as "[I]a simplificación conceptual de estados complejos" (255; “the conceptual simplification of complex
states” 61), so our own experience of living and adaptation emerges as the result of “complex” processes gone through unconsciously: “En lo corporal, la inconciencia es una necesidad de los actos físicos. Nuestro cuerpo sabe articular este difícil párrafo, sabe tratar con escaleras, con nudos, con pasos a nivel . . . ” ([i]n bodily terms, unconsciousness is a necessary condition of physical acts. Our body knows how to articulate this difficult paragraph, how to contend with stairways, knots, overpasses . . . ”)—and so on. As Borges, therefore, concludes: "Nuestro vivir es una serie de adaptaciones, vale decir, una educación del olvido" (“For us, living is a series of adaptations, which is to say, an education in oblivion”).

The actions our body performs in silence are comparable to the silences found in the text. Indeed, as the first-person narrator observes in "Funes el memorioso" ("Funes, His Memory"): "Pensar es olvidar diferencias, es generalizar, abstraer“ (590; "To think is to ignore (or forget) differences, to generalize, to abstract” 137). In contrast, Funes, the story's protagonist, is a victim of his own encyclopedic memory, a fact that makes abstraction impossible. Not only does he remember the minutest detail of every object or experience he has ever seen or had, but he also remembers every time he had imagined it. Accordingly, Funes’s memory can only reflect the disparate objects he encounters or envisions; he cannot reflect upon them. This kind of encyclopedic recall leaves the individual an empty fullness, a crowded oblivion, unable to transcend a solipsistic (and fragmentary) sense of world and self. The objects he unites in memory, furthermore, have no relation beyond the gaze that collects and re-collects them. Ultimately, this process destroys Funes’s humanity and renders him a passive observer of his own death: "... Funes discernía continuamente los tranquilos avances de la corrupción, de las caries, de la fatiga. ... Era el solitario y lúcido espectador de un mundo multiforme, instantáneo y casi intolerablemente preciso (589; “... Funes could continually perceive the quiet advances of
corruption, of tooth decay, of weariness. . . . He was the solitary, lucid spectator of a multiform, momentaneous, and almost unbearably precise world” 136). If the activities of writing and reading offer us an “education in oblivion,” it is important to recognize that the idea of “oblivion” is not synonymous with obliteration. Indeed, "una educación del olvido" ("an education in oblivion” seems to be part the "iron-clad" reality—the id est—of being human.

In opposition to the classical writer’s approach, however, stands the “romantic” author, whose literary approach seeks to “deplete” rather than to expound ‘reality’, and, as Borges states in "La postulación de la realidad" ("The Postulation of Reality"), whose "método continuo es el énfasis, la mentira parcial" (256; “continual method is emphasis, the partial lie” 62). In "La supersticiosa ética del lector" ("The Superstitious Ethics of the Reader"), we further discover that the “romantic” author’s emphasis is not upon the ‘reality’ lying beyond the text, but rather upon language itself, a fact that proves to be a thoroughgoing and false superstition. As Borges expounds: "Los que adolecen de esa superstición entienden por estilo no la eficacia o la ineficacia de una página, sino las habilidades aparentes del escriptor: sus comparaciones, su acústica, los episodios de su puntuación y de su sintaxis" (236; “Those who condone this superstition reckon that style is not the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of a certain page but rather the writer’s apparent skills: his analogies, acoustics, the rhythm of his syntax or punctuation” 52).

Instead of considering both silence and text as reflective of a more “complex reality,” the romantic approach focuses upon language as a performative medium, where the reader, like Funes, becomes a passive observer to, rather than an active participant in the writing act. In the “romantic” mode, furthermore, language acts as ‘reality’ s’ “initial contact,” leading to a series of ‘unrealities’ (such as Tlön) that Borges explores in the fictions. (As Sergio Pastor Merlo points
out, this idea also leads to the cult of the original text [88].) 35 Therefore, the symptomatic approach of the romantic writer and the superstitious reader—that is, the emphasis on form, rather than on the broader significance of the literary act—leads both reader and writer to miss contact with the broader ‘reality’ opened up by the text. Indeed, if language is considered in this way (as a game, rather than an experiential medium) then the silences within the text no longer speak to a broader ‘reality’, but emerge as unspeaking spaces. In this case, the only dialogue within the text is the recursive notion of a text in conversation with itself. As Borges, therefore, ironically notes:

No hay un excrítor métrico, por casual y nulo que sea, que no haya cincelado (el verbo suele figurar en su conversación) su soneto perfecto, monumento minúsculo que custodia su posible inmortalidad, y que las novedades y aniquilaciones del tiempo deberán respetar. Se trata de un soneto sin ripios, generalmente, pero que es un ripio todo él: es decir, un residuo, una inutilidad. (238)

There is not a single poet who, as minor as he may be, hasn’t sculpted (the verb tends to figure in this conversation) the perfect sonnet, a miniscule monument that safeguards his possible immortality, and which the novelties and effacements of time will be obligated to respect. It is usually a sonnet without curlicues, though the whole thing is a curlicue, that is, a shred of futility. (53)

This “shred of futility” is also "[una] falacia en purduración" ("[an] everlasting fallacy"). In order to fully understand this fallacy, however, we are instructed to see “Sir Thomas Browne’s Urn Burial”—the work that the narrator sets out to translate at the end of “Tlôń, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” Is, therefore, the narrator’s translation of Browne’s work "monumento minúsculo" ("a miniscule monument") of futility, designed, for example, to postpone the author’s confrontation with caesura? Or, on the other hand, can it be considered a recognition of the author’s "iron-clad" humanity? A means, like the footnote at the end of "The Library of Babel," to resist Tlôń’s

35 Pastermerlo also devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of the “Superstitious Ethics of the Reader.” This chapter is well worth reading, as it explores Borges’s process of writing and rewriting this particular essay.
totalizing ‘unreality’? Asking these questions—which problematize the narrator’s relationship to the blank page, as well as to a universal human history made accessible through the text—allows the reader to reflect upon their own relationship to language and caesura. As the foregoing discussion has shown, it is a consideration that involves bringing the text back into tension with an external ‘reality’, as well as accepting the text as a product of human experience. In order to explore these ideas more fully, we will now turn to “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.”

The World That Will Be Tlön

As mentioned in the first section, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is composed of the article (dated 1940) and the postscript (dated 1947). In the course of these sections, the first-person-narrator, "J. L. Borges," takes up several different positions with regard to his subject matter. This self-positioning is designed to keep him on the threshold of events, first as a critical witness who documents the discovery and rise of Tlön, and then as a translator who, having withdrawn from a world that will be Tlön, remains on the outside of the text looking in. Interrogating the different positions the narrator takes with regard to his subject matter will allow us to explore the narrator's relationship to the blank page, which I will argue acts as a catastrophic caesura and an extension of (inner) exilic space. In proceeding with this discussion, I will first focus upon the article, which outlines the properties of Tlön, and then upon the postscript, which reveals the origins of Tlön, before finally turning to the narrator's task of translation. This consideration will rely on themes taken up in the previous sections. It will focus upon the literary text as a repository of universal human history, as well as upon the ability of language to act, as Borges puts it in "Historia de la eternidad" ("The History of Eternity") as a "un espejo delicado y secreto de lo que pasó por las almas" (432; "a sensitive, secret mirror of what passes through every
soul," 136), or, conversely, an empty medium that renders us spectral. These ideas will prove central to an exploration of the first-person narrator's relationship to the blank page as a site of reconnection (to a universal human history) or a space of recommencement (in a new world to rule). As previously mentioned, this consideration directly reflects upon our own relationship to language and to the moments of caesura within the text.

If we turn to the article, we find that it has been composed in the "timeless present' of normal scholarly discourse" (Brotherston and Hulme xvii), a genre that serves to emphasize the narrator's position on the threshold of events. Although directly involved in the discovery of the apocryphal Encyclopedia Britannica and later of Volume Eleven, the narrator nonetheless assumes the position of critical witness to, rather than of protagonist in the events he documents. Furthermore, the narrator's stance of the critical, scholarly witness, which implies the distance typical of “normal scholarly discourse,” is reminiscent of the classical author’s approach to his material. The genre in which the narrator writes implies the existence of a larger dialogue. As Borges remarks in "La postulación de la realidad" ("The Postulation of Reality"), the narrator does not write "los primeros contactos de la realidad" (254; “reality’s initial contacts” 60).

Finally, the fact that the narrator's article is written in the first person underscores the idea that the text is a product of human experience, a chronotope where time, dialogically speaking, becomes visible and space becomes "charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 84). A first reading, therefore, gives the article an analytical, rather than a confessional character—an idea that, once again, serves to underscore the narrator’s place on the threshold.

As Beatrice Sarlo points out, the threshold, for Borges, is a powerful construct, an idea that stems directly from Borges's experience as an Argentine writer confronting a European
center: “Distance, Borges would argue, if it is conceived of as a geological, cultural and poetic displacement, and assumed as a Latin American right, not only makes fiction possible, but also creates the conditions for the reader’s pleasure” (29). Distance, in the context of Sarlo's argument, speaks to the idea of the Latin American writer on the threshold; a writer, moreover, who celebrates what he views as "a geological, cultural and poetic displacement," where Europe, once again, is taken as the center. As a result, acknowledging Borges’s position on the threshold between languages and cultures is seminal to understanding the author’s theory of literature, which Sarlo sums up in the following way: “[For Borges, l]iterature is composed of versions” (33). For, as the critic further notes: “If no originality is attached to a text, but only to the writing or reading of a text, the inferiority of the margins vanishes and the peripheral writer is entitled to the same claims as his or her European predecessors or contemporaries.”

Although further discussion of Borges as an Argentine author confronting a European center lies beyond the scope of the present discussion, I do believe that the idea of the margin, or threshold, as an enabling construct can be generalized to include the individual who, writing from the periphery, confronts Tlön's totalizing oblivion. Indeed, as we saw in the previous chapters, the threshold becomes a source of creative freedom, allowing the displaced individual the chance to recreate and repossess, while yet remaining unimplicated in those plots that threaten to enclose him or her. (This is an important point to which we will return.)

At the same time, there are places in the article where the narrator's threshold positioning cracks. The first of these breaks occurs when the narrator relates his initial discovery of Volume Eleven: "Me puse a hojearlo y sentí un vértigo asombroso y ligero que no describiré, porque ésta no es la historia de mis emociones sino de Uqbar y Tlön y Orbis Tertius" (517; “I began to leaf through it [the encyclopedia] and suddenly I experienced a slight, astonished sense of dizziness
that I shall not describe, since this is the story not of my emotions but of Uqbar and Tlön and Orbis Tertius” 71). By ironically stating that he "no describiré" ("shall not describe") his emotional state—which he has, in fact, just described—the narrator underscores his rejection of the center. Like the first-person narrators in Transit and Pale Fire, he is determined to remain on the threshold in the position of witness rather than protagonist. At the same time, the narrative registers a subtle tension between the narrator's objective tone and his subjective response.

The second break occurs in the context of a conversation the narrator has with Herbert Ashe, an individual who, we find, was a member of the “dispersa dinastía de solitarios” ("scattered dynasty of recluses"), whose creation, Tlön, "ha cambiado la faz del mundo" (529; “has changed the face of the earth” 81). As the narrator further recollects of this conversation:

Una tarde, hablamos del sistema duodecimal de numeración (en el que doce se escribe 10). Ashe dijo que precisamente estaba trasladando no sé qué tablas duodeciales a sexagesimales (en las que sesenta se escribe 10). . . . Hablamos de vida pastoril, de capangas, . . . y nada más se dijo—Dios me perdone—de funciones duodeciales. (516)

One evening, we spoke about the duodecimal number system, in which twelve is written 10. Ashe said that by coincidence he was just then transposing some duodecimal table or other to sexagesimal (in which sixty is written 10). . . . We spoke of the bucolic rural life, of capangas, . . . and nothing more was said—God forgive me—of duodecimals. (71)

The exclamatory insertion—"Dios me perdone" ("God forgive me")—interrupts the flow of the narrative and betrays the fact that the narrator, despite his objective tone, feels complicit in the story. Indeed, we soon realize that the narrator, who first traced the origins of the apocryphal article, and who single-handedly discovered Volume Eleven, was in fact active in making Volume Eleven a matter of scholarly debate, thereby introducing Tlön's fragmentary oblivion into the "timeless present' of scholarly discourse" (Brotherston and Hulme xvii). Though opting
to remain unimplicated in the story, the narrator was, therefore, also instrumental in bringing Tlön into the world.

At the same time, as the narrator remarks, the plan that led to Tlön's creation was "tan vasto que la contribución de cada escritor es infinitesimal" (518; “so vast that the contribution of each writer is infinitesimal” 72). This idea also describes the narrator's position in relation to Tlön. Ultimately, the fact that each person's contribution, including Herbert Ashe's, must be regarded as infinitesimal, can be read as a dystopic confirmation of the power of the margin. The margin, that is, has allowed a “dispersa dinastia de solitarios" (529; "scattered dynasty of recluses" 81) to change the face of the world. At the same time, Tlön's ideal world, which has no human context, also contains no reflection of universal human history. The narrator, who was instrumental in bringing Tlön into the world, is ultimately marginalized in favor of a totalizing fiction that does not recognize individual human identity.

Despite these breaks, however, the article does indeed seem to present a coherent façade. At a first reading, the tension between 'objective' and 'subjective', 'fiction' and 'reality' remains relatively clear. Even when we subsequently learn in the postscript that the article was published in the Antología de la literatura fantástica ("The Anthology of Fantastic Literature") and that the narrator's scholarly approach to his subject matter in fact belongs to the realm of popular culture, we can still say that the article, like the apocryphal Encyclopedia Britannica, appears to be a work of mimicry, a clever play with als ob. This fact allows the reader, like the narrator, to approach the article from a distance, to watch the interplay of 'fiction' and 'reality' from a

36 As previously noted, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” was originally published in Sur in May of 1940. It was then re-published in The Anthology of Fantastic Literature later that same year and was finally incorporated into the volume of Ficciones in 1944.
position on the threshold. The narrator's critical tone and the article's scholarly form further encourage the reader to approach the text from a distance.

When we reach the postscript, however, an important transformation takes place. The caesura between article and postscript would have the plot of the story jump seven years ahead. The purported passage of seven years ironically projects itself into the future, a ploy that implicates the reader in the story and, at the same time, encourages the reader to revisit the article and the narrator’s position at the end of the postscript 1) in light of the prediction that "el mundo será Tlôn" ("the world will be Tlôn"), and 2) in light of the fact that the world of Tlôn reflects the emergence of 'unrealities', such as Nazism, that threaten to "impoverish" human experience. The postscript, that is, encourages the reader to consider the article (as a game of als ob) within the framework of an historical id est, transforming Borges's story into a "cautionary tale" that "reveal[s] the drift of popular culture and the manipulation of popular sentiment toward totalizing and totalitarian ends" (Kadir, “Totalization” 159). In order to set the groundwork for this discussion, it would be helpful to take a closer look at the world that will be Tlôn, focusing in particular on the way in which language, text and 'reality' are defined in Tlôn's totalizing universe.

As the narrator remarks:

Las naciones de ese planeta [Tlôn] son—congé nitamente—idealistas. . . . El munde para ellos no es un concurso de objetos en el espacio; es una serie heterogénea de actos independientes. Es sucesivo, temporal, no espacial. No hay sustantivos en la conjetural Ursprache de Tlôn, de la que proceden los idiomas "actuales" y los dialectos: hay verbos impersonales, calificados por sufijos (o prefijos) monosilábicos de valor adverbial. . . .

Lo anterior se refiere a los idiomas del hemisferio austral. En los del hemisferio boreal . . . la célula primordial no es verbo, sino el adjetivo monosilábico. El sustantivo

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37 As Kadir also notes, the term "popular culture" denotes a breakdown in meaning, a "rhetorical catachresis," which etymologically pits the Latin verb populus, "'to lay waste', 'to devastate', 'to ravage'" against the concept of culture as a "lexis and praxis [that] redounds to cultivation and edification," 155.
se forma por acumulación de adjetivos. No se dice luna: se dice aéreo-claro sobre oscuro-redondo . . . Hay poemas famosos compuestos de una sola enorme palabra. Esta palabra integra un objeto poético creado por el autor. El hecho de que nadie crea en la realidad de los sustantivos hace, paradójicamente, que sea interminable su número. (519)

The nations of that planet [Tlön] are, congenitally, idealistic. . . . For the people of Tlön, the world is not an amalgam of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts—the world is successive, temporal, but not spatial. There are no nouns in the conjectural Ursprache of Tlön, from which its “present-day” languages and dialects derive: there are impersonal verbs, modified by monosyllabic suffixes (or prefixes) functioning as adverbs. . . .

That principle applies to the languages of the southern hemisphere. In the northern hemisphere . . . the primary unit is not the verb but the monosyllabic adjective. Nouns are formed by stringing together adjectives. One does not say “moon”; one says “aerial-bright above dark-round” . . . . There are famous poems composed of a single enormous word; the world is a “poetic object” created by the poet. The fact that no one believes in the reality expressed by these nouns means, paradoxically, that there is no limit to their number. (72-73)

In both primitive languages outlined here, there is no concept of an object that can exist independent of its expression in language. Indeed, as we see, the languages of Tlön do not correspond to objective 'reality' at all, but instead string together words in an encyclopedic, additive manner that focuses either upon the verb or the adjective. (This idea also calls to mind the empty oblivion reflected in Funes’s agglutinative, fragmentary memory, an idea that makes abstraction and, therefore, self-reflection impossible.) The only concept of an object, then, is the one that is created in language: the "objeto poético" (‘poetic object’) that can be conjured and dissolved in keeping with what the poetry requires. However, because "nadie crea en la realidad de los sustantivos" (‘no one believes in the reality expressed by these nouns’), als ob (‘as if’) and id est (‘it is’) function as one and the same thing. Language acts like the mirror that simulates fullness, but is empty. Because language no longer reflects an external, objective ‘reality’, furthermore, any discussion of origin and ending, or of an individual identity rooted in memory and partaking in a universal, human history becomes not obsolete, but speculative. Identity itself becomes a "poetic object."
As the narrator, therefore, continues:

En los hábitos literarios también es todopoderosa la idea de un sujeto único. Es raro que los libros estén firmados. No existe el concepto del plagio: se ha establecido que todas las obras son obra de un solo autor, que es intemporal y es anónimo. La crítica suele inventar autores: elige dos obras disímiles—el Tao Te King y Las mil y una noches, digamos—, las atribuye a un mismo escritor y luego determina con probidad la psicología de ese interesante hombre de lettres. . . . (523)

Within the sphere of literature, too, the idea of the single subject is all-powerful. Books are rarely signed, nor does the concept of plagiarism exist: It has been decided that all books are the work of a single author who is timeless and anonymous. Literary criticism often invents authors: It will take two dissimilar works—the Tao Te Ching and the 1001 Nights, for instance—attribute them to a single author, and then in all good conscience determine the psychology of that most interesting hombre de lettres. . . . (76-77)

Just as Herbert Ashe's infinitesimal contribution to Tlön's overall text demonstrated the dystopic ability of the margin to act as a source of (re)creative freedom, so, too, the idea that all books are the work of a single, anonymous author dystopically confirms that—as Borges remarks in "La postulación de la realidad" ("The Postulation of Reality")—"la pluralidad de los hombres y de los tiempos es accesoria" (255; "the plurality of men and of eras is incidental" 60). Furthermore, the Tlönian game of taking "dos obras disímiles" ("two dissimilar works") and "atribuye[las] a un mismo escritor" ("attribut[ing] them to a single author") seems to echo Borges's argument that the writer creates his own precursors. In this context, therefore, it could be argued that Borges's idea of a universal history, which transcends present time, limits and borders, introduces an identity into human history that becomes totalizing in its own right, eliding important differences between self and other in favor of a generalized notion of human experience.

At the same time, it must also be remembered that, for Borges, literature acts as a confirmation of a universal human history whose existence in times of crisis can be opposed to 'unrealities', such as Nazism, that seek to "impoverish" the worth of human experience. Literature, that is, acts as the mirror mentioned in "Historia de la eternidad" ("A History of
Eternity" that reflects "de lo que pasó por las almas" (432; "what passes through every soul" 136), creating a beneficial threshold, where the individual is brought into contact with a broader human 'reality'. If literature offers us an abstraction, then, it is an abstraction that also enables a critical moment of self-reflection in the face of a vanishing threshold.

This idea is antithetical to the world of Tlön. As we have already seen, Tlön’s poets and readers both participate in the romantic writer's tendency to view language as a raw material to be sculpted, rather than as a medium of communication. Under the influence of this "superstition," language becomes a mirror that merely simulates fullness. This absence of reflection, furthermore, entails the loss of memory, as well as of a universal human (or humanizing) history. As a result, the individual lacks the ability to act upon the world in a meaningful way and is thereby consigned to the margins of text as world. This marginalized position paradoxically renders the individual a witness to rather than a protagonist in the world that will be Tlön, a dystopic confirmation of the narrator’s original desire to be regarded as witness to, rather than as protagonist in the story that brought Tlön into the world.

However, Tlön's entrance into the world also results in the disappearance of the threshold as such. As we have already seen, conceptual boundaries between 'subjective' and 'objective', 'fiction' and 'reality' vanish in Tlön's ideal universe. Als ob ("as if") becomes a function of id est ("it is") and vice versa, that is to say, language loses its ability to represent an external 'reality'. To make the statement “it is” is simultaneously to play a game of “as if.” Because there is no concept of individual identity, furthermore, there is no consciousness of mortality. Whereas the individual could once say, as Borges writes in "Nueva refutación del tiempo" ("A New Refutation of Time"), "El tiempo es un río que me arrebata, pero yo soy el río" (115; "Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river" 234)—the individual has now lost the power to
stand outside of the metaphor. Instead, s/he exists on the edge of a vanishing margin, a victim of perpetual displacement, as one thing succeeds another—and . . . and . . . and . . . ad infinitum.

In the world that will be Tlön, there is no hiatus, no pause for abstraction. Language no longer forces a self-referential discourse. As a result, the individual, who forms a problematic chronotope in a world that no longer acknowledges the meeting of time and space, acts as a vanishing extension of, as well as an impotent witness to Tlön's totalizing 'unreality'. For, aside from the “poetic objects” that express a 'reality' in which no one believes, the only concept of nouns in the world of Tlön are hrönir: “hijos casuales de la distracción y el olvido” (524; “the coincidental offspring of distraction and forgetfulness” 77).

As the narrator continues:

La metódica elaboración de hrönir (dice el Onceno Tomo) ha prestado servicios prodigiosos a los arqueólogos. Ha permitido interrogar y hasta modificar el pasado, que ahora no es menos plástico y menos dócil que el porvenir. . . . Más extraño y más puro que todo hrön es a veces el ur: la cosa producida por sugestión, el objeto educido por la esperanza. (524-25)

The systematic production of hrönir (says Volume Eleven) has been of invaluable aid to archaeologists, making it possible not only to interrogate but even to modify the past, which is now no less plastic, no less malleable than the future. . . . Sometimes stranger and purer than any hrön is the ur—the thing produced by suggestion, the object brought forth by hope. (77-78)

Objective ‘reality’, as well as past, present and future, are malleable, so that ‘reality’ itself appears to be the marriage of chance and necessity, an idea that is apt to vanish when the observer's attention is distracted or the spectator forgets to remember:

Las cosas se duplican en Tlön; propenden asimismo a borrarse y a perder los detalles cuando los olvida la gente. Es clásico el ejemplo de un umbral que perduró mientras lo visitaba un mendigo y que se perdió de vista a su muerte. (525)

Things duplicate themselves on Tlön; they also tend to grow vague or “sketchy,” and to lose detail when they begin to be forgotten. The classic example is the doorway that continued to exist so long as a certain beggar frequented it, but which was lost to sight when he died. (78)
As a result, the individual cannot act or reflect upon the world in a meaningful way; instead, s/he is consigned, like the protagonist in Kafka’s parable, "Vor dem Gesetz" ("Before the Law"), to the threshold of a world that is text. Once again, this positioning paradoxically renders the individual a passive eyewitness, rather than an active protagonist in the world that will be Tlön, a dystopic confirmation of the narrator’s original desire to be regarded as witness rather than protagonist. Though, his presence as witness is what makes the doorway possible, as in Kafka’s gnomic text that Borges appropriates here as liminal precursor to his own textual invention.

If the reader opts to take a threshold position to the events described in the article and continued in the postscript, then, it is arguable that the reader, too, becomes complicit in bringing Tlön into the world. By consigning “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” exclusively to the realm of fiction, without pausing to reflect upon the problematic meeting of id est (“it is”) and Als ob (“as if”), which speaks to language’s ability to represent and recreate a given ‘reality’, we miss out on a dialogue that contextualizes the text within the realm of human experience. As a result, the story loses its ability to reflect upon the reader’s historical context and, therefore, upon ‘unrealities’ such as Nazism. On the other hand, if we read the text as a product of human experience—capable, despite its fictional nature, of establishing a dialogue with a broader human ‘reality’—then the moments of caesura in the text become meaningful. Even in the absence of the narrator’s voice, caesura is able to "speak."

One important moment of caesura in the text occurs at the end of the postscript, when the narrator withdraws into a position of inner exile. As “J. L. Borges” proclaims: "El mundo será Tlön. Yo no hago caso . . . " (529; “The world will be Tlön. That makes very little difference to me . . . ” 81). At this point, the narrator, caught at a crossroads where history and oblivion, mortality and immortality, remembrance and forgetfulness meet, arguably occupies a position
similar to that of Kafka's protagonist who waits before the doorway. Like Kafka’s gate, it is this
crossroads that is in danger of being "lost to sight" when the narrator (or the reader) looks away.
Before discussing the narrator’s position of inner exile at the end of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis
Tertius,” it would be helpful to look briefly at Kafka’s parable, "Vor dem Gesetz" (“Before the
Law”), and consider Borges’s appropriation of the same.

If we turn to Kafka’s parable, which appears in the novel, Der Prozess (The Trial), we
find that the protagonist, known only as "ein Mann vom Lande" (77; “a man from the country”
3), waits on the threshold of a doorway that has been created specifically for him. His presence
on the threshold holds the doorway in being. Throughout his life, furthermore, the “man from
the country” attempts to enter the doorway by various means. He even tries, for example, to
bribe the doorkeeper, who accepts everything the man offers. At the same time, the doorkeeper
tells him: "'Ich nehme es nur an, damit du nicht glaubst, etwas versäumt zu haben'" (“I am only
taking it to keep you from thinking that you have omitted anything”). Indeed, the protagonist’s
ability to enter the doorway seems to belong to the world of Als ob (“as if”). For when the man
asks whether or not he will be permitted to enter the doorway at all, the doorkeeper responds:
"'Es ist möglich' . . . 'Jetzt aber nicht”“ ("It is possible . . . , but not at the moment”). Enticed by
the possibility of entrance—an entrance, however, that is perpetually postponed—the man
spends his life in waiting. It is an idea not dissimilar to chasing the vanishing horizon. The man
exists on the threshold of a doorway that was created for him, but that he cannot enter. In the
end, he learns that upon his death the door will be shut. To complicate matters, we find that this
doorway is just one of many. The doorkeeper, too, is just one of many, "einer mächtiger als der
andere" (77; “each more powerful than the last” 3). Therefore, the succession of doorways and
doorkeepers is conceptually endless, a totalizing concept called into being by a single individual.
As a result, the protagonist’s humanity contrasts starkly with a plot that, like the Library of Babel or Tlön, isolates and encloses him. The “man from the country” exists on a threshold where history and oblivion, mortality and immortality, remembrance and forgetfulness meet.

If we return to "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and consider the story in light of Kafka’s parable, we are led to ask: What type of doorway does the first-person narrator, a beggar on the threshold, hold in being? If we consider the narrator’s position in light of the prediction that “el mundo será Tlön" ("the world will be Tlön"), we can postulate that the doorway is the inviolable past. In the context of a world that will be Tlön, individual memory for a universal human history is fading. Trying to recapture that history from a position of displacement is an exercise in futility. Having lost his place in the narrative “home” constituted by a (vanishing) human history, the narrator nonetheless retains the memory of that homeland. It is a memory, moreover, that includes the story of Tlön, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius. At the same time, it is a past seen from the far side of the (inner) exilic caesura, a past that appears to the narrator sub species aeternitatis, under the aspect of eternity. For as Borges once again remarks in "Historia de la eternidad" ("A History of Eternity"), the exile who views the past with nostalgia sees his "posibilidades felices" (433 "expectations of happiness"; 136) sub species aeternitatis, under the aspect of eternity. For:

En la passion, el recuerdo se inclina a lo intemporal. Congregamos las dichas de un pasado en una sola imagen; los ponientes diversos rojos que miro cada tarde, serán en el recuerdo un solo poniente. Con la prevision pasa igual: las más incompatibles esperanzas pueden convivir sin estorbo. Dicho sea con otras palabras: el estilo del deseo es la eternidad. (433)

In passion, memory inclines toward the intemporal. We gather up the delights of a given past in a single image; the diversely red sunsets I watch every evening will in memory be a single sunset. The same is true of foresight: nothing prevents the most incompatible hopes from peacefully coexisting. To put it differently: eternity is the style of desire. (136)
Seen from the far side of the (inner) exilic caesura, the inviolable past becomes a “projection of eternity,” a totalizing concept that, paradoxically, can “reach only to the end of time and not beyond” (Kadir, Memos 98). In this reading, furthermore, the anticipatory caesura between the article and the postscript reflects the critical threshold upon which the narrator stands. The blank page, a catastrophic caesura, acts as a repository for a vanishing past. Because this past is part of a world that exists beyond retrieval, however, the caesura also becomes an extension of exilic space, a place into which the narrator, a beggar on the threshold, will himself vanish at the end of the tale.

It is by making the vanishing point visible that the story encourages us to examine the narrator’s relationship to a vanishing human history. The recognition of the critical nature of this crossroads, furthermore, leads us to ask: What is the “style” of the narrator’s desire? Does he desire to attempt to reconnect to a universal human history, despite the futile nature of this idea? Or, in the absence of an overarching master narrative, does he desire to recommence anew within a space of open possibility? What ‘reality’ does the narrator struggle to hold in being through the activity of translation? Is it, for example, a hrôn, the result of distraction (the act of translation) and forgetfulness (the act of turning his back on the world of Tlön)? Or, instead, is the projected translation a nostalgic return to origin, more in keeping with the concept of the ur, a ‘reality’ "produced por sugestión" ("produced by suggestion") and "educido por la esperanza" (525; "brought forth by hope" 78). (524-25)?

In this context, for example, we might postulate that the vanishing past, seen from the far side of the (inner) exilic caesura, appears to be a place where the "most incompatible hopes" (two different worlds: the pre-Tlönian and the Tlönian), two different cultures (seventh-century English and early twentieth-century Argentine), and two different styles (that of Browne and
Quevedo) can “peacefully coexist.” At the same time, as Mercedes Blanco correctly notes: “La traducción quévediana de Browne proyectada por el narrador de ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ opone tácitamente a la fantástica arqueología de Tlön la idolatría del mundo clásico, es decir de un pasado immune a los cambios . . .” (45; “The Quevedian translation of Browne projected by the narrator of ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' tacitly counter-poses to the fantastic archeology of Tlön an idolatry of the classical world, a world that is immune to change”).

The past to which the narrator turns is the inviolable past, a past immune to change. In the absence of an overarching historical narrative—of a narrative that is reflective of a universal human history—the past becomes a space divorced from ‘everyday’ lived experience. At the same time, even the inviolable past is antithetical to Tlön's eternally present universe, which regards the past as a malleable material subject to change. Therefore, instead of a hrōn, an ideal object brought forth from distraction and forgetfulness, perhaps the translation does indeed resemble the ur, a ‘reality’ brought forth by suggestion and sustained by hope—a doorway sustained, that is, by the narrator's will to remembrance.

It is, furthermore, worth remarking in this context that, in retreating to the hotel at Adrogué, the narrator is actually returning to a place of origin; to the place, that is, where he first stumbled across Volume Eleven. As such, the narrator occupies a unique position. He balances, once again, on the threshold between memory and oblivion. Even if "J. L. Borges," the self-avowed spectator, has, like every other individual, become dystopically spectral, we can still posit that the act of translation creates a critical chronotope, preserving the crossroads between memory and forgetting, history and oblivion. In this case, the narrator’s final confession appears to be similar to the footnote that testifies to the first-person narrator's humanity in "La biblioteca de Babel" (“The Library of Babel”):
Antes, por cada tres hexágonos había un hombre. El suicidio y las enfermedades pulmonares han destruido esa proporción. Memoria de indecible melancholía: a veces he viajado muchas noches por corredores y escaleras pulidas sin hallar un solo bibliotecario. (561)

In earlier times, there was one man for every three hexagons. Suicide and diseases of the lung have played havoc with that proportion. An unspeakably melancholy memory: I have sometimes traveled for nights on end, down corridors and polished staircases, without coming across a single librarian. (114)

At the same time, the narrator is surrounded by a totalizing structure that, like the Library of Babel, isolates and encloses him. If we posit, therefore, that the narrator—in the absence of an overarching narrative—attempts to reconnect to human history through the act of translation, we must also recognize that the shores of history and the vanishing horizon have become one and the same thing. History itself is receding. Pursuing a reconnection to history is, therefore, like pursuing a horizon that vanishes as you move toward it. *Als ob* ("it is") has become synonymous with *id est* “it is.” The activity of translation recursively gives meaning to a seemingly futile journey that will ultimately end with the narrator, “J. L. Borges,” vanishing from the world and into the text. At the same time, mediating between one text and the other preserves the threshold and postpones ending, allowing the narrator a space from which to pursue reconnection and/or approach a recommencement.

Perhaps a partial answer to these questions could be found in the text Borges has chosen to translate. For, as mentioned in the first section, Sir Thomas Browne’s *Urn Buriall* is a work that has death at its heart. In recording the various methods of societies for interring the dead, the work reflects upon the fallacies we pursue in order to safeguard our tenuous eternities.  

(As Borges once again remarks in "La supersticiosa ética del lector" [“The Superstitious Ethics of the

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38 For a more thorough discussion of Borges’s engagement with Browne’s text, see Kristal, 89-96.
“The Epistle to the Reader”:

But these are sad and sepulchral Pitchers, which have no joyful voices; silently expressing old mortality, the ruins of forgotten times, and can only speak with life, how long in this corruptible frame, some parts may be uncorrupted; yet able to out-last bones long unborn, and noblest pyle among us.

By choosing a text that in fact meditates upon death, the narrator, displaced out of history, is arguably attempting to reconnect to a universal human history by actively translating a text that has death, the common denominator of human experience, at its heart. In this respect, perhaps the narrator’s act of translation is indeed akin to the postscript Borges appends to "Nueva refutación del tiempo" ("A New Refutation of Time")—an “And yet" that not only acknowledges that "El tiempo es la sustancia de que estoy hecho" (115; “Time is the substance I am made of” 234), but also allows this idea to become a means of self-reflection.

On the other hand, perhaps the act of translation is simply designed to postpone a confrontation with the world that will be Tlön. As Mercedes Blanco notes, the narrator arguably:

... embota su angustia con la droga de los “quietos días” de Adrogué, mientras espera lo inevitable, y ello mediante la empresa más fútil... que pueda concebirse; traducir, para nadie, para nunca, de un idioma condenado a breve plazo a otro idioma condenado. (24)

... dulls his anxiety with the drug of the “quiet days” in Adrogué, while he awaits the inevitable—and this while engaging in the most futile project imaginable: a translation that is not meant for any reader, that serves no purpose, from one condemned language into another.

In this case, the translation, which is not meant for any reader—and which, therefore, is not in essence dialogical—seems to be a type of Tlönian game. Not only does the narrator, as translator, distance himself from a world of forgetting, but he also indulges in a form of play that has forgetting at its heart. Mediating between “one condemned language” and another allows the translator—who works within the inner exilic void—to recreate a world, complete with the
immutable past, over which he has total control. Because the narrator attempts to translate Browne’s text in the “style of Quevedo,” furthermore, his translation seems to echo the virtuoso play of the baroque poet of the Spanish Siglo de Oro. As such, the text can arguably be considered a Tlönian form of play, a game that takes place in the space between memory and forgetting.

Ultimately, then, it seems that the need to reconnect to an overarching historical narrative that has death at its heart and the desire to recommence in a world over which he has total control both co-exist in the narrator’s project of translation. At the same time, they potentially come into conflict in the eye of the reader, who is able to recognize the caesuras in the story as points of tension where the totalizing world of Tlön meets the "iron-clad" reality of narrator and reader. If we say, therefore, that the chronotope the narrator inhabits is critical, we can also say that the chronotope the reader inhabits, which brings the story into contact with a broader human ‘reality’, is crucial. For it is at this point that the narrator’s futile position is framed by the reader’s time-conscious, history-conscious gaze. In reading the text as a product of human experience, the caesuras— which ultimately become meaningless in the narrator’s context (after all, "el mundo será Tlön" [“the world will be Tlön”])—become speaking, subversive spaces that testify to a ‘reality’ beyond the book. Indeed, as Ivan Almeida points out:

> Al llegar a esa frase, el desconcertado lector se siente conducido a recomenzar la lectura. Su atención se focaliza esta vez, muy naturalmente, no ya en las aventuras narradas sino en la performatividad del acto narrativo. (199)

Upon arriving at this phrase, the disconcerted reader feels himself led to rebegin the reading. This time his attention is focused, quite naturally, not only on the adventures that have been narrated, but also on the performance of the narrative act.
In focusing upon the performance of the narrative act, the (re)reader is also led to reflect upon the caesuras that occur in the text, executing, in the going, the vanishing author’s “bequest” (Kadir, *The Other Writing* 45).

On the other hand, if the text is read as a ‘fiction’ that is divorced from the reader’s ‘reality’, then the breaks in the text emerge as empty, unspeaking spaces simply designed to separate one idea from another. Faced with a narrator who vanishes into the text, then, it is left to the reader to decide whether the caesuras in the text will emerge as “speaking” or “empty”; whether they will become mirrors that echo human experience, or whether they are simply the confirmation of a simulated, fantastical fullness. The vacillating “style” of the narrator's desire, therefore, encourages the reader to question his or her own relationship to universal human history in the face of a world that will be Tlön.
CONCLUSION

No Longer and Not Yet: A Reader's Conundrum

At some turning-points of history, however, at some heights of crisis, a fate similar to that of silkworms and butterflies may befall a generation of men. For the decline of the old, the birth of the new, is not necessarily an affair of continuity; between the generations . . . the chain is broken and an "empty space," a kind of historical no man's land, comes to the surface which can be described only in terms of "no longer and not yet.

- Hannah Arendt, 121

In the essay "No Longer and Not Yet," Hannah Arendt describes "the abyss of empty space and empty time" that separates those who lived through the catastrophe of World War I from the generation that preceded the catastrophe. It is, Arendt remarks, a "historical no man's land," a sense of being suspended in a void of "no longer and not yet."

The first-person narrators in Transit, Pale Fire and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" are caught in a similar void. Having experienced both physical and narrative displacement, they no longer have a sense of historical continuity. At the same time, they have not yet arrived at a new alternative for history-making and identity construction. Instead, they face the blank page as a catastrophic caesura and an extension of exilic space.

I have argued that, in negotiating the blank page (actual or as caesura) in their tales, the narrators vacillate between a desire for reconnection and a need for recommencement. As such, they stand at a crossroads similar to that which confronts Odysseus on Calypso's island. It is a choice between endlness and ending, forgetfulness and remembrance, oblivion and history. It is also the contrapuntal sense of absence in presence and presence in absence, a suspension between a post-exilic and a pre-exilic world. My exploration of these texts has shown, however, that these works problematize the way in which history is written and identity constructed from a position of displacement. In attempting to frame the blank page in their tales, the narrators
exhibit the two faces of exilic narrative desire. As we have seen, either of narrative choices—to reconnect to the shores of human history or to recommence in a space where "stories happen"—is problematic.

Although the inclusion of death in the tale arguably reconnected each narrator to a common human history, reconnection itself turned out to be a tenuous proposition. In *Transit*, for example, the attempt to reconnect to the shores of human history proved to be another "island kingdom" to which the nameless narrator—clinging to an overarching narrative of Odyssean exceptionalism—sought to flee. In *Pale Fire*, the attempt to reconnect ended with Charles Kinbote accepting a(n) (il)legitimate, spectral type of "dwelling" for the sake of his narrative appropriation. Finally, in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," reconnection involved the narrator's nostalgic return to origin, a place from which to vanish into a past taken *sub species aeternitatis*.

Recommencement, on the other hand, required the first-person narrators to utilize strategies of recursion and postponement: vacillating, for instance, between Seidler and Weidel (*Transit*); dismembering and re-membering "Pale Fire" in a series of footnotes designed, in part, to prevent the poem's reader from becoming the poem's rereader (*Pale Fire*); or engaging in a futile work of translation destined for no eyes but the narrator's own ("Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"). In each case, recommencement anew, paired with the aesthetic of a vanishing horizon, was possible only as long as the text would bear it.

Whether attempting to reconnect or to recommence, then, the narrator is ultimately brought face-to-face with the blank page as a catastrophic caesura and extension of exilic space. Whether framed as a "figure of rupture" or a figure of (re)connection, as an absent presence or a present absence, the blank page in the midst of the tale proves to be a disruptive space. As center, it decenters. As caesura, it interrupts the narrative flow, thrusting the first-person narrator
back into contact with an everyday exilic 'reality', even while sundering him from the same. At the same time, the blank page provides the narrator with a choice: to travel or to dwell.

According to Edward Said, this choice, which involves a contrapuntal suspension between presence and absence, gives the displaced individual an insight into human experience to which others—"principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home" ("Reflections" 185)—do not have access:

> Regard experiences as if they were about to disappear. What is it that anchors them to reality? What would you save of them? What would you give up? Only someone who has achieved independence and detachment, someone whose homeland is "sweet" but whose circumstances make it impossible to recapture that sweetness, can answer these questions. (Such a person would also find it impossible to derive satisfaction from substitutes furnished by illusion or dogma.) (185-861).

Caught on the cusp of a vanishing horizon, with the shores of history yet in sight, the first-person narrators in *Transit*, *Pale Fire* and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" act as critical witnesses to the process of vanishing. They are able to speak "concretely" (Rushdie 12) of what anchors experience to (or frees experience from) 'reality'. In each case, however, they also seem willing to accept simulacra—whether it be a simulacrum of dwelling, of recommencement, or an amalgamation of the two—which calls Said's parenthetical declaration, and along with it the ideal of exilic "inoculation," into question.

For Walter Benjamin, writing history from this perspective—from the perspective of a vanishing 'reality'—is an authenticating work of salvage, an idea that the philosopher takes up in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History":

> Das wahre Bild der Vergangenheit *huscht* vorbei. Nur als Bild, das auf Nimmerwiedersehen im Augenblick seiner Erkennbarkeit eben aufblitzt, ist die Vergangenheit festzuhalten. . . . Denn es ist ein unwiederbringliches Bild der Vergangenheit, das mit jeder Gegenwart zu verschwinden droht, die sich nicht als in ihm gemeint erkannte. (695)

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which
flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. . . . For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. (255)

The void of which Benjamin speaks is akin to the "historical no man's land," the charged blank space between "no longer" and "not yet," that threatens to swallow the history of the blank page—and with it the immanence of ending—in *Transit, Pale Fire* and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." The displaced individual, who witnesses the immanence of ending, as well as the process of vanishing, stands at the aforementioned critical crossroads, caught between history and oblivion. As Hannah Arendt has also remarked, however, the crossroads Benjamin evokes is a tragic one. Although engaged in a project of historical salvage, Benjamin himself was like the shipwrecked sailor who—stuck at sea, yet within sight of shore—had "not learned to swim either with or against the tide" ("Introduction" 22).

The presence of the blank page in the tale, which presents the first-person narrator with the choice—to stay or to go—also ensures that they, like Benjamin, can swim neither with nor against the tide. Although they "concretely" bear witness to the experience of caesura, an idea that endows them with a form of (exilic) narrative authority, the presence of caesura in their tales also transforms them into unreliable narrators. Like Odysseus, they are brought to speak by their exilic context. They act as "sole witness" (Hartog 29) to everything they have done and seen. As a result, the histories they re-member and dismember in the going must be viewed with the double, often duplicitous face of exilic narrative desire in mind.

In reading these texts, therefore, we are placed in a curious position. The void of "no longer and not yet," the caesura from which each narrator speaks, presents the reader with a conundrum. The duplicitous nature of each first-person narrator's text warns us to keep a critical distance, even as it attempts to draw us in. We are, for example, actively encouraged to vacillate
with the narrator between reconnection and recommencement. At the same time, we are
couraged to remain passively on the threshold of text and world, witnessing, and thereby
enabling, the narrator's project of self-positioning.

Indeed, as I have attempted to show, each first-person narrator has actively scripted the
reader into his text. In *Transit*, the reader faces the horizon, while the narrator faces the hearth;
in *Pale Fire*, the opposite is true; in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the reader is positioned to
bring the text back into tension with an extratextual 'reality', an idea that enables the narrator's
final vanishing act. In each case, the reader allows the fleeting moment of reconnection to take
place—endowing the narrative with a form of authenticity, as the text is brought back into
contact with an extra-textual human 'reality'—even while enabling the exilic narrator's play. The
reader, namely, allows the first-person narrator to "dwell in travel" and "travel in dwelling"
through the means of a sometimes recursive, end-directed narration. (At the same time, each
narrator eventually comes into direct contact with the blank page, at which point both
reconnection and recommencement, storytelling and storymaking are called into question.)

In each text, furthermore, the attempt to recreate a narrative home—either through
reconnection or recommencement—ends in failure. *Transit's* narrator is left facing a shadow-
touched wall; Charles Kinbote vanishes into the uncertain horizon of "I may . . . I may . . . I
may"; "J. L. Borges" retreats into a quietist position of inner exile. Even if *Transit, Pale Fire*
and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" problematize the ideal of historical continuity—of telling the
tale for the sake of reconnection—however, they also underscore the fact that living in and
through writing is a totalizing process in its own right. Attempting to "dwell" in the text involves
strategies of recursion and postponement. Ultimately, the text proves to be uninhabitable. If it is
part of an "exilic morality" not to be at home in one's home; to accept that we are all "strangers
to ourselves”; or that the only authentic history is one that can be grasped from a standpoint of vanishing, then, we, as readers, are indeed presented with a conundrum, a problematic called into being by the double vision of the (unreliable) exilic narrators in works such as *Transit, Pale Fire* and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius."

In observing each narrator's on-going project of self-positioning; the way in which they vacillate between witness and protagonist in the tales they spin; even while negotiating the enabling, dystopic threshold between history and oblivion, we are called upon to ask questions such as the following: How much narrative authority are we willing to give the first-person narrators, who speak from a position of displacement? Do we abandon ourselves wholly to their vision and allow exilic space to become an Ithakan shore? Or do we maintain an absolute critical distance and refuse to recognize that we, too, are implicated in a "world that will be Tlön"? What is the price of remaining "faithful" to a narrative that attempts to transform the "figure of rupture" back into a figure of (re)connection? How far do we take the notion that beauty plus pity is an essential definition of art? What does it mean to allow the blank page to become an empty space, where stories happen *ad infinitum*?

It is, perhaps, by encouraging the reader to ask these questions that works such as *Transit, Pale Fire* and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" truly bear witness to the character of the blank page and caesura as a catastrophic extension of "no longer and not yet." It is, perhaps, only at this point that the tragic caesuras in human experience can truly be opened up to the reader as a matter of present, pressing concern.
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