LYRICAL STRATEGIES: THE POETICS OF THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

*Lyrical Strategies: The Poetics of the Twentieth-Century American Novel* takes a comparative approach to genre by examining twentieth-century American novels in relation to the lyric, rather than the narrative, tradition. Narrative theorists have long noted that modern and contemporary novels paradoxically abandon the defining characteristics of narrative—plot, sequence, external action—for other rhetorical strategies. I argue for a strain of the twentieth-century American novel that is better suited to the reading practices of lyric poetry, in which we read not for story but for structural repetition, rhythm, figurative meaning, dramatic personae, and apostrophe. In the spirit of demonstrating what I take to be a pervasive phenomenon within twentieth-century fiction, each of my chapters traces a single lyrical trope through works by four different novelists ranging from modernist (Gertrude Stein, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Jean Toomer) to postmodernist (Vladimir Nabokov, Don DeLillo, Chuck Palahniuk, Kathy Acker) as well as those who do not fall neatly into either category (Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, Louise Erdrich, Russell Banks, Marilynne Robinson). By adopting a more flexible approach to literary forms that reverses our conventional reading practices, which tell us to expect sequential action from a novel and apostrophic states of mind from a lyric, this project produces fresh readings of narrative texts by shifting our attention, paradoxically, to their non-narrative components.
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This study rests on the counter-intuitive assumption that novels should not necessarily be read as novels. In fact, it asks that we abandon our common-sense reading practices by re-examining canonical works of twentieth-century American fiction through the lens of lyric poetry. Why should we adopt this approach, given that lyric and narrative have often been defined in contradistinction to one another? Why take this approach, now that lyric poetry has lost so much of its cultural and institutional power, whereas the novel remains so pervasive it has become a synecdoche for literature in general?

Such an undertaking, I argue, enables us to better navigate a type of novel that looks quite different from the novel in its earlier iterations. As a number of critics have noted, modern and contemporary novels are remarkably non-narrative in both form and content, if we understand fiction as requiring a dynamic plot that is propelled by sequential (if not necessarily chronological) action. Conspicuously lacking plot, external action, and logical temporal succession, the twentieth-century American novels we have canonized in our university curricula, those novels that grace the Modern Library’s “Top 100” list, instead favor linguistic, epistemological, and ontological instabilities often generated by points of view that are limited, fractured, or unreliable, eliciting greater participation on behalf of the reader in the construction

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1 Clifford Siskin refers to this general attitude as “novelism.”
2 See Wayne Booth, especially pp. 4-6, and Scholes and Kellogg, pp. 263. Robert Caserio locates a strain of modern fiction that rejects plot and story altogether; in rejecting plot, he argues, authors such as Stein, Lawrence, Woolf, and Joyce reject action and meaning in favor of “quietism, purposelessness, inhibition or suspension of will, passive or static states of mind and feeling, and speculation free of connection with deeds” (xiv). Peter Brooks also detects a rebellion against plot in the 20th century novel “engendered perhaps by an overelaboration of and overdependence on plots in the nineteenth century” (7). “Whereas plot continues in our time to be a dominant element in popular fictions of many sorts and to proceed on principles little changed from the nineteenth century,” he continues, “in those works that claim to challenge their readers, plot is often something of an embarrassment” (314).
3 In fact, the juxtaposition between the selections of the board and those of the readers reveals a dramatic difference in aesthetic taste. Readers generally favored fantasy and science fiction novels that rely quite heavily on plot in the traditional sense. Ayn Rand and Elron Hubbard dominate the readers’ top ten list, each appearing three times; James Joyce dominates the board’s, appearing twice. See <www.themodernlibrary.com/top-100/100-best-novels>
of textual meaning. This non-narrative tendency seems strangely paradoxical, even out of place, in a genre that relies on certain conventions for its coherence as narrative fiction, though it is right at home in the realm of the lyric, which is traditionally rooted in the aesthetic, synchronic, and subjective experience of a speaker.

This project locates a strain of twentieth-century American fiction that is deeply indebted to the rhetorical strategies of lyric poetry. Consequently, readers must approach these texts with a different set of reading practices from those that are typically applied to narrative fiction. A number of the writers treated here are lyric poets as well as novelists, though they are much better known for their narrative fiction: Gertrude Stein, John Dos Passos, Vladimir Nabokov, Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich, and Russell Banks, not to mention Faulkner and Hemingway, both of whom experimented (however unsuccessfully) with poetry in the early part of their careers. Nearly all of the authors I address have been labeled “poetic” or “lyrical” in one book review or another. This project provides one account of what, precisely, such labels might mean. Because broad, sweeping assessments of lyric run the risk of “narrativizing” poetry, however, this study will examine lyrical techniques at multiple levels and scales ranging from the word to the line to the work as a whole.

*Lyrical Strategies* is an intervention within narrative theory, which has indeed neglected poetry—even narrative poetry—in favor of prose fiction. It also, however, represents a larger intervention into the field of literary studies in seeking to return our attention to the genre of the lyric and its attendant reading practices. The study of lyric poetry is valuable not only for its own sake but also, as I will argue, for a more complete understanding of the twentieth-century American novel.

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4 For a recent estimation of this problem, see McHale 11-12.
Chapter one situates my project within classical literary criticism’s tripartite separation of literature into lyric, narrative, and dramatic forms, a division that is generally upheld and reinforced by twentieth-century genre critics. Despite its utility on a heuristic level, this model has prevented scholars from examining the fruitful kinships and overlaps across literary genres; it has also effectively placed genres in competition with one another for various forms of cultural and institutional power. Twentieth-century American writers, however, have been interested in transgressing the very generic boundaries scholars were policing, experimenting with elements of both lyric and narrative forms within their writing.

Because broad, sweeping assessments of lyric run the risk of “narrativizing” poetry by treating verse as if it were prose, this study examines lyrical strategies at multiple levels and scales ranging from the word to the line to the work as a whole. Chapters two and three focus, therefore, on local units of meaning—phrases and refrains, syntax and lineation—and their relationship to the larger works they constitute. Chapter two explores the lyrical role of repetition within narrative texts by Gertrude Stein, Jean Toomer, John Dos Passos, and Kathy Acker. The repetition of sound patterns, words, and phrases for dramatic, mnemonic, or aural effect is commonplace within lyric poetry, which began as an auditory literary form, yet repetition is also a favorite device of experimental novelists who repeat words, phrases, and, in some cases, entire paragraphs in ways that disrupt the sequential progressions we tend to expect from narrative fiction. As a result, we must approach these narrative texts as something like lyric poems, which foreground what Peter Brooks calls a “simultaneity of meaning” over a narrative-oriented model that privileges a linear progression from beginnings toward endings (20). Chapter three examines the use of polysyndeton, the deliberately repetitive use of coordinating conjunctions for dramatic rhetorical effect, within novels by Hemingway, Faulkner, DeLillo, and Cormac McCarthy. In the
formally traditional poetry of earlier periods, polysyndetic coordinations are closely aligned with both meter and lineation, producing a steady, if flexible, rhythm; the inherently democratic structure of these coordinating conjunctions, which grants equal significance to each item in the construction, also runs counter to Gerald Prince’s observation that narrative requires a “hierarchical” arrangement of events in time (Narratology 151-2).

Subsequent chapters discuss lyrical principles that govern novels on broader structural levels. Chapter four examines the function of protracted metaphors within novels by Henry Miller, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Russell Banks. In his famous essay on the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, Eliot defines the conceit as a combination of distance and extension: that is, the distance between the objects of comparison, and the compositional space devoted to the development and elaboration of the comparison. While narrative fiction typically advances plot through literal, rather than metaphorical, action, this chapter examines novels that make use of a single, extended metaphor in a way that deliberately subordinates the realm of the literal to the realm of figuration. Chapter five centers on novels by Henry James, Vladimir Nabokov, Bret Easton Ellis, and Chuck Palahniuk that feature highly dramatized narrators. Twentieth-century fiction is known for its use of the unreliable narrator, but this trope has an important literary predecessor in the Victorian dramatic monologue, in which ontology collapses into subjectivity—that is, events that appear to occur at the story level are reduced to a narrator’s complex psychological state, often signaled by a “twist” in which the truthfulness of the narrative is suddenly, and quite totally, thrown into question. Because our inability to trust these narrators undermines plot in a radical way—has American Psycho’s Patrick Bateman, for example, committed any of the murders or other crimes he purports to have
carried out?—the narrative “progression” we experience in these novels resides not in plot but in our changing attitudes toward their slippery narrators.

Chapter six looks at the other end of this equation—the narratee—by treating the apostrophic address in novels by Philip Roth, Louise Erdrich, Gloria Naylor, and Marilynne Robinson. According to Jonathan Culler, the apostrophe is the very fulcrum that separates lyric poetry from narrative prose, since it invokes an I/you drama that “works against narrative and its accompaniments: sequentiality, causality, time, teleological meaning” (In Pursuit 148-9). A number of novelists, however, have made use of the apostrophe in order to frame intimate, even embarrassing narratives, as is the case of Portnoy’s Complaint (a patient addressing his therapist). This chapter explores forms of apostrophic address in narrative fiction in which a first-person, character-bound narrator addresses a character-bound narratee who is not the reader. As a result, the reader is cast into the alienating position of an eavesdropper who overhears a private narrative that is not intended, at the intradiegetic level, for her.

Inevitably, these categories overlap. The treatment of repetition at the level of the word or phrase in chapter one bleeds into the treatment of repetition at the level of syntax in chapter two; novels that invoke the narrative apostrophe tend also to have dramatized (if not necessarily “unreliable”) narrators; and some authors—James, Stein, Hemingway, Nabokov, Morrison, DeLillo—exhibit writing styles that might easily fall into more than one category. I have tried, however, to treat a broad range of modern and contemporary writers in order to demonstrate the prevalence of lyric techniques within twentieth-century American fiction. In an attempt to address what I diagnose in chapter one as a disjunction between critics, who tend to separate genres, and writers, who tend to bridge them, I have also tried, wherever possible, to rely on
theorists who are also poets and fiction writers—Pound, Eliot, Stein, Faulkner, Joan Retallack, Timothy Steele, Robert Pinsky, John Hollander, Lyn Hejinian.

This project not only points to the permeability of generic borders but, in so doing, offers fresh readings of canonical works of American fiction made possible by a more flexible approach to literary forms. Comparative studies of genre are rare, since our institutional partitioning of literature into genres produces specialists who focus on one area only: as Brian McHale puts it, “some scholars specialize in narrative; others specialize in poetry; few specialize in both” (12). Critics throughout the twentieth century have reinforced these divisions in their scholarship and course titles, but writers were very interested in breaking down the barriers that literary criticism since Plato has erected between literary forms. Just as twentieth-century poets were looking to re-invent lyric for a new era, so fiction writers were changing the face of narrative by experimenting with rhetorical strategies that erstwhile belonged to the realm of the lyric. By reversing our conventional reading practices, which tell us to expect sequential action from a novel and apostrophic states of mind from a lyric, this project produces new readings of narrative texts by shifting our attention, paradoxically, to their non-narrative components.
Chapter One
Introduction: Genres in Contest

“We are living in the age of the Narrative Turn,” writes James Phelan in the Fortieth Anniversary Edition of Kellogg and Scholes’ *The Nature of Narrative*, “an era when narrative is widely celebrated and studied for its ubiquity and importance. Doctors, lawyers, psychologists, businessmen and women, politicians, and political pundits of all stripes are just a few of the groups who now regard narrative as the Queen of Discourse and an essential component of their work” (285). Narrative is thriving and its significance uncontested, Phelan claims; it has even broadened its scope to include a range of non-literary discourses. As an example, he offers the 2004 U.S. presidential election: “Democratic politicians contended that their candidate John Kerry lost to George W. Bush because Kerry failed to articulate his vision for an improved America in a clear and persuasive narrative” (285).

In response to the tyranny of the “Narrative Turn,” critics have begun to lament the academy’s neglect of lyric poetry, a genre that has traditionally been defined *against* narrative prose in its very essence. Mutlu Blasing argues that our “current constructions of the ‘discipline’ of literary study, which emphasize the social, economic, or political determinants of literary production,” have led to “the disciplinary censoring of poetry,” since—unlike the novel—lyric poetry’s focus on language does not translate easily into these larger cultural-political frameworks (4-5). Jonathan Culler has also objected to lyric poetry’s marginalized status within literary studies, arguing that “narrative has become the norm of literature” at the expense of the lyric poem, which—when studied at all—“is frequently assimilated … to the model of narrative fiction” (“Why Lyric?” 201). Whereas lyric thrives in the outside world of poetry readings and
online publications, he argues, it has been relegated to the institutional margins of an academy in which “narrative is treated not as one possible literary form but as the very condition of experience.”

Genres vie for cultural, commercial, and institutional power, and in the contest of genres, narrative has emerged the clear victor. At least, this is the way 21st century criticism has articulated the relationship between lyric and narrative forms. The above state-of-the-field assessments not only presuppose a clear separation among generic forms, they also presume that the relationship among these forms is essentially antagonistic. What are the origins of these assumptions about genre? From whom did we inherit these positions, which prevent us from seeing important connections among literary kinds?

The tripartite partitioning of literature into lyric, drama, and narrative (or “epic”) and the subsequent rivalry among these genres, and between lyric and narrative in particular, has a long history within Western literary theory. In fact, these basic attitudes about genre can be traced back to the writings of Plato and Aristotle, both of whom created a tripartite division of literature that even today remains mostly intact. Plato’s *Republic* sorts literary kinds according to the degree of mimesis they achieve. For Plato’s Socrates, literature’s power to represent or “imitate” reality is dangerous, given its potential to seduce citizens of the ideal Republic away from the true realm of the Forms, which is accessed through philosophical inquiry alone. Narratives that are relayed through indirect discourse are the least deceitful of literary kinds, since they maintains the voice of a single speaker, unlike most other epic poetry, which frequently disguises the narrator’s voice through the direct dialogue of its characters; worse still is the dramatic form,

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5 For more accounts of genres in contest, see Markovits as well as Kurnick, who understands genres to be “engaged in a kind of Darwinian struggle for survival” (259).
in which the narrator furtively disappears altogether (393a-394c). According to Socrates, poets are reckless imitators who appeal to the irrational part of the soul and who create images “that are far removed from the truth” (605c). For this reason, he suggests, “lyric odes and songs” are the most dangerous of all genres. Consisting of “three elements—words, harmonic mode, and rhythm” (398d), the grace of the lyric makes these imitations palatable, even downright pleasurable: “He speaks with meter, rhythm, and harmony, for if you strip a poet’s works of their musical colorings and take them by themselves, I think you know what they look like” (601b). The poets represent such a threat to the realm of universal Forms that Socrates bans them from his ideal society altogether. They may re-enter the Republic, Socrates judiciously offers, once they can rationally justify their art—in the analytic prose style of philosophical discourse, naturally.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle builds on Plato’s diegetic/mimetic distinctions, creating a literary taxonomy based not only on modes of representation but also on unity, harmony, and scope. He concludes that tragedy is the highest literary form, superior to comedy as well as both epic and lyric poetry, since only tragedy possesses the proper degree of “magnitude” and “order” upon which beautiful art depends (1450b35). Whereas Plato’s Socrates presents mimesis as a dangerous and misleading quality of art, Aristotle considers imitation to be a natural and healthy human tendency; consequently, while Socrates condemns drama for creating the illusion of reality, Aristotle praises it for this very reason: “its reality of presentation is felt in the play as read, as well as in the play as acted” (1462b). Because Aristotle values mimetic art that is grounded in plot and action, he hardly dwells on lyric, or dithyrambic, poetry at all, spending most of his *Poetics* comparing and contrasting tragedy to epic in order to establish tragedy’s

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6 Clearly, there is irony in this argument, as in much of the *Republic*, since all of Plato’s dialogues appear in dramatic form.
superiority. The scope of epic poetry is too large, he decides, since it contains action that has “no fixed limit of time, whereas Tragedy endeavours to keep as far as possible within a single circuit of the sun, or something near that” (1449b10-15); and because Tragedy presents “an imitation of an action that is complete in itself” (1450b20-25), it is more unified and “comprehensible as a whole” (1451a10).

These formulations may appear outdated to the modern critic, but Plato and Aristotle established literary taxonomies that have persisted and set the tone for genre criticism in the Western tradition for over two millennia: the separation of literature into lyric, narrative, and dramatic forms, with an emphasis on the differences and distinctions among these groupings, and the evaluative privileging of one genre over all others based on loaded and circular sets of criteria. While the uses and definitions of genres have undoubtedly changed over time, the classical taxonomy persists, even—perhaps especially—within twentieth-century genre criticism, which maintains a clear demarcation between lyric poetry and narrative prose.

We begin with Bliss Perry, renowned teacher, editor, and scholar of literature at Princeton and, later, Harvard University, whose critical volumes on poetry and prose reached a wide audience at the turn of the century, though they have since faded into obscurity. His influential Study of Prose Fiction, first published in 1902 and followed by a number of reprints, was an extension of his lectures at Princeton. Making use of the classical tripartite division of genres, Perry’s study argues that lyric chiefly distinguishes itself as “the vehicle of personal emotion. The ‘lyric cry’ is the spontaneous overflow of the individual passion of the poet. Its joy or pain is egoistic. … this highly emotionalized attitude, this intimate expression of purely personal feeling, is very far from being the normal mood of the average fiction writer” (29-30). (In his Study of Poetry [1920], Perry adds to this definition “the strongly rhythmical or metrical
character of the final expression” [49].) Whereas narrative fiction and epic poetry “have a story to tell” (30), the lyric represents the impulsive realm of the emotions. What’s more, Perry warns, never the twain shall meet, or at least, not without disastrous results: “At present nothing is to be gained, and much has evidently been lost, by confusing the territories of prose and verse, and producing, under the name of ‘prose poetry’ and the ‘poetic short story,’ a mass of nondescript gelatinous rhetoric which can be classified as neither flesh, fowl, nor good red herring” (44). The intermingling of lyric and narrative, he suggests, produces only bastard hybrids.

In his essay, “The Kinds of Poetry” (first published in 1912; reprinted in his 1920 collection of essays), John Erskine corroborates this definition of lyric as the sincere expression of a poet’s emotional state: “Unless it is an affectation, the lyric renders an emotion truly felt, and this sincerity of intuition appears to be all that the poet can be expected to care about” (17). Indeed, the lyric’s power is derived from its ability to “respond to life always as a rapturous present moment” such that any poem that deviates may be considered an aesthetic failure. In an essay on “The New Poetry” of the modernists (originally printed in 1917; also reprinted in the 1920 collection), Erskine attributes their critical unpopularity to their reliance on the techniques of prose fiction:

They derive their methods, unconsciously or consciously, from the masters of modern realism; that is, their art is the product of much novel-reading. For decades we have been absorbing prose records of manners, of characters, of scenes; and almost any literary youngster in England or America has had some initiation into the “methods of fiction” or at least into the “art of the short story”; if we have taken no courses in these subjects in college, we have read books which make the whole matter clear, and most of us have tried to practise either the artful realism of the French or the naïve realism of the
Russians—until a generation of readers and writers has grown up which sooner or later would be sure to transfer the methods of prose realism to verse. The new poetry is simply making the experiment for us. (107-108)

Though Erskine is offering a half-hearted defense of “the new poetry,” he too tends to cast these lyric-prose hybrids as generic aberrations, though his rhetoric is far more neutral than Perry’s: “The main point is that the new poetry inherits its style from a prose ancestry and takes its methods and its subjects from the tradition of the novel; and we who like or dislike what we see are none the less witnessing one of those mutations by which from time to time literature re-invigorates itself, pouring old wine into new bottles or new wine into old bottles” (109-110).

Gayley and Kurtz’s textbook, Lyric Epic, and Allied Forms of Poetry (1920)—the second book in a series titled Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism aimed broadly at teachers, students, theorists, reviewers, and anyone “who make[s] of criticism a discipline, an aim, or a profession” (iii)—also argues for a definition of lyric poetry based on emotion and subjectivity. The textbook suggests rather than prescribes possible sets of generic criteria, but even these suggestions presuppose a definition of the lyric much in line with Perry and Erskine’s:

“The Difference between the Lyric and Other Kinds of Poetry, especially the epic and the drama, may be considered from the following points of view: the poet’s subjectivity; the absoluteness or relativity of his vision; his attitude,—impressionistic, aesthetic ideal,—unmoral, moral, religious; the nature of the objects contemplated and emotions aroused; the aim of the poet’s representation and its effect (aesthetic and ethical); the movement or the unity appropriate to the poem and to the species of poetry; the material and the manner of the presentation; the audience appealed to.” (original emphasis, 40)
The lyric is again aligned with the solipsistic mental and emotional state of the poet, with the realm of contemplation (as opposed to action), and with special attention to aesthetic form. Like Perry, Gayley and Kurtz reaffirm the classical model of generic classification, even suggesting that these categories are natural kinds: “The authors can only say that they believe that types of a sort do exist, subject to gradual variation. By a constant factor are fixed the only possible moulds or channels of communication and, therefore, the primary types,— as for instance within the realm of poetry, the lyric, narrative, and dramatic” (v).

Beyond the 1920s, literary critics increasingly identify lyric poetry with the private realm of individual expression in contradistinction to the novel, a plot-driven form that is geared toward a readership in a more explicit way. Like Plato’s Socrates, Mikhail Bakhtin formulates the distinction between lyric and narrative in diegetic terms in his essay “Discourse in the Novel” (1934-5), though he reverses Socrates’ value judgments about the two genres. Whereas the lyric imposes an artificial unity by maintaining a single voice, that of the poet, the novel incorporates a robust variety of social discourses into its literary fabric:

In the majority of poetic genres, the unity of the language system and the unity (and uniqueness) of the poet’s individuality as reflected in his language and speech, which is directly realized in this unity, are indispensable prerequisites of poetic style. The novel, however, not only does not require these conditions but (as we have said) even makes of the internal stratification of language, of its social heteroglossia and the variety of individual voices in it, the prerequisite for authentic novelistic prose. (264)

The lyric expresses “the monologic utterance of the individual” (269); the novel, by contrast, is a socially democratic form that includes a range of dialects, languages, and other modes of discourse.
The final section of Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) titled “Theory of Genres,” which also upholds the classical narrative/drama/lyric taxonomy, casts the lyric utterance as not only individual but completely private: quoting John Stuart Mill, Frye supports his definition of lyric as “the utterance that is overheard. The lyric poet normally pretends to be talking to himself or to someone else: a spirit of nature, a Muse … a personal friend, a lover, a god, a personified abstraction, or a natural object” (249). Frye intensifies this point later in the essay: “The lyric is the genre in which the poet, like the ironic writer, turns his back on the audience” (271). Here, he articulates the relationship between the lyric poet and his audience in terms that even approach hostility. Scholes and Kellogg’s landmark work *The Nature of Narrative* (1966) upholds Frye’s definition, distinguishing between narrative, drama, and lyric based on the position (or absence) of the “story-teller” within each genre: “By narrative we mean all those literary works which are distinguished by two characteristics: the presence of a story and a story-teller. A drama is a story without a story-teller … A lyric, like a drama, is a direct presentation, in which a single actor, the poet or his surrogate, sings, or muses, or speaks for us to hear or overhear” (emphasis mine, 4).

Also following—even citing—Frye, Jonathan Culler’s *In Pursuit of Signs* (1981) uses this definition of lyric as private and emotional as the very fulcrum that separates lyric from narrative. The apostrophic realm of the lyric, Culler argues, “works against narrative and its accompaniments: sequentiality, causality, time, teleological meaning … Such considerations suggest that one distinguish two forces in poetry, the narrative and the apostrophic, and that the lyric is characteristically the triumph of the apostrophic” (149). In a similar vein, W. R. Johnson’s *The Idea of Lyric* (1982) argues that classical lyric discourse is distinguished by the “I/You” dynamic between speaker and audience; the “virtual disappearance of the lyric ‘You’”
within romantic and modern poetry, however, marks the genre’s shift away from rhetorical exchange toward a more solipsistic meditation (8). Helen Vendler (Poets, Poems Poetry, 2002) also opposes lyric poetry to the so-called “social genres” of epic, fiction, and drama that “make us look at the wide panorama of a social group—a nation, a village, a family” (xlii). Though she does not agree that the lyric is “overheard,” arguing instead that the lyric speaker always invites the reader to adopt his or her subject position, she does maintain alongside Frye and Culler that the lyric is “the genre of private life: it is what we say to ourselves when we are alone. There may be an addressee in lyric (God, or a beloved), but the addressee is always absent … the lyric represents a moment of inner meditation.”

Certainly, these conceptual frameworks have powerful heuristic value, and certainly, critics are right to point out that lyric and narrative forms have divergent rhetorical aims and objectives. One of lyric poetry’s chief strengths has been its ability to handle feelings, meditations, and evaluations that do not translate easily into a plotted and sequential narrative. Genre critics continue to frame the differences between lyric and narrative, however, in ways that not only portray them as separate classes of literature that never touch, but that also place them in direct competition with one another—more often than not, at the expense of lyric and toward the exaltation of the novel. Anticipating the “Narrative Turn” celebrated by contemporary narrative theory, Bliss Perry argues that lyric may be the “finer art,” but narrative fiction is “the great modern art. By means of it we are brought into contact with modern ideas, with the tumultuous, insistent life of the present” (Study of Prose 22).” Perry’s evaluation of the novel is echoed by Bakhtin, for whom the novel is the only form that bears on the contemporary moment: “the novel has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making” (7).
According to Bakhtin, the lyric is ideologically, as well as stylistically, problematic: whereas the heteroglossia of the novel is linked to a democratic poetics that allows for a variety of types of social discourse, the unity imposed by the lyric voice results in linguistic “enslavement” (271).

In fact, Bakhtin’s analysis is part of a larger strain of Marxist literary criticism that famously privileges the novel over other forms, especially the lyric, because of the novel’s distinctive capacity for registering social and economic inequalities. György Lukács has lauded the realist novel for its ability to counter, by “measuring them against social reality,” the bourgeois “reactionary prejudices” that are produced and reproduced under capitalism (“Realism” 1040); whereas the novel has the ability to “liberate [one] from the bonds of sheer brutal materiality,” he argues, poetic verse “can only weave a garland of freedom round something that has already been liberated from all fetters” (Theory 58). For Fredric Jameson, narrative is essential to the historiography upon which Marxism is premised, since only narrative can provide a coherent account of “political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chronicle-like sequence of happenings in time; then of society, in the now already less diachronic and time-bound sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes; and, ultimately, of history now conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production and the succession and destiny of the various human social formations” (Political Unconscious 75). Ironically, in formulating the lyric as a mode that deliberately disdains the reader in order to indulge in a private thought or emotion, even those critics who are sympathetic to lyric poetry—Frye, Culler, and Vendler—inadvertently bolster these Marxist assessments of the novel as the more social, and socially-responsible, of the two forms.7

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7 For recent and thoughtful accounts of lyric poetry’s potential to contribute productively to a Marxist literary framework, see Christopher Nealon’s “The Poetic Case” and “Camp Messianism.”
While twentieth-century genre criticism, following classical literary theory, has fashioned lyric and narrative as inherently distinct, mutually exclusive, and rival genres that do not have much to say to one another, the twentieth-century practitioners of genre—that is, the writers themselves—did not conceive of these categories in such a fractured way. In fact, a number of avant garde writers were interested in exploiting this distinction only to collapse the two categories together, though they often articulate the distinction as being between “poetry” and “prose.” In “The Serious Artist” (1913), Ezra Pound addresses “the often asked question: What is the difference between poetry and prose?” by arguing that “the thing that counts is ‘Good writing,’” since “both poetry and prose are but an extension of language. Man desires to communicate with his fellows” (242, 244). Similarly, in her essay “Poetry and Grammar,” Gertrude Stein argues, quite simply, that both forms emerge from a feeling that is articulated through carefully-chosen diction: “Do you always have the same kind of feeling in relation to the sounds as the words come out of you or do you not. All this has so much to do with grammar and with poetry and with prose. Words have to do everything in poetry and prose” (Writings 313). By focusing on the confluence of lyric poetry and narrative prose, both writers articulate a theory of genre that privileges kinship over difference and cross-fertilization over containment.8

The attitudes of Pound and Stein are echoed by a number of other writers including William Carlos Williams, who experimented with both narrative and lyric forms in works such as Spring and All (1923), and who expresses his attitude toward genre in a letter to Horace Gregory: “Frankly I’m sick of the constant aping of the Stevens’ dictum that I resort to the antipoetic as a heightening device. That’s plain crap—and everyone copies it. Now Rodman. The

8 Gertrude Stein and her experiments with lyric and prose forms were very influential for the Language poets, who often cite Stein as a revered ancestor and who insist, as does Stein, that “prose is not necessarily not poetry” (Hejinian 323). See Bernstein, Hejinian, and Retallack. In the same vein, Pound and Williams are consistently claimed by the objectivist poets. See Charles Olson’s “This Is Yeats Speaking” and “Paterson, Book V” in his Collected Prose.
truth is that there’s an identity between verse and prose, not an antithesis” (SL 265). Writing to his mother in 1925, William Faulkner boasts that his painstaking artistry has resulted in a concluding passage for his novel, Sanctuary, that is closer to poetry than to prose: “I have just written such a beautiful thing that I am about to bust—2000 words about the Luxembourg gardens and death. It has a thin thread of plot, about a young woman, and it is poetry though written in prose form. I have worked on it for two whole days and every word is perfect. I haven’t slept hardly for two nights, thinking about it, comparing words, accepting and rejecting them, then changing again. … I have over 20,000 words on my novel, and I have written a poem so modern that I don’t know myself what it means” (SL 17). Charles Olson also argues for the fusion of lyric and narrative in a 1951 letter to Cid Corman: “Narrative writing is, at the moment, wholly waiting for the advance of verse. Only the poets now can pull the narrative writers ahead” (Letters for Origin 60). Joan Retallack has even framed this kind of formal innovation as a “conscious, strategic risk” that she calls “the poethetical wager” (21):

…authentically innovative work is consciously poethetical. It vitally engages with the forms of life that create its contemporary context—the sciences, the arts, the politics, the sounds and textures of everyday life, the urgent questions and disruptions of the times. It’s these factors that make it different from earlier work and for a time unrecognizable—to all but a few—as significant extension or transgression of existing genres. For the work to become poethetical it seems it must risk a period of invisibility, unintelligibility. (40)

The truly innovative writer, then, necessarily risks “unintelligibility” in her violation of traditional generic boundaries—a wager that Retallack insists is a moral imperative for the serious artist. Thus, while critics were busy affirming—even policing—generic boundaries, these
insights suggest that writers were, to the contrary, interested in pushing these lines of demarcation to their outer limits.

This project asks that we follow these writers in exploring alternative ways of articulating the relationship between lyric and narrative to the “contest of genres” that is perennially invoked by literary critics. In particular, I suggest that we take seriously Heather Dubrow’s recommendation that we devote “proportionally less attention to conflicts between lyric and narrative in order to recognize the frequency and variety of their cooperative interaction” (“Interplay” 264). Of course, one might take any number of approaches to such a dense and multi-dimensional interaction. Stephen Fredman’s Poet’s Prose: The Crisis in American Verse (1983) examines prose works written by lyric poets, including John Ashbery’s Three Poems, William Carlos Williams’s Kora in Hell: Improvisations, and Robert Creeley’s Precences: A Text for Marisol. Fredman’s study is driven by an exegetical question about hybrid literary forms: “How are we to read a prose text that an American poet conceives of as poetry?” (1) Fredman’s subjects, however, are still poems, conceived and written as such by practitioners of the lyric. His study, while interesting, is not truly trans-generic.

Alternatively, one might also address what Wolfgang G. Müller has termed the “lyric insertion,” or “the insertion of passages of lyric poetry narrative and dramatic texts” (173). Examples of the lyric insertion range from titles (Hemingway’s For Whom the Bell Tolls) to epigraphs (such as Langston Hughes’s poem, “Harlem,” which opens Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place) to lyrics composed by the novelist for use in the plot: Ishmael Reed’s Flight to Canada (1976), for instance, begins with a lyric poem composed by Raven Quicksilk for his master, Arthur Swille, upon his escape from Swille’s plantation. As Müller points out, however, these insertions effectively underscore, rather than undermine, generic distinctions: “If
a novel or drama is equipped with lyric inserts, the difference between genres is highlighted. There would be no point in inserting a poem or a part of a poem into a non-lyric text if the specific generic status of the insertion were not perceptible” (173). Rather than choosing an approach that would replicate the divisions between lyric and narrative articulated by twentieth-century genre critics, I have opted instead to choose texts that deliberately blend literary kinds together in ways that challenge, rather than reaffirm, the classical model of generic classification.

One might also approach the relationship between lyric and narrative by drawing our critical attention to novels written by lyric poets, of which there are many—e.e. cummings’s *The Enormous Room*, Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*, or Nathaniel Mackey’s *Bedouin Hornbook* series, to name a few. One might compare the poems and novels to see what formal structures and tropes they might share. I have deliberately chosen to work with novels that already receive our critical attention as novels, however, in order to demonstrate that our aesthetic judgments of narrative fiction are already indebted to the conventions of lyric poetry in ways that we take for granted. Critics may complain about the lyric’s marginalized status in the university, but our canon of modern and contemporary fiction, which is largely made up of novels that lack discernible plotlines and other traditional hallmarks of narrative fiction, appear to suggest otherwise.

Our recognition of twentieth-century fiction’s indebtedness to the lyric tradition has profound hermeneutical implications for our readings of modern and contemporary American novels. These genres, after all, facilitate very different approaches to reading. We reads novels sequentially from beginning to end, for example, whereas we read lyric poems both forward and backward in order to fully apprehend their internal structural logic. We read novels, more or less, for the literal and lyric poems for the figurative. We read novels for story and lyrics for attitudes.
or mental states. We approach novels as invited listeners and lyric poems as eavedroppers. Admittedly, these assumptions are based on a twentieth century, Romantic-inflected understanding of lyric poetry—a perspective that is not without its problems, since, as a number of critics have rightly pointed out, the lyric means different things in different historic periods. Necessarily, these assumptions also presuppose essential differences between lyric and narrative forms that give rise to such disparate reading practices. Rather than arguing for a framework that positions these genres as two separate, rival spheres that never touch, however, I argue that lyric and narrative can take on the qualities of one another in a way that requires us to shift our reading expectations accordingly.

This project, then, does not deny the heuristic and practical utility of dividing literature into types or in recognizing the rhetorical differences between genres. It does, however, insist that works of literature do not always fit neatly into these categories and that, in fact, literary texts often inhabit a variety of genres at once. By analyzing novels alongside theories of lyric rather than theories of narrative, I hope to demonstrate the kind of work that can be done when we conceive of genres, or sets of textual properties, in terms of likeness rather than difference. After all, as Wai Chee Dimock reminds us, “genre is not just a theory of classification but, perhaps even more crucially, a theory of interconnection. Kin is every bit as important as kind. And, by kin, what I have in mind is not necessarily a genealogical relation, but just as often, a remote spectrum of affinities” (“Genre” 86). What productive comparisons might we draw between Lolita and Browning’s dramatic monologues? What happens when we read Ernest

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9 Jeffrey Walker has persuasively argued, for instance, that our contemporary notions of lyric prevent us from realizing the important argumentative function of lyric, which is rooted in the epideictic rhetorical tradition of ancient Greece (8). Likewise, Heather Dubrow has pointed out that brevity, one of the least-disputed defining characteristics of lyric, is relative and highly variable from one literary-historic period to another, particularly within the early modern period, and less important than the relationships among a poem’s constituent parts, especially among its stanzas (Challenges 156). I do not pretend to solve all of the problems that accompany a trans-historic conception of lyric poetry here, but because I am working with twentieth-century novels, I mostly rely on a twentieth-century view of lyric and its attendant reading practices.
Hemingway alongside Walt Whitman, or Toni Morrison alongside the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets? Or, more broadly, how might the tradition of lyric poetry shed light on the twentieth-century American novel?
Chapter Two
Repetition and Insistence

When reading the novels of Kathy Acker, one often encounters the same passage five or six times in a row; likewise, a single passage of prose within a work by John Dos Passos may feature the same cluster of words repeated with neurotic insistence. Why would writers impede the progress of their narratives in such a way? Because repetition violates conventions we hold to be essential to narrative—sequence, progression, and a plot that develops through time—its pronounced presence within twentieth-century American fiction can create something of a roadblock for readers, who must make adjustments to their generic expectations when they encounter words, phrases, and even full paragraphs in duplicate. How do we understand novels that make extensive use of repetition on linguistic, structural, and thematic levels? This chapter moves from a discussion of repetition’s role(s) within the lyric tradition to its function within novels by Gertrude Stein, Jean Toomer, John Dos Passos, and Kathy Acker. Because of their extreme reliance on repetition at the level of form as well as content, these novels are better suited to the reading practices of lyric poetry, which encourage us to view these texts as collections of inter-related and mutually-reinforcing segments rather than orderly progressions that unfold through sequential development.

Repetition inheres in nearly all of lyric poetry’s traditional structural features, many of which derive from its oral (and, hence, aural) roots. Rhyme, assonance, and alliteration are repeating units of sound; meter is a repeating pattern of stresses, syllables, or metric feet. Certain poetic forms, such as the sestina and the villanelle, rely heavily on structural repetition. The
refrain, most common in ballad form, consists of the repetition of an entire line or stanza. Even the very etymology of poetry signals repetition, since, as Roman Jakobson reminds us, verse indicates a “return”: “on every level of language,” he argues, “the essence of poetic artifice consists in recurrent returns” (145). Repetition, then, plays an important role within the lyric on any number of formal planes—but to what effect?

Traditionally, at least, repetition has been thought to contribute to the unity and coherence of a lyric poem. The repetition of like sounds forges a phonic association among terms that have otherwise no natural connection to one another. John Donne’s “The Flea” uses end rhyme, for instance, to close the distance between the speaker and his resistant lover, emphasizing the carnal connection that already exists between them within the figure of the flea: “Though use make you apt to kill mee,/ Let not to that, selfe murder added bee,/ And sacrilege, three sinnes in killing three,/ … Just so much honor, when thou yeeld’st to mee,/ Will wast, as this flea’s death tooke life from thee” (48). Rhyme effectively binds “thee,” “me,” and “three,” reinforcing the unholy trinity invoked by the lyric speaker. Similarly, Gerard Manley Hopkins relies heavily on alliteration and assonance to juxtapose the “grandeur of God,” which “gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil/ Crushed,” to an unappreciative generation that is “seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil” (56). If repetition forges logical connections between otherwise unrelated terms, it can contribute to a poem’s hermeneutical coherence, encouraging us to read these terms in light of one another: to read the addressee, or “thee,” of Donne’s poem in relation to the trinity of “three” that includes the speaker and the flea, and to read the God of Hopkins’s lyric in terms of his powerful “grandeur.” In fact, lyric poetry is often formulated as a genre of

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10 See, for instance, the entry for “repetition” in the New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan: “Repetition is a basic unifying device in all poetry” (1035). See also Helen Vendler’s Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology, which argues that a repeated word serves as the “linch-pin” of a poem (166).
stasis, which is thought to be maintained, at least in part, through the synchronizing effects of repetition. As Lyn Hejinian puts it, repetition has been “conventionally used to unify a text or harmonize its parts, as if returning melody to the tonic” (44).

There is also, however, a sense in which repetition can be deeply disruptive, especially with regard to larger units of meaning such as the word or the line. In certain cases, the repetition of a term or phrase may actually work to unhinge, rather than fasten, its meaning by way of re-contextualization. This is especially true of modernist verse, which often deploys and redeploy a term with increasing levels of irony. Amy Lowell’s “Patterns” (1916) exploits repetition in just such a way. The first appearances of “patterns” in the poem suggest opulence and beauty: “I walk down the patterned garden-paths/ In my stiff, brocaded gown./ With my powdered hair and jeweled fan,/ I too am a rare/ Pattern” (58). As the poem progresses, however, these patterns become shackles, and the speaker fantasizes about throwing them off in an act of sexual liberation: “What is Summer in a fine brocaded gown!/ I should like to see it lying in a heap upon the ground./ All the pink and silver crumpled on the ground./ I would be the pink and silver as I ran along the paths,/ And he would stumble after/ … Till he caught me in the shade” (59).

Though the speaker and her lover “would have broke the pattern … on this shady seat,” they are deprived of the opportunity after he is killed in combat, and the speaker is instead forced to remain within the garden, “Held rigid to the pattern/ By the stiffness of my gown” (60). Finally, as the poem concludes, she realizes that patterns also inhere in the destructive forces that have taken her lover: “For the man who should loose me is dead,/ Fighting with the Duke in Flanders,/ In a pattern called a war” (61). Here, patterns take on a bitterly ironic meaning in a way that dramatically undercuts their auspicious deployment at the poem’s beginning. In fact, the
repetition of patterns within such a wide variety of contexts causes the speaker to question their very meaning in a dramatic apostrophe that closes the poem: “Christ! What are patterns for?”

Sterling Brown makes similar use of repetition in his poem “Bitter Fruit of the Tree” (written 1939; published 1980). The poem opens with an imperative from the white community, “you are not to be bitter,” directed at several generations of African Americans within the speaker’s family. The imperative is repeated with mounting irony throughout the poem, reappearing after a litany of gross injustices: “When they sold her first-born and let the second die,/ When they drove her husband till he took to the swamplands,/ And brought him home bloody and beaten at last./ They told her, ‘It is better you should not be bitter’” (200). This pattern continues in the poem’s second stanza, as well. The more the phrase is repeated, the less secure its initial meaning becomes, undermined as it is through its ironic juxtaposition to concrete and poignant instances of black suffering under slavery. Consider, too, a more contemporary example such as Li-Young Lee’s “Persimmons,” which also exploits repetition’s potential for irony. The poem opens with the speaker’s punishment by his sixth grade teacher for failing to recognize the difference between “persimmon” and “precision”; the remainder of the poem is a word play on both terms, especially as the speaker explores all of the meanings persimmons have held for him, from his mother’s explanation that “every persimmon has a sun/ inside, something golden, glowing,/ warm as my face” to persimmons he has gifted to his father, who is going blind: “I gave him the persimmons/ swelled, heavy as sadness,/ and sweet as love” (18). In turn, his father makes a painting that the speaker finds much later: “Two persimmons, so full they want to drop from the cloth” (19). The irony of the poem lies in the teacher’s technical—and punitive—handling of the term as it contrasts the speaker’s deeply personal and emotional experiences with persimmons, which are based on love, patience, and understanding.
Much twentieth-century poetry is interested in repetition’s potential to disrupt or undermine, rather than reinforce, a poem’s hermeneutical coherence. In such cases, Lyn Hejinian writes, “the initial reading is adjusted; meaning is set in motion, emended and extended, and the rewriting that repetition becomes postpones the completion of the thought indefinitely” (44).

Hejinian’s account of repetition echoes that of one of her foremost influences, Gertrude Stein. In her famous essay, “Portraits and Repetition,” Stein denies repetition’s existence altogether, arguing that words and phrases cannot possibly receive the same treatment each time they are used: “Is there repetition or is there insistence. I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. … there can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis” (Writings 288). Whatever Stein might mean here by “emphasis”—whether this refers to the fleeting quality of the “continuous present” which, as soon as it is apprehended, is gone; or, more literally, to changes in stress by either writer or reader—she is certainly attuned to the dynamic potential of repetition in which recurring words and phrases are altered by the contexts that shift around them. Under Stein’s account, meaning is not secured through repetition but delayed through a process of continuous alteration.¹¹

If repetition has the power to dislocate meaning even within lyric poetry, in which repetition is not only commonplace but expected, consider its disruptive potential when used within narrative fiction, a genre that relies on progressive, if not necessarily chronological,

¹¹ For a related, though not equivalent, discussion of repetition’s potential for signaling difference rather than sameness, see also Gates’s account of “Signifyin(g)” in The Signifying Monkey: “Free of the white person’s gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms. Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use. I decided to analyze the nature and function of Signifyin(g) precisely because it is repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference. Whatever is black about black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin(g) difference” (xxiv).
plotlines that evolve through sequential action. Narrative is the representation of events in sequence: this is one of the oldest and most basic definitions of narrative form upon which a number of other definitions and distinctions essential to narrative theory are premised.\textsuperscript{12} The classic story/plot distinction first articulated by the Russian formalists as fabula/suzjet, in which “fabula” refers to the events as they occur in chronological order and “suzjet” to the story’s arrangement, or “the orderly sequence in which they are presented in the work,” hinges on a difference in sequence from the raw material of the story to the final artistry of the plot (Tomashevsky 67). A host of other common narrative devices rely on sequence for their effect, as well, including retroversions and anticipations—commonly known as flashbacks and foreshadowing—which deliberately deviate from chronology in order to construct an alternative sequence that is concentrated on causality.\textsuperscript{13} Without a succession of events that are linked to one another through causal and temporal relations, argued Boris Tomashevky, we may have a lyric or a travelogue, but we simply do not have a story (66).

Of course, we tolerate a certain amount of repetition within narrative fiction in the abstract. Repeating images often generate a motif, and motifs in turn cohere into larger themes.\textsuperscript{14} We read narrative not just for story but for deeper meanings, and repetition often flags images or ideas as significant to our overall understanding of a narrative. We do, however, expect certain essential elements of narrative fiction to move forward developmentally if not necessarily chronologically. The linguistic movement of narrative fiction, for example—unlike that of lyric poetry—is necessarily uni-directional, as Mieke Bal has cogently argued: “As against various

\textsuperscript{12} Porter Abbott argues for a much broader definition of narrative as the representation of a single event (\textit{Cambridge Introduction to Narrative} 13). Under Abbott’s definition, most lyric poetry would qualify as narrative.

\textsuperscript{13} Some theorists, including Brian Richardson, maintain that causality—even more so than time—is an essential part of narrative fiction: “Every narrative includes (along with space and time) some system of causation as part of its setting” (15).

\textsuperscript{14} Boris Tomashevsky makes this argument in his essay, on “Thematics.” For a more recent look at repetition as building theme within narrative fiction, see J. Hillis Miller.
other art forms—architecture, visual arts—a written linguistic text is linear. One word follows another, one sentence follows another; and when one has finished the book, one has sometimes forgotten the beginning” (81). Plots too require sequential movement, constructed as they are from a series of ordered events that are linked together through various relations, including chronology, sequence, and succession. In denying all three, repetition seems to prevent narrative’s development on any number of fronts.

A number of avant garde novelists in the twentieth-century, however, were invested in repetition as a device that offers a new way of framing narrative fiction not as a coherent story that unfolds through a logical or chronological sequence but as a series of disordered and elliptical states or events that exist in a continuous state of revision and inter-referentiality. Such uses of repetition—in words and phrases, as in Stein’s *Three Lives*; in whole lines and refrains, as in Toomer’s *Cane* and Dos Passos’s *U.S.A. Trilogy*; and in entire paragraphs, as in Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School*—encourage us to apprehend these narrative texts as something like lyric poems that foreground what Peter Brooks calls a “simultaneity of meaning” over a narrative-oriented model that privileges progression from beginnings toward endings (20). Lyric poems, Brooks argues, demand to be read “backward as well as forward,” since devices that are linked to repetition actively encourage us to read the separate parts of a poem against one another in a mutually-reinforcing way that resists the traditionally sequential movement of narrative fiction. One might very well understand the end of a story, after all, without necessarily referring back to its beginning, but the first end-rhyme of a rhyming couplet does not make proper sense without the second, and vice versa.

The texts treated here are segmented into parts—volumes, sections, and subsections—that bear important heuristic relations to one another, much like the lines and stanzas that

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15 For an in-depth discussion of sequence, succession, and the intelligibility of plot, see also Caserio 5-6.
constitute the segments of a lyric poem. These novels resist sequential plotting through their unconventional stress on repetition, but they also resist sequential readings, divided as they are into discrete parts that interrupt, rather than forge, narrative continuity. Recently, Brian McHale, following Rachel Blau DuPlessis, has deemed “segmentivity”—the division of a literary work into segmented units of meaning—a driving component in the meaning-making of poetry (McHale 14; DuPlessis 51). For DuPlessis, it is an essential part of what distinguishes poetry from prose: poetry is, she argues, “the kind of writing that is articulated in sequenced, gapped lines and whose meanings are created by occurring in bounded units precisely chosen … in short, all the meanings poetry makes are constructed by segmented units of a variety of sizes” (51). These units, she argues, are created by those spatial gaps—“line break, stanza break, page space”—that make up poetry’s unique arrangement on the printed page.

While integral to lyric poetry, segmentivity is not necessarily unique to this genre. McHale points out that “prose fiction has its own formal segmentation into volumes, installments, books, chapters, sections, even paragraphs and sentences,” although, he concedes, “its segmentivity is subordinated to its narrativity” (23). The novels of Stein, Toomer, Dos Passos, and Acker, however, actually foreground segmentivity over narrativity in a way that discourages the forward-propelled reading practices that suit traditional narrative fiction. Instead, they demand a lyric-based reading practice that frames these stories as complex networks of bounded parts that are interconnected even as they are self-contained. This heuristic is reinforced by each text’s reliance on repetition, which deliberately stalls narrative progression by reiterating linguistic acts and events that have already appeared in the text. These repetitions also, however, effectively connect each novel’s discrete segments together through lexical and
thematic recurrences that help us to read these otherwise disjointed texts as coherent unities. As narratives, they are fragmented, but as lyrics, they are whole.

Reading these novels outside of sequence, however, does not mean that we must read them as static. Critics tend to stereotype lyric poetry as projecting a “gestalt in stasis,” the atemporal expression of an idea or state of mind (Friedman 164). As Lowell’s “Patterns” and Brown’s “Bitter Fruit of the Tree” demonstrate, however, repetition need not entail sameness or stasis at all—hence Stein’s argument that it is better termed “insistence.” In fact, the changing contexts that surround the deployment and redeployment of words and phrases include the reader’s changing relationship to, and understanding of, these terms. Narrative texts—and lyric poems, for that matter—that make extensive use of repetition do exhibit dynamic movement, though not the sequential movement that we typically expect within narrative fiction.

The difficult and repetitive prose styles of Stein, Toomer, Dos Passos, and Acker have garnered simultaneous admiration and frustration from critics who have struggled to make sense of their elliptical and trans-generic narratives. “These stories … have a quite extraordinary vitality conveyed in a most eccentric and difficult form,” writes an early reviewer of *Three Lives*. “Whoever can adjust himself to the repetitions, false starts, and general circularity of the manner with find himself very near real people.” This chapter explores in detail these “adjustments” to which Stein’s reviewer refers, arguing that the adjustments we must make are from narrative to lyric expectations. Critics have largely circumvented the difficult prose styles of these writers by turning instead toward thematic or biographical analyses of the work. A formal analysis of repetition and its function within this fiction, however, sheds light not only on the content of the work but also, as I will argue, on our most basic assumptions about narrative form.
Like the novels it treats, this chapter deliberately deviates from traditional sequence, forgoing chronology for a different trajectory that centers instead on the authors’ variant understandings and manipulations of generic difference. We begin, therefore, not with Stein but with John Dos Passos, whose experimentations with genre within the pages of the epic *U.S.A. Trilogy* supply an important framework through which we can better understand the other writers in this chapter, their relationships to traditional literary forms, and the role that repetition plays within their fiction.

The novels that comprise the *U.S.A. Trilogy*—*The 42nd Parallel, 1919*, and *The Big Money*—are driven by a level and degree of segmentivity that we are far more accustomed to seeing in poetry than in novels. Not only are they subtitled “volumes” of the larger trilogy, these novels are further subdivided into four types of rotating sections: “newsreel” sections, which contain splices of historical newspaper headlines, article excerpts, and song lyrics; serial narrative sections that plot the lives of a number of fictional characters; historical biographies, which are brief and heavily editorialized versions of a historical figure’s life and work; and “camera eye” sections, fragmented impressions that culminate in the burgeoning political consciousness of an unnamed speaker. Critical work on the *U.S.A. Trilogy* has typically treated one or another section in isolation from the rest, and not surprisingly, the majority of this work has focused on the narrative sections, which generally conform to our conventional expectations of the novel. The other sections, however, are not to be ignored, since all four work together and against one another in important ways that reveal their affinities and differences as variant modes of literary expression.

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16 Usually, this speaker is identified as Dos Passos himself, since these sections are heavily autobiographical and correlate with events and impressions from Dos Passos’s own life. Because I am treating these sections as lyrics, however, I maintain a separation between speaker and poet.
In fact, these sections exist on a generic sliding scale ranging from the dramatic to the narrative to the lyrical, if we measure these categories by the degree to which they are mediated by an organizing central consciousness. The newsreel sections unfold like a drama as headlines and song lyrics are deposited verbatim into these documentary-style sections without any discernible narrator. The fictional sections are mediated by an impersonal, extradiegetic narrator who operates mostly through free indirect discourse, giving voice to the thoughts and feelings of the trilogy’s characters. The narrator of the historical biographies, by contrast, is deeply partisan in his depictions of real historical figures and their life events—a fusion of narrative sequence and lyrical subjectivity. Finally, the lyrical “camera eye” sections turn inward, recording impressions prompted by some external catalyst that ranges from the personal to the political.

Within the very pages of Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.*, then, is an assortment of generic possibilities that, together, represent the variety of approaches one might take to literary representation.

No one section or approach is privileged over the others in the *U.S.A.* novels, which makes use of all four modes rather evenly, though they certainly have not received equal treatment in literary scholarship. In particular, critics have sidestepped the trilogy’s lyrical component by virtually ignoring the “camera eye” sections. The subject matter of these passages is rendered oblique by their stream-of-consciousness style and by the lexical repetitions that appear and reappear at irregular intervals—repetitions that have seemingly little to do with the rest of the passage, let alone with the rest of the novel or trilogy. Reviewers have panned these sections on aesthetic grounds: a write-up in the *New York Times* celebrating the trilogy’s centenary called them “overripe and pretentious,” the most badly written of the four rotating sections (Gilman). When excerpted sections appeared in *Esquire* in 1936, they were published alongside editor Arnold Gingrich’s prescription for how to read them—which, ironically,
instructs readers not to examine these sections with too much scrutiny: “do not insist upon making consecutive sense of every phrase and sentence as you go along. The effect is as cumulative as that of music or painting,” he advises (51). Even Dos Passos himself has made dismissive comments about the camera eye segments, insisting that they were merely a means of rescuing the other three sections from the messiness of his personal prejudices: “it served a useful function … to distill my subjective feelings about the incidents and people described. … In the biographies, in the newsreels, and even in the narrative, I aimed at total objectivity by giving conflicting views—using the camera eye as a safety valve for my own subjective feelings. It made objectivity in the rest of the book much easier” (Sanders). Despite even Dos Passos’s pronouncements to the contrary, however, the camera eye sections—and the lexical repetitions they contain—are crucial to U.S.A. and are in fact the chief conduit for the trilogy’s leftist politics.

The sections typically center on some formative event within the young speaker’s political life: a presidential sighting, an overheard speech, a distasteful encounter with the wealthy elite. Sometimes, these sections culminate in epiphany; at other times, in a lingering rhetorical question. In most of the camera eye sections, however, repetitions are crucial rhetorical features that ground the passage within a fixed, politically-charged image. In The 42nd Parallel, these images are often class markers or symbols that leave a strong impression on the child speaker. Mr. Pierce—a wealthy family friend who once employed Dos Passos’s father—fixes himself a toddy and tugs at his “dundrearies” four times in “The Camera Eye (15).” The term—which denotes long, full sideburns—comes from an 1858 British play by Tom Taylor called Our American Cousin featuring a dim-witted aristocrat named Lord Dundreary. The character was famously depicted by an actor named Edward A. Sothern, who wore these bushy sideburns when
he played the role. According to the *OED*, the term has come to signify the sideburns themselves, though the facial hair is a synecdoche for the character type from which they derive. The dundrearies that absorb the speaker, then, have political significance, standing in for the vacuous superiority of the elite. This episode records the speaker’s earliest impression of unmerited class distinction. The “fashionable lady” of “The Camera Eye (18)” marks the second. Her penchant for “bullterriers” and for her “gentleman friend who was famous for his resemblance to King Edward” is repeated by the speaker with neurotic insistence, much as Mr. Pierce’s dundrearies became a repetitive fixture in “The Camera Eye (15).” Accompanying her “on a fourinhand,” the speaker is disturbed by her high regard for symbols of class distinction and her equally intense hatred for tradespeople (“the bullterriers bit the tradespeople … No my dear they never bit nice people”) and for children such as the speaker (“she loathed simply loathed most children”). The section ends with the speaker’s renunciation of the fashionable lady and each of her class markers in turn, though he trades the superficiality of the upper class for an uncomfortable feeling of social displacement: “I didn’t like her and I didn’t like the bullterriers and I didn’t like the fourinhand but I wished … I was home but I hadn’t any home” (176).

Repetitions within other camera eye sections help to establish the novel’s class and labor politics, as well. “The Camera Eye (11)” depicts a trip to a Presbyterian church service in Pennsylvania with the influential Pennypacker family, but stalling the passage’s development is the speaker’s insistent yet unrelated question, “who were the Molly Maguires?”—a question that interrupts this section five times. The Molly Maguires, a secret, Civil War-era Irish-American labor organization composed of anthracite coal miners from the Pennsylvania coal region, famously resorted to violent tactics in protesting their exploitation by the (largely Protestant) mine owners and supervisors. The church service takes place in the institution of the oppressors,
one that will not allow the speaker to inquire about the labor union: “who were the Molly Maguires? but it was too late you couldn’t talk in church” (86). The question, despite its insistence, remains unanswered by the end of the section.

The Molly Maguires in “Camera Eye (11)” are also part of a larger repetition, only one example of the many labor unions that appear in the novel’s other sections: the I.W.W., the A.F.L., the Western Federation of Miners, the Anarchist Union of Industry and Agriculture, all of whom, as Mac states, are “members of the same classconsciousness” (100). Nearly every newsreel section highlights an advancement or setback in the labor movements of the century. “LABOR GREETS NEW CENTURY,” declares “Newsreel I” (2). “GENERAL STRIKE NOW THREATENS,” warns “Newsreel IV” (44). “Newreel VI” depicts an industrial accident caused by poor working conditions: “when the metal poured out of the furnace I saw the men running to a place of safety. To the right of the furnace I saw a party of men all of them running wildly and their clothes a mass of flames. Apparently some of them had been injured when the explosion occurred and several of them tripped and fell. The hot metal ran over the poor men in a moment” (63). “Newsreel VII” announces a “LABOR MENACE IN POLITICS” (67). These references to labor unions connect to still larger thematic repetitions within the novel that center on class warfare, from William Jennings Bryan’s “Cross of Gold” speech—excerpted in his biography section (134-6)—to socialist movements all over the globe, including the Bolshevik and Mexican Revolutions.

The camera eye sections become less frequent in 1919 and The Big Money, though they function in much the same way. In 1919, the repetitions within these sections are rooted in the horrors of the First World War, which supplies the overarching theme for this volume. Patrick

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17 Mac joins up with the I.W.W. and the Anarchist Union of Industry and Agriculture in his narrative sections. Big Bill Haywood, founding member and leader of the I.W.W. and member of the Western Federation of Miners, appears both as a character in Mac’s narrative and in a separate historical biography.
Henry’s legendary imperative regarding the righteousness of the Revolutionary War—“Give me liberty or give me death”—is reiterated in fragments in “The Camera Eye (30): “Give me liberty or give me death ... Patrick Henry in khaki submits to shortarm inspection and puts all his pennies in a Liberty Loan or give me ... or give me death” (78-9). Here, Patrick Henry is satirized as submitting not only to inspection for venereal disease but to the wedding of capitalism and patriotism within the symbol of the Liberty Loan. The repetitive fragments also ensure that death, and not liberty, receives greater emphasis. Henry’s imperative reappears within another ironic context in “Camera Eye (41), as the speaker describes the French girl he meets at an “anarchist picnic”: “I sat on the impériale of the third class car with the daughter of the Libertaire (that’s Patrick Henry ours after all give me or death) a fine girl her father she said never let her go out alone never let her see any young men it was like being in a convent she wanted liberty fraternity equality and a young man to take her out” (335-6). The repetition enacted here presents a critique of the girl’s political commitments—evidently, she values dating as highly as she values the ideals of the American and French Revolutions. In both camera eye sections, Patrick Henry’s war cry is emptied of its original significance and rendered impotent against the realities of a purposeless war, on the one hand, and the weak political commitments of youth, on the other.

Repetition also performs much of the ideological work of The Big Money. The travesty of justice regarding the trial and execution of the Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti play a major role in this volume and serve as the focus for “Camera Eye (49)” and “Camera Eye (50).” Both sections contain the same, repetitive phrase that casts immigrants as “haters of oppression.” In this sense, Dos Passos suggests, immigrants are the ultimate patriots, even more American than those who are native-born: “this fishpeddler you have in Charlestown Jail is one of your
founders” (350). With this line, Dos Passos enacts yet another repetition in which the jailed fishpeddler is set up as a double for the founding fathers. Repetition effectively re-positions Sacco and Vanzetti as insiders rather than outsiders, role models rather than criminals. These sections also pose the same, repetitive apostrophic questions to the nation (“who are your oppressors America”; “who are your betrayers America”) and pit the first-person pronoun against the third-person plural in depicting a nation divided into haves and have-nots: “how can I make them feel how our fathers our uncles haters of oppression came to this coast,” asks “Camera Eye (49); “they have clubbed us off the streets they are stronger they are rich … there is nothing left to do we are beaten,” concedes “Camera Eye (50)” (350, 371). These repetitions construct a powerful dichotomy—oppressor and oppressed, betrayer and betrayed—that culminate in the novel’s most often-quoted line: “all right we are two nations” (371). This line, which depicts a country split based on class warfare, is the U.S.A. Trilogy writ large. The novels may span a variety of topics—labor unionization, communist revolutions, global imperialism, world war, the stock exchange, immigration, women’s liberation—but the common denominator is a nation in which the powerful are pitted against the powerless.

These readings demonstrate Dos Passos’s deeply political investment in the trope of repetition, a trope that surfaces chiefly in the camera eye sections that readers, critics, and even the author himself have tended to undervalue. Repetitions work to focus these stream-of-consciousness fragments on a politically-charged point or image that links up with larger, thematic repetitions that course through the trilogy. They establish important connections between the local—represented here by the unnamed speaker’s burgeoning class-consciousness, located within fixed symbols such as Mr. Pierce’s dundrearies—and national, even international, political movements toward anarchism, socialism, and labor unionization. Repetition forges
coherence in the *U.S.A. Trilogy*, and coherence has decidedly ideological stakes: we are meant to read Sacco and Vanzetti in terms of the nation’s founders; the historical Patrick Henry against the Patrick Henry of “Camera Eye (41)” and of “Camera Eye (30)”; and the industrial accident narrated in “Newreel VI” against the speaker’s insistent question in “Camera Eye (11),” “Who were the Molly Maguires?” *U.S.A.*, after all, gains its momentum not from its stand-alone fragments but from the lexical and thematic repetitions that bind these fragments together. It is based on a heuristic of cross-association whereby each iteration of a phrase or fragment is necessarily read in light of the others. To read the trilogy or any of its volumes as a linear narrative progression is to distort the ambitions of this epic project since, as Caren Irr has argued, the *U.S.A. Trilogy* rejects any “radically teleological view of national culture” reflected by nationalist historical narratives (45). For Dos Passos, in fact, quite the opposite is true—repetition, and not teleology, signals real political headway, but we cannot make progress until we learn to read these repetitions within our own national history: to read Bartolomeo Vanzetti, “this fishpeddler you have in Charlestown Jail,” as “one of your founders” (350).

The quartet of rotating sections that comprise the trilogy celebrates four equally viable approaches to the historiographical project of *U.S.A.* in particular and to literary representation more broadly. Lyrical subjectivity, represented here by the camera eye sections, is granted a gravity and validity equal to the impersonal historical objectivity represented in the “newsreel” sections and also to the more familiar character-based narratives represented by the fictional biographies. The trilogy’s form suggests that the intensely personal political consciousness of the lyric speaker is not only as powerful as those of the trilogy’s fictional characters, many of whom come to identify with larger political movements within the course of their narratives, but also as
powerful as the political consciousness of the nation itself, recorded through historic news headlines and article excerpts within the trilogy’s “newsreel” sections.

The historical biographies—the fourth of the rotating sections—are unique hybrids of both lyric and narrative conventions, which places them somewhere in-between the camera eye sections and the fictional episodes on the generic scale that Dos Passos has created. These passages provide succinct accounts of the life of a historical figure who has made some contribution, for better or for worse, to the relationship between capital and industry in the U.S. They depict the bad guys and the good guys, from business tycoons like Andrew Carnegie and Henry Ford to labor organizers like Big Bill Haywood and anti-trust progressives such as “Fighting Bob” La Follette. Like lyric poems, these sections are brief and compressed; they exhibit lineation, appearing in free verse form rather than in prose; and they are delivered from a deeply subjective point of view that actively manages our feelings toward these historic personalities. As in much narrative fiction, however, the narrator is heterodiegetic and, following standard biographical practice, recounts the major events of the figure’s life in sequential and chronological order. The historical biographies are significant in their departure from the other rotating sections, each of which fits quite squarely into one or another classical generic category: the newsreels into drama, the fictional sections into narrative, and the camera eye sections into lyric. Dos Passos sets up this taxonomy only to collapse these differences within the historical biographies, which are constructed from elements of both lyric and narrative traditions. These sections make explicit the possibilities for generic blending between lyric and narrative that are implicit, as I will argue further, in the novels of Toomer, Stein, and Acker.

The unique form of the U.S.A. Trilogy, manifested in its four rotating sections, demonstrates Dos Passos’s awareness of generic difference, which he galvanizes here for
political ends. The newsreel and historical biography sections may lend a wider scope and
greater objectivity to the trilogy than what the lyrical sections can afford, but the “camera eyes”
lend repetition and insistence, forging political coherence among phrases, symbols, figures, and
events that may otherwise seem politically irrelevant or, at the very least, disconnected. The
form of *U.S.A.* also, however, demonstrates Dos Passos’s willingness to undermine generic
difference, as evidenced in the historical biographies that deliberately blur lyric and narrative
conventions together. In this respect, *U.S.A.* performs in microcosm what twentieth-century
American fiction performs on a broader level: the manipulation and, ultimately, rejection of the
classical division between lyric and narrative.

Jean Toomer’s 1923 tour-de-force, *Cane*, is another heavily segmented text that makes
use of lyric, narrative, and dramatic forms. It is divided into three main sections: the first and last
take place in rural Georgia, and the middle section takes place in Chicago and Washington, D.C.
The first and middle sections are also subdivided into titled segments I call vignettes, for lack of
a better term, many of which are subdivided further still into numbered parts. In their discussions
of *Cane*, scholars typically discuss the text as being divisible into discrete and self-contained
lyric, narrative, and dramatic vignettes. Short fragments that appear in verse—“Reapers,”
“Cotton Song,” “Georgia Dusk,” and “Beehive,” to name a few—are usually classified as lyric
poems. Those longer vignettes in prose that feature plot and character—“Karintha,” Blood-
Burning Moon,” “Box Seat,” “Bona and Paul”—are classified as narrative. “Kabnis,” the long
vignette that closes the novel, is cast as a drama.

This classical taxonomy, however, does not hold when one examines the text more
closely. Though “Kabnis,” for example, is invariably regarded as a play, the section also contains
lyrical song refrains and long, narrative sequences that are mediated by a central narrator and in which direct dialogue appears in quotation marks. Conversely, “Theater,” “Box Seat,” and “Bona and Paul”—three of Cane’s purportedly “narrative” sections—are partially narrated through the form of the dramatic dialogue, complete with setting and stage directions. Lyrical refrains appear throughout the narrative sections of Part I, including “Karintha,” “Becky,” “Carma,” and “Blood-Burning Moon”; Part II is largely made up of prose poems, including “Seventh Street,” “Rhobert,” and “Calling Jesus.” Like Dos Passos, Toomer has set up something that resembles a generic taxonomy only to merge these categories together through deliberate instances of generic blending and amalgamation.

The trope that most consistently cuts through these various segments and genres is repetition, which appears both within and across the text’s various sections. Cane contains a dizzying number of lexical repetitions that dominate the “lyric” sections but that also figure prominently in the narrative and dramatic pieces by way of the refrain. Like Dos Passos’s “camera eye,” these refrains ground the vignettes within a fixed, central image that bears some heuristic relationship to the rest of the text. In the vignette titled “Becky,” the phrase “the pines whisper to Jesus” appears six times; this refrain constructs nature as a witness to Becky’s suffering and a mouthpiece that reports her suffering to the heavens. “Harvest Song” contains phrases—“I hunger,” “my throat is dry”—that appear at least four times each, emphasizing the visceral toll that harvesting takes on the body. The phrase “Doris dances” appears eight times in the vignette “Theater,” underscoring Doris’s desperate efforts to communicate her hopes and desires to John through the movement of her body. The broken phrase, “Crimson Gardens. Hurrah! So one feels,” opens three nearly consecutive paragraphs in the vignette “Bona and Paul” and is coupled with parataxis to convey the energy of the Chicago jazz club: “The drinks
come. Four highballs. Art passes cigarettes” (76). These brief refrains provide the vignettes with a recurring point of focus, but their repetition also encourages us to read each instance in light of the others as they begin to take on a cumulative meaning. Doris’s dancing, for instance, becomes increasingly hopeful with each repetition of her refrain, especially following her inner monologue, a heartfelt entreaty directed at John that she attempts to convey through her dancing alone: “O will you love me? And give me kids, and a home, and everything?” (52). Similarly, the whispering of the pines in “Becky” develops from a repeated description (“the pines whisper to Jesus”) to an apostrophe (“O pines, whisper to Jesus”) to an imperative (“pines shout to Jesus!”) as the story reaches its climax with the collapse of Becky’s house. The weight and momentum of these phrases increases with each iteration, making them exemplary cases of repetition as insistence.

The stanza-length refrains that appear throughout Cane also contribute to the work’s segmentation, playing an essential role in framing and dividing Cane’s narrative sections. Sometimes, these refrains bookend a section by appearing at its beginning and ending, as in “Becky” and “Seventh Street.” At other times, however, the refrains appear three times in even intervals that effectively divide the vignette into two or three discrete segments, depending on where they are placed. In these cases, repetition creates structure, and our readings of the vignettes are shaped by the structural divisions it produces. The refrain in “Karintha,” for instance—“Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,/ O cant you see it, O cant you see it,/ Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon/ … When the sun goes down”—appears at the beginning, middle, and end of the vignette, splitting the narrative into two parts. The first section documents Karintha’s childhood as she attracts the attention of men from an early age: “Old men rode her hobby-horse upon their knees. Young men who danced with her at frolics when they
should have been dancing with their grown-up girls. God grant us youth, secretly prayed the old men. The young fellows counted the time to pass before she would be old enough to mate with them” (1). The segment ends with Karinthia’s movement toward puberty and sexual awakening, indexed again by the reactions she draws from men of different ages: “Old men could no longer ride her hobby-horse upon their knees. But young men counted faster.” The second section discloses Karinthia’s unhappy fate as a result of her sexuality, which has been prematurely hastened by these young men. Not only has she “been married many times,” she delivers a child in the forest whom she abandons to a smoldering “pyramidal sawdust pile” (2). In this segment, we are told three times that “Karintha is a woman”—a repetition implying that such unhappiness and desperation is par for the course. In dividing the narrative in half, with Karinthia’s transition into puberty serving as the fulcrum, this vignette’s segmentation suggests that Karinthia’s tragedy hinges on her sexuality, which has “ripened too soon” on account of her impatient suitors.

“Blood-Burning Moon” is divided into three numbered sections, each of which closes with the refrain, “Red nigger moon. Sinner!/ Blood-burning moon. Sinner!/ Come out that fact’ry door.” The divisions created by the numbers and refrains essentially construct the vignette as a three-part tragedy. In the first segment, we learn that Louisa is being courted by Bob Stone, her white employer’s son, and also by Tom Burwell, a black sharecropper. In the second segment’s rising action, Tom confronts Louisa when he learns about Bob, though she manages to smooth things over. In the third segment, however, Bob accosts Tom in a cane field and is killed; the town responds immediately by lynching Tom in the factory. The climactic action of the closing section echoes against each part of the refrain: the “ghost of a yell slipped through the flames and out the great door of a factory,” a direct allusion to the refrain’s imperative—“Come out that fact’ry door”—and Louisa’s view of “the full moon, an evil thing, an omen” resonates against
the ominous “blood-burning moon.” The refrain, then, not only creates a tragic structure, it also mirrors the violence of the vignette’s climactic lynching scene, producing yet another layer of repetition.

As “Blood-Burning Moon” demonstrates, the refrains within *Cane* not only provide structure for these vignettes, they often bear important connections to the texts they are framing. Many of these repetitions center on the image of the lynched black body, as Susan Edmunds has convincingly argued. This is certainly true for the refrain in “Kabnis”—“White-man’s land./ Niggers, sing./ Burn, black children/ Till poor rivers bring/ Rest, and sweet glory/ In Camp Ground.”—which first appears as the whispering of the “night winds in Georgia,” depicted here as “vagrant poets” (81). Kabnis hears their refrain as he drifts off to sleep in the beginning as well as the ending of the first section. The imperative within this refrain—“Burn, black children”—harkens back to the lynching tree depicted in “Song of the Son,” to the burning corpse of Tom Burwell in “Blood-Burning Moon,” and to the conceit established within the closing lines of the lyrical vignette “Portrait in Georgia”: “And her slim body, white as the ash/of black flesh after flame” (27). It also, however, foreshadows the story’s second section in which Kabnis—a newcomer to the South—learns of the town’s dark history with regard to lynching, the most poignant instance of which is the story of Mame Lamkins:

She was in th family-way, Mame Lamkins was. They killed her in th street, an some white man seein th risin in her stomach as she lay there sopy in her blood like any cow, took an ripped her belly open, an th kid fell out. It was living; but a nigger baby aint supposed t live. So he jabbed his knife in it and stuck it t a tree. And they all went away. (90).
When the refrain appears a final time in section five, it has become the “womb-song” of a “pregnant Negress,” a clear allusion to the tragic lynching of Mame Lamkins (103). The refrain within “Kabnis” is a haunting reminder of Southern lynch law, the ever-present threat of violence rendered legitimate through white supremacy.

Lexical and thematic repetitions travel frequently across Cane’s sections and subsections, binding these otherwise disparate parts together. The whispering pines that appear so frequently in “Becky” reappear in the “Georgia Dusk” and in “Kabnis,” in which a sister’s singing voice is likened to “the sound of evening winds that blow through pinecones” (90). The canebrake functions as a charged site of sexual ecstasy, jealousy, and violence within “Carma,” “Fern,” and “Blood-Burning Moon.” Sunsets appear in nearly every sketch, save “Kabnis,” which ends in daybreak. Repetitions also link these segments together in ways that are unsettling, however. One cannot read the curling smoke that rises from the “pyramidal sawdust pile” in “Carma” and “Georgia Dusk,” for instance, without remembering its original deployment as the site at which Karintha burns her unwanted child. Likewise, the conceit within “Face”—“her channeled muscles/ are cluster grapes of sorrow/ purple in the evening sun/ nearly ripe for worms” (8) and that within “Song of the “Son”—“O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,/ Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air” (10) also echo the fate of the unhappy Karintha, “a growing thing ripened too soon” (2). Cane may romanticize certain aspects of rural folk life, but it is also filled with haunting reverberations of lynching, infanticide, and sexual abuse—reverberations one is likely to miss if one is inattentive to the text’s lexical repetitions.

Despite his reliance on fragmentation, Jean Toomer conceived the structure of Cane as a circle, as he describes to his publisher and friend Waldo Frank in a letter from December 12, 1922:
From three angles, CANE’s design is a circle. Aesthetically, from simple forms to complex ones, and back to simple forms. Regionally, from the South up into the North, and back into the South again. Or, from the North down into the South, and then a return North. From the point of view of the spiritual entity behind the work, the curve really starts with Bona and Paul (awakening), plunges into Kabnis, emerges in Karintha etc. swings upward into Theatre and Box Seat, and ends (pauses) in Harvest Song. … Between each of the three sections, a curve. These, to vaguely indicate the design. (Whalan 101)

Indeed, Cane’s sections are separated by three curved lines that form a circle. One may begin reading from any number of places, Toomer suggests, and arrive at different and legitimate readings that are all validated by the novel’s cyclical form. In essence, Toomer declares here that sequence is unimportant—or, at the very least, it is arbitrary, since a sequence based on one starting point is just as valid as another. This point is missed by critics who argue that Cane should be read as a linear novel that chronicles the development of a poet-narrator in what amounts to a künstlerroman, “the quest of a modern black artist for sociopsychological wholeness and creative authority” (Bell 97). Such a reading demands that we read the first-person singular pronouns that crop up in a few of the vignettes and lyrics as a single, consistent narrator who develops over the course of Cane. This model, which is based a narrative-oriented reading practice, does enable us to read Cane as a coherent whole complete with character development and a narrative arc. The imposition of linearity onto Cane, however, not only suppresses those formal elements—namely segmentation and repetition—that have made it the avant-garde experiment for which it is so widely known and cited, it also distorts Toomer’s own sense of the novel as one that may be picked up and completed at a number of different places.
If one takes seriously Toomer’s pronouncements regarding *Cane*’s circularity, repetition can produce a number of different heuristic frameworks based on one’s starting point. If we read *Cane* from start to finish, the novel’s many references to dusk, which serves not only as a major conceit for skin coloration but also as the setting for nearly every sketch, is finally offset by the “Kabnis,” the closing lines of which herald a new day and possibly a new way of life: “Outside, the sun arises from its cradle in the tree-tops of the forest. Shadows of pines are dreams the sun shakes from its eyes. The sun arises. Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town” (116). The “birth-song” of the sun’s rays suggests a new beginning for African Americans who, until this point in the text, have endured prejudice, violence, and back-breaking manual labor for wealthy white landowners under a new economy that scarcely differs from slavery. Read straight through, the novel ends on a note of hope and redemption rather than pessimism or defeat. If we begin reading with “Kabnis,” however, and finish reading after the middle section, the novel begins at daybreak and remains suspended in dusk until finally concluding at nighttime, the setting for “Bona and Paul.” This sketch, which closes *Cane*’s middle section, ends with Paul’s hopeful declaration that “something beautiful is going to happen” only to discover that Bona has disappeared (78). Read this way, *Cane* begins with the hopefulness of sunrise, moves through scenes of violence and despair at dusk, and concludes at night with yet another instance of a hope aborted.

Toomer’s awareness of the variant patterns of movement that his novel yields—from simple to complex forms, and complex to simple; South to North, and North to South; spiritual awakening to despair and back again—demonstrates repetition’s resistance to a single, linear sequence and its tendency toward a multi-directional movement that can sustain a variety of
readings. One must truly, as Peter Brooks suggests of lyric poetry, read both “forward and backward” in a novel like *Cane*, which showcases repetition’s potential for both coherence and disruption even within a single text (20). *Cane*’s fragments may cohere in the repetitions that build overarching themes and patterns through which we can read the novel as a whole, but the different contexts they supply for these phrases and images unsettles any stability of meaning we might be attempted to assign to them, just as the enigmatic image of the smoldering sawdust pile appears in contexts ranging from Karintha’s infanticide to industry and labor within “Carma” and “Georgia Dusk,” where it is coupled with the blowing of the sawmill whistle that signals the end of the workday. Repetition urges us to read each instance of a term or image against the others, but not without an eye for difference. After all, the variations and breaks within these patterns are often as important as the pattern itself, just as the closing lines of “Kabnis” signal a significant break from the theme of dusk, which may be interpreted in a variety of ways depending on where we begin reading.

Approaching *Cane* through the lens of lyric poetry, we are able to read *Cane* as a relation of parts in a way that accounts for, rather than ignores, the text’s cyclical thematic and lexical repetitions. In fact, a lyrical reading of *Cane* would bring together two divergent and conflicting strains of scholarship that argue for readings of *Cane* based on either fragmentation or unity. Some critics such as John Reilly and Linda Wagner-Martin have insisted that *Cane* is a collection of fragments that never quite cohere into a unified whole, whereas others, including Catherine Innes and Patricia Watkins, have argued that the text is united under certain overarching themes and symbols, such as “man’s inability to communicate and interact with fellow humans; the inability to understand and therefore to love; the inability to quicken another human soul” (Watkins 305). If we read *Cane* the way we might read a lyric poem—as a series of
inter-related parts that are bear heuristic relations to one another through linguistic and thematic repetitions—we are able to account for both fragmentation and unity without contradiction.

Gertrude Stein is known for her use of repetitions, and *Three Lives* (1909) is no exception. The work, which presents three discrete but thematically connected fictional lives, would appear to be predicated on the sequential progression that the biography mode demands, but each section is dominated instead by repetitions that suggest an elliptical, rather than linear, movement. The novel’s repetitions at the level of language challenge readers to track the changing meanings of these repeated terms, which become increasingly unstable with each new deployment. These linguistic repetitions are also, however, mirrored by the narratives themselves at the level of content, as each “life” or section presents an implicit critique of traditional narrative form by presenting alternatives to worldviews that are premised on the logic of sequence. On the level of both form and content, *Three Lives* advocates the incorporation of lyrical elements into narrative by suggesting that sequence and progress are not the only ways of ordering our lived experience.

While Dos Passos uses repetition for purposes of coherence, relying heavily on this device to communicate the trilogy’s leftist ideology, Stein uses repetition for purposes of dislocation in a way that more actively solicits reader participation in the construction of textual meaning. In particular, her repetitive use of epithets within *Three Lives*, which supply the titles for two of the three stories—“The Good Anna” and “The Gentle Lena”—invite readers to judge and question precisely how “good” and “gentle,” respectively, the titular characters might be. Homeric epithets provided easy and memorable tags that, in part, managed reader responses by
“telling” rather than “showing” an audience how to feel about a particular character, but Stein makes repetitious use of the epithet in ways that almost immediately calls the label into question.

The opening lines of “The Good Anna,” which feature the first appearance of the title epithet, for instance, do not center on the servant Anna nor on her goodness but on the merchants she has exasperated through her miserly bargaining tactics: “The tradesmen of Bridgepoint learned to dread the sound of ‘Miss Mathilda’, for with that name the good Anna always conquered. The strictest of the one price stores found that they could give things for a little less, when the good Anna had fully said that ‘Miss Mathilda’ could not pay so much and that she could buy it cheaper ‘by Lindheims’” (7). The subsequent appearances of the epithet corroborate this portrait of Anna as a manipulative micromanager. Anna even attempts to dominate the employers she serves, criticizing nearly every aspect of Miss Mathilda’s lifestyle, from her clothes to her late night “country tramps” with friends to her finances and art-collecting: “‘And I slave and slave to save the money and you go out and spend it all on foolishness,’ the good Anna would complain when her mistress, a large and careless woman, would come home with a bit of porcelain, a new etching and sometimes even an oil painting on her arm” (13-14). Powerless against the good Anna’s stalwart personality, Miss Mathilda eventually relinquishes her decision-making to her “good” yet officious servant: “Life was very easy for this large and lazy Miss Mathilda, with the good Anna to watch and care for her and all her clothes and goods” (14).

In the early sections of the narrative, the epithet is consistently placed within contexts that render it ironic, given Anna’s stubborn need to control her environment. Equally domineering toward her friends and lovers, Anna becomes incensed when the widow Mrs. Lehntman—“the romance in Anna’s life” (19)—adopts a child she cannot afford to maintain: “‘My, Miss Annie is real mad now,’ Julia said, as the house shook, as the good Anna shut the
outside door with a concentrated shattering slam” (29). Anna is even authoritarian toward her dogs, constantly scolding them for bad behavior: “the good Anna,” the narrator gently mocks her, “had high ideals for canine chastity and discipline” (8). The contexts in which “the good Anna” initially appears, then, seem to suggest that Anna’s epithet is laden with sarcasm.

The good Anna does, however, exhibit a number of good qualities as the story unfolds, and the epithet is redeployed within contexts that elicit greater sympathy for her character. She is disciplined and industrious, happiest when she feels needed and is able to fulfill her duty as a fiercely loyal—and nurturing—employee: “taking care of Miss Mathilda were the happiest days of all the good Anna’s strong hard working life” (40). She is also a caring friend and lover, though she is often exploited and betrayed by others, including Mrs. Lehntman, who abandons Anna and decides to pursue a heterosexual relationship with the new doctor in town: “This was most mysterious and unpleasant and very hard for our good Anna to endure” (36). Anna even becomes a generous philanthropist, despite her best efforts toward fiscal responsibility: “Save and you will have the money you saved, was all that she could know. Not that the good Anna had it so. She saved and saved and always saved, and then here and there, to this friend and that, to one in her trouble and the other in her joy … it always went, the hard earned money she had saved.” In time, Anna’s generosity extends beyond her friends to perfect strangers and animals, as well: “So the good Anna gave her all to friends and strangers, to children, dogs and cats, to anything that asked or seemed to need her care” (42).

Yet Anna’s compassionate generosity must be measured not only against her negative qualities but also against her hypocrisy, since her chief criticism of Mrs. Lehntman and her daughter, Julia, is their inability to manage their money wisely, whether through poorly-financed philanthropic projects (in the case of Mrs. Lehntman) or selfish indulgences (in the case of Julia).
Their irresponsible spending habits affect Anna so deeply that they darken her whole outlook: “The good Anna could not understand the careless and bad ways of all the world and always she grew bitter with it all. No, not one of them had any sense of what was the right way for them to do” (47). Even so, Anna falls into the same spending pattern when she is nearly unable to maintain the boarding house she acquires because she charges so little in rent. Though her friends advise her to demand more money from her tenants, “the good Anna somehow could not do it” (50). As a result, Anna must get rid of her hired help and effectively works herself into an early grave in order to stay afloat financially. Though the doctor pleads with her to rest, she stubbornly resists his advice, and following an operation, “the good Anna with her strong, strained, worn-out body died” (52). In these sections, Anna’s epithet appears within contexts that are quite ambivalent: she is generous, but perhaps unreasonably so, and certainly hypocritical in her criticisms of Mrs. Lehntman’s own inability to weigh her philanthropy against her finances; and Anna’s subsequent refusal to heed doctors’ orders suggest that she might have something of a martyr complex, especially given the “strained” and “worn-out” condition of her overtaxed body at the time of her death.

“The good Anna,” it turns out, is a complex character, not all good and yet not without her redeeming qualities, stalwart and caring though also stubborn, overly-critical, and controlling. The epithet appears exactly sixty times throughout the story, and each instance must be weighed against the rest if readers are to develop a complete picture of the contradictory Anna. The first of Stein’s “three lives,” the good Anna moves between extreme states of being in a way that generates a paradoxical portrait, as she vacillates between service and authority, generosity and parsimoniousness. These epithets do not accrue cumulative meaning so much as they represent meaning that exists in a continuous state of alteration in which the “initial reading
is adjusted” with each reiteration, as Lyn Hejinian suggests of repetition’s role within avant-garde lyric poetry that rejects closure. Stein too forgoes closure for a different kind of life-writing within Three Lives, one that refuses to contain its characters within the traditional bounds of narrative biography.

In a similar vein, “The Gentle Lena” calls into question the meaning of the very adjective that frames the titular epithet, since “gentle” is used within a wide variety of contexts that range from softness to stupidity to spinelessness. Though its initial deployment merely establishes Lena’s pleasant demeanor—“Lena was patient, gentle, sweet and german”—the adjective quickly becomes an indication of weakness when it is used a second time as the servant Lena attempts to wake the children who are in her charge:

Lena’s german voice when she knocked and called the family in the morning was as awakening, as soothing, and as appealing, as a delicate soft breeze in midday, summer. She stood in the hallway every morning a long time in her unexpectant and unsuffering german patience calling to the young ones to get up. She would call and wait a long time and then call again, always even, gentle, patient, while the young ones fell back often into that precious, tense, last bit of sleeping. (149)

Though Lena’s gentleness is again presented as pleasant and sweet, it is downright ineffectual, given her task: her voice is so “soothing,” so “delicate,” that it fails to wake the children at all. Lena becomes increasingly linked to passivity and impotence as the story develops: “Lena, who was patient, sweet and quiet, had not self-control, nor any active courage” (154). In fact, it is her “gentleness” that makes her so pliable in the hands of others, especially in those of Mrs. Haydon, who manipulates Lena’s penchant to follow orders because “she did not know that she could do anything different” to bully Lena into an early and unwanted marriage (156). Lena’s husband-
to-be, Herman, is also described as “gentle” within similar contexts: “He was gentle and a little fearful. … He was obedient to his mother and father” (157). Gentleness, it appears, has quickly become a euphemism for spinelessness.

The term is also used to indicate Lena’s lack of intelligence. Habitually described as “dull” and “simple” by Mr. Haydon (155), Lena is also derided by the other girls in town for her stupidity: “The other girls … all liked the simple, gentle, German Lena very well. They all, too, liked very well to tease her, for it was so easy to make her mixed and troubled” (149). Lest this stirs our sympathy for Lena, the narrator insists that Lena is too simple, her emotions too “gentle,” to feel suitably hurt by their cruelty: “It was all a peaceful life for Lena, almost as peaceful as a pleasant leisure. The other girls, of course, did tease her, but then that only made a gentle stir within her” (150). Though this last line is repeated twice, we cannot necessarily take the narrator’s declarations for granted, since neither the narrator nor the story’s characters are very sympathetic toward Lena; as Marianne DeKoven points out, only two characters—the street-car conductor and Mrs. Haydon’s cook—express any compassion for Lena, and they are the only two characters to disclose that Lena has been crying, a fact that is reported through their dialogue (Stein 170 f. 5). While the conductor attempts to comfort Lena after she is abandoned by Herbert at the altar, the cook declares that Lena has been “crying all the time” (170). These instances of despair not only indicate the complexity of Lena’s emotions, they also belie the narrator’s insistence that, though Lena is mistreated, she “never really knew that she was slighted” (155).

As Lena falls into a deep depression toward the end of the story, the adjectives “careless,” “dull,” and “lifeless” appear together to describe her new temperament on four separate occasions. In effect, they replace, and are set in opposition to, the “gentleness” that
defines Lena in the story’s openings pages. Here, gentleness indicates a prelapsarian state of happiness that contrasts Lena’s despondency following the births of her three children:

“Sometimes Lena would wake up a little and get back into her face her old, gentle patient, and unsuffering sweetness,” though, we are told, these occasions become increasingly rare (173). After Lena dies in childbirth, delivering a stillborn who “was like its mother lifeless” (174), the cook chooses to remember Lena in her initial state of gentleness: “She remembered how nice Lena had looked all the time she was in service with her, and how her voice had been so gentle and sweet-sounding” (174). In these cases, “gentle” indicates nostalgia for the simplicity and innocence of Lena’s life before becoming a wife and a mother. Though the adjective has been associated with ineffectuality and stupidity, its meaning becomes suddenly relative here at the story’s conclusion, preferred as it is to Lena’s domestic misery.

As in “The Good Anna,” the titular epithet that frames “The Gentle Lena” does not provide the easy interpretive key that it would appear to promise. Rather, “gentle” takes on such a wide array of meanings that each instance must again be gauged against the others for full context. As readers, our judgment of Lena and her circumstances hinges on our ability to chart the changing meaning of this elastic term through which she is continuously defined. Beginning as a pleasant but meek servant girl, Lena appears to become the butt of Stein’s narrative joke as she is increasingly characterized as simple and dim-witted, though she regains our sympathy through her unhappiness and the complexity of emotions that her unhappiness betrays—all through the repetition of a few simple terms.

These repetitive epithets offer a different kind of characterization from what we typically see in fiction, where a character is developed as the narrative progresses and becomes more or less crystallized by the narrative’s end. In The Company We Keep, Wayne Booth famously
argued that we become so intimate with narrators and characters that they become like real people against whom we can sharpen our own moral judgment. The characters in Stein’s *Three Lives* remain far more elusive than this, perhaps in part because their epithets are too simple to be suitably descriptive or even accurate. Rather than cementing characterization, repetition instead causes us to doubt whether we can ever know these characters well enough to affix them with labels at all.

The violation of sequence within *Three Lives* operates beyond the repetition of epithets, however. It is no accident that all three stories are domestic narratives that focus on home life and family structure. All feature women with deviant sexualities who must reconcile themselves to a heteronormative society that is geared toward sexual reproduction, the ultimate cultural manifestation of sequence and progress.¹⁸ Not only does Anna resist translating her life into narrative terms through her failure to reproduce, she is quite hostile to the children of her friends and employers, who tend to interfere with her relationships: Anna leaves the household of Miss Mary Wadsmith on account of her daughter, Jane, and she is less than fond of Mrs. Lehntman’s two children, becoming furious when Mrs. Lehntman expands her family by adopting another child without consulting Anna. Indeed, Anna’s easiest and most felicitous relationship is in her service to the single and childless Miss Mathilda. It is this relationship that frames the story, which is structured not through chronological sequence but through Anna’s personal and professional ties with others. The most meaningful relationships within “The Good Anna” inhere not in vertical bloodlines but in lateral, elective alliances, suggesting the intrinsic value in what is non-sequential and non-reproductive. “The Gentle Lena” is likewise critical of traditional,

¹⁸ For an extensive treatment of traditional narrative and its link to heteronormativity, see Judith Roof: “Interwound with one another,” she writes, “narrative and sexuality operate within the reproductive and/or productive, metaphorically heterosexual ideology that also underwrites the naturalized understanding of the shape and meaning of life” (xxvii).
domestic narratives that are premised on the familiar sequence of courtship, marriage, and children. Though she and Herman initially resist marriage, they succumb to the pressure placed on them by Lena’s aunt and Herman’s parents. They follow traditional sequence by having a child soon thereafter, and though “poor Lena was not feeling any joy to have a baby,” she delivers two more before dying in childbirth with her fourth (172). In effect, sequence kills the gentle Lena, who cannot seem to find an alternative to reproduction in perpetuity.

These issues come to a head in “Melanctha: Each One As She May,” the longest and most complex of the three lives, and in which Melanctha’s “wandering” is the alternative that might have rescued Lena from the pitfalls of sequence. Like “The Good Anna” and “The Gentle Lena,” Melanctha’s story is rife with lexical repetitions, especially the repetition of terms such as “wandering,” which again take on a variety of meanings. The very expression “wandering” implies the kind of restless, anti-linear movement that is also suggested by repetition, and Melanctha’s “wandering” implies everything from geographical exploration to introspective soul-searching to sexual experimentation. Primarily, though, Melanctha’s “wandering” is connected to her quest for some primal form of knowledge and self-mastery: “she wandered, always seeking but never more than very dimly seeing wisdom” (60). Wisdom, another repeated term, is charged with sexual meaning and seems to be achieved only through social and sexual deviance. Chided by townsfolk for her promiscuous “wanderings,” Melanctha finally secures “wisdom” in her same-sex relationship with Jane Harden: “It was not from the men that Melanctha learned her wisdom. It was always Jane Harden herself who was making Melanctha begin to understand. … Melanctha began to really understand” (65-7).

Whole phrases are also repeated throughout the story, save subtle changes in syntax and word order: Melanctha is “a little wandering and mysterious and uncertain in her ways” (56);
Melanctha is “mysterious and uncertain and wandering in her ways” (57); and, having found wisdom in her relationship with Jane, Melanctha is no longer uncertain but is still “mysterious in her ways” (69). Melanctha, the only protagonist who is not tagged with an epithet, possesses a strong enigmatic quality that is not present in the other heroines of *Three Lives*. What’s more, these phrases link Melanctha’s mystery to her “wandering,” forging a connection between psychological complexity and sexual self-discovery. Much of Melanctha’s depth as a character, after all, is derived from her “mysterious” sexuality, which is never fully disclosed, except through these repetitive euphemisms.

The local repetitions within “Melanctha” are replicated on a larger, structural level with the repetition of entire paragraphs that tie the end of the story back to its beginning, and vice versa: the paragraph that juxtaposes the “subtle, intelligent, attractive half white” Melanctha to the “coarse, decent, sullen, ordinary, black childish Rose,” for instance—a juxtaposition that also, as a number of scholars have pointed out, reveals Stein’s racism—reappears nearly word-for-word much later in the story (54, 131), as does the story’s opening paragraph, which narrates the death of Rose’s baby on account of Rose’s inexplicable negligence (53, 140). In fact, the story begins and ends not with Melanctha at all but with Stein’s portrait of Rose Johnson, whose simplicity and selfishness provide a marked contrast to the enigmatic yet kind-hearted Melanctha, who “always loved too hard and much too often” (56).

The lexical and grammatical repetitions within “Melanctha” may be fairly obvious—nouns (“wisdom”), verbs (“wandering”), adverbs (“certainly”), phrases, even paragraphs are repeated extensively—but the story’s content also works to reinforce these formal repetitions by forgoing linear progress for other kinds of movement and development. Melanctha’s pursuit of knowledge through avenues that are elliptical and experiential, even carnal, suggests an
alternative model of epistemology that is based on exploration and bodily feeling as opposed to a narrative-based model that is premised on rational sequence and teleological progress. 19 Jeff Campbell, of course, represents this narrative-oriented paradigm that privileges reason over feeling and progress over regress. After all, Jeff is wedded to ideas of social progress, committed as he is to the improvement of the black race, and in his view, Melanctha’s presentism, her reliance on passion and feeling over a sequential logic that looks toward the future, are precisely the problem:

I don’t, no, never, believe in doing things just to get excited. You see Miss Melanctha, I mean the way so many of the colored people do it. Instead of just working hard and caring about their working and living regular with their families and saving up all their money, so they will have some to bring up their children better, instead of living regular and doing like that and getting all their new ways from just decent living, the colored people just keep running around and perhaps drinking and doing everything bad they can ever think of, and not just because they like all those bad things that they are always doing, but only just because they want to get excited. (76)

Melanctha counter-assails by pointing to Jeff’s cowardice as the real motivation behind his social philosophy: “You certainly are just too scared Dr. Campbell to really feel things way down in you” (77). Jeff’s emotional life appears to corroborate Melanctha’s insight, since Jeff is happiest when he yields to feeling and, subsequently, to “wandering”: “It was sometimes pure joy Jeff would be talking to Melanctha, in these warm days he loved so much to wander with her. Sometimes Jeff would lose all himself in a strong feeling” (96). Only when he is apart from Melanctha does Jeff become mired in anxiety and self-doubt. He is overtaken by rationality.

19 Lisa Ruddick sees this split in epistemological terms, arguing that “Melanctha” hinges on these “two ‘ways of knowing.’ One is linear and progressive; the other is circular and rhythmic and has something in common with the wandering quality of Melanctha’s mind” (33).
which, paradoxically, only confuses rather than clarifies his position: “And Jeff tried to begin again with his thinking, and he could not make it come clear to himself, with all his thinking, and he felt everything all thick and heavy and bad, now inside him, everything that he could not understand right, with all the hard work he made, with his thinking” (106-7). Because he is ultimately unable to abandon himself to feeling, Jeff remains “uncertain” of himself and of his relationship with Melanctha (103); tethered equally to bourgeois conduct and to rational analysis, Jeff never absorbs the “wisdom” that Melanctha tries to impart to him.

If we tease out the metafictional implications of “Melanctha,” we might identify the story’s tension between linearity and circumlocution as the dramatization of two incompatible literary modes, a traditionally narrative model that is premised on a sequential development from beginning to ending, and a lyrical model that is rooted in repetition and feeling. The structure—and content—of “Melanctha” leans much more heavily toward the latter than the former, which is criticized, even lampooned, in the depiction of Jeff Campbell, who refuses to admit elements of lyric into his worldview. In fact, we lose a great deal if we insist on reading this story as a sequential progression that charts Melanctha through her sexual awakening to her abandonment by Jane Harding, Jeff Campbell, and finally Rose Johnson, to her unremarkable death. Such movement, which traces a life in decline, may validate the view of the townsfolk, as well as that of Jeff Campbell, who believed that Melanctha “would never come to any good” on account of her wandering (69), and of Rose Johnson, who casts off Melanctha because she “never can have no kind of a way to act right, the way a decent girl has to do” (145). It fails, however, to capture Melanctha’s success as a sexual iconoclast who achieves fulfillment through “wisdom”; it also fails to garner adequate sympathy for a heroine who falls short of happiness, not because of her moral conduct, but because of the anxieties and petty jealousies of others.
Reading “Melanctha” through the lens of lyric poetry—remaining acutely attentive to the text’s linguistic and structural repetitions—enables us to remain faithful not only to the story’s organization but to Melanctha’s achievement of sexual discovery and self-mastery. It also highlights the structural connection between Melanctha and the story itself so that Melanctha’s life and its textual articulation work to reinforce one another, placing Melanctha squarely at the center of our sympathies. The layers of repetition within the story cause the text itself to “wander” at various levels and scales, from the word to the paragraph to the story’s overarching narrative structure. Accordingly, our attention also wanders—from the end of the story to its beginning and back again, from one linguistic unit of meaning to another, from Melanctha’s relationship with Jane Harding to her relationships with Jeff Campbell, Rose Johnson, and Jem Richards. The text, like Melanctha, does not withstand a sequential reading; indeed, it is structured to resist this reading.

In an interview with Robert Haas in 1946, Stein described *Three Lives* as a narrative experiment in the relation of a composition’s parts to the piece as a whole:

Cézanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole, and that impressed me enormously, and it impressed me enormously, and it impressed me so much that I began to write *Three Lives* under this influence and this idea of composition and I was more interested in composition at that moment, this background of word-system, which had come to me from this reading I had done. I was obsessed by this idea of composition, and the Negro Story [“Melanctha”] was a quintessence of it. (15)

Stein herself suggests here that the best way to navigate *Three Lives* is not through the narrative model represented by Jeff Campbell but by a lyric-based practice that treats a literary work as a
series of inter-related parts, each of which is integral to the work as a whole. Scholars typically treat one or another of these three lives in isolation from the others, but Stein’s comments, coupled with the important formal and thematic connections among these stories—manifested through various levels of repetition—suggest that they are best read together as stories that articulate alternatives to narrative sequence.

If Stein uses repetition for purposes of hermeneutic disruption, preventing characterization from ever crystallizing around her three protagonists, Kathy Acker takes this one step further, turning repetition in the direction of satire. The punk/feminist/postmodernist writer’s experimental novels flout social and narrative conventions alike, and *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978), Acker’s best known and most critically acclaimed work, contains a plot so bizarre that it can hardly be summarized with any coherence. The novel loosely charts the story of Janey Smith, a precocious adolescent who is abandoned by her father, who is also her lover; subsequently, Janey enrolls in high school in New York City and joins a gang called “THE SCORPIONS,” undergoes multiple abortions, is kidnapped and sexually abused by a Persian slave-trader, and escapes to Tangiers, where she joins up with writer Jean Genet before dying of cancer at age fourteen. Like Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* and Toomer’s *Cane*, Acker’s novel incorporates a variety of genres and modes into its textual fabric. Shifting unpredictably between narrative prose and dramatic dialogue form, it is filled with crude drawings of genitals, lyrics lifted from other poets, a hand-written collection of “Persian poems” (a series of Persian phrases that Janey translates into English), a separate series of love poems Janey writes to her Persian captor, and a lengthy “book report” on *The Scarlet Letter*. The lyric sections in particular are filled with repetitions, some crude (“SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME”), some rhetorical (“I like fire./ I
like glory./ I like stars”), and some therapeutic, the articulation of words and feelings that Janie
cannot seem to express when it really counts (“No No No No No NO NO NO”) (110, 109).

Repetition also, however, bleeds into Janey’s main narrative, especially as it becomes a
lexical and structural manifestation of her trauma. One of Acker’s most remarkable experiments
with narrative form is her singular use of repetition on the scale of the paragraph, a device that
quite literally stalls the progression of Janey’s story for four entire pages. The passage depicts
Janey’s last day with her father-lover before he leaves her for another woman, and it appears six
times in a row:

A few hours later they work up together and decided they would spend the whole
day together since it was their last day. Janey would meet Johnny at the hotel where he
worked when he got off from work.

They ate raw fish and salad (cerviche) [sic] at a Lebanese joint and tea at a
Northern Chinese place. They held hands. They didn’t talk about Sally or anything heavy.

Johnny left her, telling her he’d be home later. (21-5)

This “last day” is traumatic for Janey, who has dreaded this moment for the first thirteen pages of
the novel. In fact, she has ironically willed this harrowing event into being by way of repetition,
insisting to her father, “You are going to leave me,” seven times until it eventually becomes a
reality: “You said I was going to leave you before it even entered my mind,” her father later
reveals (23).

The day is brief and anti-climactic: they meet after work, they eat together, they avoid
difficult topics, and they part ways. Nevertheless, the scene is replayed again and again as the
narrator—who is closely aligned with Janey—desperately attempts to assign some significance
to this final meeting. The repetition of this passage is also, however, connected to Janey’s
psychological trauma, which results not only from her incestuous relationship with a father who treats her as if she is an overbearing wife, but also from his abandonment of her to a “totally fucked-up” world in which she can—and does—fare much worse (66). As Suzette Henke has argued, the repetition within Acker’s work reflects those symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder that are listed in the DSM-IV: “recurrent and intrusive recollections of the [traumatic] event, … ‘psychic numbing’ or ‘emotional anesthesia,’” and feelings of alienation characterized by a “markedly reduced ability to feel emotions” (quoted in Henke 94). Certainly, she argues, “Janey Smith courts compulsive re-exposure to situations reminiscent of incest trauma and Oedipal abuse.”

Repetition is built into the novel’s very plot, as Janey continuously seeks to replicate her bizarre and damaging relationship with her father in her relationships with other men. As Susan Hawkins points out, Janey is “doomed to reproduce her primal desire for Johnny within every heterosexual relationship she encounters. … Desire for her father recursively rules her life” (645). Janey is even comically self-aware of her psychosis: “This time when I run after a man who doesn’t want me,” she writes in her diary as she pursues the homosexual Genet, “I’m really going to run after him” (117). Cruelty and rejection, however, only seem to arouse desire within the broken Janey. Sexually abused by her captor Linker, she writes him a series of love poems: “Are you really crazy, doesn’t my love mean anything to?” (105) When Genet tells her that she “stink[s] more than this gaol does. You lousy stinking pervert,” she responds with another erotic lyric: “The night is opening up,/ to our thighs,/ like this cunt which I’m holding in my hand” (136). Through repetition, Janey has not only learned to cope with abuse, she appears to crave it.

This constitutes the chief irony of Janey’s narrative—though many events occur in sequence, nothing really changes as Janey compulsively recreates her unhealthy relationship with
Johnny within all of the novel’s major events: her experiences with the gang, her kidnapping and enslavement by Linker, her bizarre romance with Jimmy Carter, and her adventures in North Africa with Genet. In this respect, the repetition of the passage that depicts her last day with Johnny stands in microcosmically for the narrative as a whole, which, even as it appears to move forward, is mired in repetition. Not unlike Melanchta, after all, Janey’s life is characterized by a series of traumatic abandonments by abusive men—first by her father, then by Linker, then by Carter, and finally by Genet. In fact, the imposition of linear sequence onto *Blood and Guts* is not only difficult to effect, it yields disappointing results, especially given the narrative’s anti-climactic conclusion: “She dies” (140).

*Blood and Guts* has been called a “parodic Bildungsroman” (Hawkins 643), and certainly, part of the joke is Acker’s deviation from the sequential progression that structures the traditional coming-of-age novel. *Blood and Guts* is divided and subdivided into sections with titles that misleadingly suggest growth and maturation, though these sections are filled with content that suggests otherwise. The major section titled “Inside high school,” for example, follows Janey as she spends curiously little time inside high school at all, joining up instead with “THE SCORPIONS,” who have other priorities: “Despite the restrictions of school, we did exactly what we wanted and it was good. We got drunk. We used drugs. We fucked. We hurt each other sexually as much as we could” (32). The segment “Janey becomes a woman” begins with Janey’s description of her tenement slum—“all you hear is continuous noise, you smell garbage and piss which drips through the walls continually, and all the people you know live like you” (57)—and culminates in her beating and kidnapping as she is sold into “white slavery” (61). Womanhood for Janey is filled with poverty, violence, and sexual humiliation. Later in the novel, Janey complains that “Genet doesn’t know how to be a woman. He thinks all he has to do
to be a woman is to slobber. He has to do more. He has to get down on his knees and crawl mentally every minute of the day. … [Women] are whatever their men want them to be. They are made, created by men” (130).

The major events of Janey’s life are not marked by the typical milestones that structure a Bildungsroman, and despite the novel’s title, school plays only a marginal role. As far as Janey is concerned, formal education is yet another tool of psycho-sexual exploitation in which “important men … train the child to suck their cocks. That’s what’s known as education” (94). Instead, Janey’s life is measured by increasingly grim levels of abuse, not only by individual men, but by the misogynistic institutions that reflect their power, not the least of which is the abortion clinic in which she finds herself: “The women in my line were handed long business forms: at the end of each form was a paragraph that stated she gave the doctor the right to do whatever he wanted and if she ended up dead, it wasn’t his fault. We had given ourselves up to men before. That’s why we were here. All of us signed everything. Then they took our money” (32). In fact, if there is any structure to our lived experience, Janey seems to suggest, it is based on a model of regress rather than progress. “In the beginning, on the desert island, the world was totally beautiful,” she writes in the vein of Genesis. “Today in my room in New York City the world is horrible and disgusting. What the hell happened?” (69)

The tone of Janey’s narrative, however, is remarkably far from tragic; Janey’s mordant sense of humor and the levity with which she treats her own exploitation display instead the hallmarks of black comedy. By coupling tone with repetition, Acker effectively turns the lyric into a vehicle for satire. Her satire may remain obliquely “diffused,” to borrow the terminology of Kathryn Hume, since Blood and Guts appears to target a number of deeply-rooted social traditions and institutions ranging from patriarchy to education to sexual modesty. Yet Acker is
also attacking the aesthetic tradition of narrative fiction by creating a novel that resists, even derides, sequential logic on so many different levels.

By contrast, the most serious and earnest sections of *Blood and Guts* are Janey’s dreams, which include nightmares as well as fantasies, drawn by hand in her “Map of my Dreams” (46-51). Her dreams resist narrative temporality altogether and are instead projected spatially, consisting of written fragments, pictures, lines, and arrows that push readers to traverse the page from multiple directions and angles—up and down, left to right, right to left, diagonally. The mini-narratives she creates within this dream map are in the present tense only: “We run and run over the low rolling hills. I’m petting a lion as we run along,” she narrates (46). Those elements that are missing from Janey’s main narrative—childhood and love, as she has been deprived of both—are represented spatially here, as well. In the space designated “THE CHILDHOOD LAND,” Janey is able to access those standard childhood experiences she has been missing as a child of abuse: “Park of concrete where I play with other children. My mother watches. I scrape my knees to bloody pulp on the concrete” (47). She also justifies the blank spots on her map by spatializing what she most craves: “All the empty spaces are love,” she explains (50).

These spatial maps deliberately frustrate narrative sequence, especially beginnings and endings. Where does one begin reading on these maps, and where does one finish? It is impossible to tell. Even when the reader chooses an arbitrary starting point, there is no clear direction that leads her from one picture or storyline to another. Instead, the map forces the reader’s eyes to wander all over the page. Sometimes, text appears sidewise at a 90 degree angle; sometimes it appears vertically, as in an acrostic. Arrows are aimless, pointing the reader in

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20 For an alternative reading of the dream maps, see Katie R. Muth. Muth argues that one can in fact construct relatively coherent narratives around portions of these maps, paying special attention to what she calls the “worm nightmare,” though she ultimately argues that this narrative “both invite and subvert narratological or allegorical interpretation” (94).
multiple and contradictory directions, a number of which simply lead to dead ends. A set of arrows that guides readers along with Janey through a series of parks, for instance, culminate in the following prompt: “There are no directions here. The river is a flood, rapids, huge waves. I love it” (50).

The pictoral and textual fragments displayed on the maps are disjointed, to say the least. The spaces, lines, and arrows that should provide directional cues effectively disorient our reading practices instead. As a result, we are faced with the impossible task of trying to read everywhere at once. Such is the effect of reading *Blood and Guts in High School* as a whole. The narrative is frequently interrupted by full-page maps, pictures, poems, and other insertions; how, and at what point, do readers integrate them into the main narrative? The structure and spatial arrangement of the text prevents any easy answer. Rather, the novel challenges us to take pause and read its isolated sections and fragments against one another simultaneously in a way that quite deliberately evades the sequential logic of traditional narrative fiction.

In part, these repetitions are linguistic experiments on behalf of these avant garde authors, who are quite explicitly putting their readers to the test, as Kathy Acker has admitted of her own experiments with language and repetition: “How does the reader remember, or what does the reader remember when you repeat something over and over again? How do language and memory work even in the most well constructed, logical texts?” (E. Friedman 15). To be sure, repetitions present a special mnemonic challenge to readers when placed within narrative fiction, since novels are much longer than lyric poems, and readers are forced to hold lines and images in their minds for far greater spans of time, especially as these repetitions are spread out among great expanses of narrative space. Ten pages separate Karintha’s “pyramidal sawdust pile” from that within “Georgia Dusk” in *Cane*; two hundred and fifty-six pages separate the first mention
of Patrick Henry and the next within 1919. The attentive reader finds herself flipping backward within these novels, wondering, haven’t I read this before? where else did this appear? and, why does it appear again?

Repetition within narrative fiction, then, is also an assault on our traditional notions of genre, which assume that novels, unlike lyric poems, are to be read from start to finish without so much as a backward glance. “Narrative texts are usually fairly long, longer than most poems,” argues Mieke Bal, “which is why one usually reads them straight through, not retracing one’s steps as one tends to do in the case of poems” (Narratology 82). Instead, the authors treated here have created novels that are premised on the structural logic of lyric poetry, in which segmentation, repetition, and inter-referentiality are foregrounded over progress, sequence, and succession, forcing the reader to look backward nearly as often as she looks forward.

The repetitions I have traced throughout these novels have been mobilized for very different, albeit political, ends. Dos Passos fixes his “camera eye” sections with repeated phrases and images that implement the trilogy’s leftist politics. Toomer uses refrains and recurring images in ways that connect Cane’s disparate parts together under a deliberately circular structure, many of which are linked to the intimations of lynching and racial violence that course through the text. Stein uses repetitive epithets and adjectives within changing contexts to unsettle any easy categorization we might place on her characters and to suggest modes of thinking and living that run counter to heteronormative notions of sequence. Finally, Acker repeats entire paragraphs and events for satirical effect in order to diagnose and critique the sexual trauma that is rendered inevitable in a patriarchal culture that preys on women. Far from producing stasis, repetition enlivens these texts by calling for reader participation in sorting out these recurrences and determining their significance. It asks that we suspend our faith in sequence to read narrative
fiction—and the world—in a different way, that we see the value in aesthetic and political strategies that are non-linear and non-teleological.

The novels treated here contain repetitions that operate at multiple levels and scales, from macro-level structures including the shape of the plot down to micro-level units of language including words and phrases. They also tend to thematize repetition itself, turning the device into an integral part of the fictional world it is ordering. This is perhaps most explicit in *Three Lives*, in which repetition becomes a forum for social critique that challenges heteronormative standards of marriage and reproduction. Each of these levels—structure, language, and theme—work in concert to reinforce repetition as an important alternative to sequential form within a genre that has been traditionally defined through sequence. Regardless, however, of the variant and divergent ends toward which it is deployed, repetition also challenges us to become closer readers of a kind of narrative fiction that demands the attention to formal detail erstwhile granted chiefly, if not exclusively, to lyric poetry.
In the summer of 2001 in the pages of the Atlantic Monthly, B.R. Myers launched his controversial attack on what he diagnosed as “the growing pretentiousness of American literary prose.” He framed the article, titled “A Reader’s Manifesto,” as a rebellion against the literary establishment on behalf of readers who yearn for accessible writing only to receive “affectation and obscurity” from our most celebrated contemporary authors. Among the high-profile targets of Myers’s polemic was Cormac McCarthy, who was accused of cultivating an inflated prose style by amassing conjunctions in an effort to create a “stern biblical tone” unbefitting his quotidian subject matter (108). Readers of McCarthy’s popular “Border Trilogy” are doubtless familiar with the interminable sentences to which Myers refers. As an exemplar, Myers offers a line recounting a cowboy breakfast from The Crossing: “He ate the last of the eggs and wiped the plate with the tortilla and ate the tortilla and drank the last of the coffee and wiped his mouth and looked up and thanked her” (McCarthy 354; qtd. in Myers 108).

The critique of McCarthy’s syntax is twofold. Not only does Myers indict McCarthy for mixing genres with disastrous results—“it’s really just bad poetry formatted to exploit the lenient standards of modern prose,” he argues—Myers also charges the writer with using this elevated syntax indiscriminately to record events of unequal importance, from a casual meal to a climactic knife fight, the results of which “can only be described as kitsch” (108). While we may or may not agree with Myers’s dismissive evaluations—and I certainly do not—he is right about a few

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21 An expanded version of the argument appeared in Myers’ book of the same title, published in the following year. The article version sparked a number of responses from other periodicals: favorable reports appeared in the Washington Post and the Observer of London while the New York Times and the L. A. Times featured negative appraisals of Myers’s piece.
things: polysyndeton, or the purposeful repetition of coordinating conjunctions, has been traditionally used in the realm of poetry for a variety of dramatic rhetorical effects, not the least of which is the cultivation of a poetic rhythm that reinforced, and even came to supplant, traditional meter. Consider, for example, the final stanza of Emily Dickinson’s lyric, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” in which polysyndeton aligns perfectly with the poem’s metrics: “And then a Plank in Reason, broke,/ And I dropped down, and down - / And hit a World, at every plunge./ And Finished knowing – then –” (30) What is more, polysyndeton’s deliberate exclusion of subordinating conjunctions (“if,” “since,” “because,” “although,” “unless,” even “when”) runs counter to the grammatical conventions of narrative fiction, which relies quite heavily on subordination not only for establishing cause and effect but also for organizing narrative into a lucid hierarchy of details, some of which are necessarily more important than others. After all, as Gerald Prince has argued, “narrative is usually not a simple concatenation of events in time but a hierarchical one”; that is, narrative should focus our attention so that certain events and details seem significant while others do not (Narratology 151-2).

This chapter explores the rhetorical construction that so offends Myers but that is used with remarkable frequency within twentieth-century American fiction. I address both prongs of Myers’s critique, from polysyndeton’s alignment with meter and lineation to the leveling or equalizing effect it creates within lyric and narrative structures alike. Organized in terms of the regularity with which writers have manipulated this lyrical syntax, the chapter first examines polysyndeton within novels by Faulkner and Hemingway, both of whom exploit this device during moments of climax; the remainder is devoted to novels by DeLillo and, naturally, Cormac McCarthy, who use this device with greater—and purposeful—frequency. Why do so many
“stylists” of the last century rely on this unusual syntax, and what effects does it produce within their fiction?

As Myers suggests, some of the oldest and best-known literary instances of polysyndeton appear in the authoritative English translations of the Hebrew Bible. The opening chapter of Genesis, for instance, famously exploits this syntax in its depiction of God’s creation and population of the earth: “And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the cattle according to their kinds, and everything that creeps upon the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good” (1.24-25). The same syntax appears as God inventories all of the organisms over which man will have dominion in the great chain of being: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth’” (1:26-7). Passages like these showcase polysyndeton’s chief rhetorical strengths, one of which is the power of enumeration. When coupled with the catalogue, polysyndeton effectively isolates and grants singular attention and importance to each item within the construction. This device also creates a cumulative or piling effect when “and” is the chosen coordinator. Each new item in the list is simply appended onto the last without provision. For this reason, polysyndetic sentences tend to build momentum, picking up energy with each new item or detail that is added to the inventory.

Polysyndeton also creates a democratic leveling effect by which each item is granted equal significance within the structure. After all, items that are granted equal weight in a syntactic sense are ipso facto granted equal weight in a narrative sense as well. Like its

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22 Myers twice accuses McCarthy of hijacking a syntax that is better suited to the Bible than to contemporary novels. In addition to identifying the “stern biblical tone that runs through all of McCarthy’s recent novels,” Myers also responds to critical praise for All the Pretty Horses by remarking, “What a difference a pseudo-biblical style makes.”
grammatical cousin, parataxis, polysyndeton—by definition as a coordinating construction—refuses to admit subordination into its structure. The democratic power of this construction has been famously exploited by Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* couples this syntax with an equalizing message in which nature’s smallest and most quotidian detail—a leaf of grass, a grain of sand—carries as much import as the happenings of the cosmos:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars,
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,
And the tree-toad is a chef-d’ouvre [sic] for the highest,
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,
And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,
And the cow crunching with depressed head surpasses any statue,
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels,
And I could come every afternoon of my life to look at the farmer’s girl boiling her iron tea-kettle and baking shortcake. (34)

Of course, Whitman is also aided here by hyperbole, but he may well resent such a term, since the content—and structure—of this passage work hard to link these items through relations of equivalence rather than through manipulations or distortions of scale. Polysyndeton deliberately flattens hierarchical relations by placing each item, or set of items, within the coordination on equal structural footing.

Because it resists narrative’s urge to subordinate—and hence discriminate—among the things it depicts, polysyndeton is a difficult syntax to maintain within prose fiction. A narrative can only compile items of equal significance for so long, after all, before movement grinds to a

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23 A similar construction that omits conjunctions, often replacing them with punctuation. The result is a series of short, staccato phrases in contrast to the smooth cadence created by polysyndeton.
halt. This structure is therefore limited in the amount of action it can depict. The opening chapters of Genesis again supply an important example: “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done” (2:1-3). Repetitive “ands,” as in this passage, may well imply temporal or logical succession, even if these causal links are supplied by the reader rather than the author; after all, Seymour Chatman argues, “Our minds inveterately seek structure, and they will provide it if necessary. Unless otherwise instructed, readers will tend to assume that even ‘The king died and the queen died’ presents a causal link, that the king’s death has something to do with the queen’s” (45-6). Even when representing action, however, polysyndeton that relies solely on the conjunction “and” is difficult to sustain. How can the narrative introduce a contrasting idea, an exception, a consequence, or a turn in events? At the very least, a narrative would require alternative coordinating conjunctions in order to move things along. “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it,” Genesis continues. “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (2:15-17). At last, a complication is introduced: while these sentences are still expressed through polysyndeton, the conjunctions in this passage modify God’s offer with a caveat (“but”) and a potential consequence (“for”). As the plot develops, subordinating conjunctions are gradually admitted into the narrative’s grammatical structure: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked” (3:6-7). The consequences of this transgression are also
necessarily expressed through subordination: “And to Adam he said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree … cursed is the ground because of you” (4:17). The relationships among these events would be obscured by polysyndeton; only subordination can introduce the kinds of causal and hierarchical relationships that traditional narrative demands.

Consequently, polysyndeton that limits itself to “and” constructions has played a much stronger role in the lyric than in the narrative tradition. These coordinations, after all, may impede narrative development, blurring the contours of plot by obscuring distinctions of time, importance, and causality, but lyric poems typically offer something different from a temporally- or causally-plotted story: a rumination, a state of mind, a feeling, a desire. What is more, lyric poetry—unlike most prose fiction—is also propelled by intricate types of formal movement, usually some combination or another of meter, rhyme, alliteration, and lineation. Together, these formal components contribute to a poem’s rhythm, those patterned movements of repetition that establish some measure of structural regularity within a lyric poem.

Units of meaning are, of course, measured differently in poetry than in prose: poems are made up of lines as well as sentences, and, as Robert Pinsky reminds us, “the line and the syntactical unit are not necessarily the same,” a simple fact that generates many of the complexities that accompany the reading of a lyric poem (30). In fact, he argues, whether or not they do align has much to do with poetic rhythm: “The run-over lines and pauses, the varying line lengths, the varying way the unit of syntax (that is, the grammatical phrases) coincides with the unit of rhythm (that is, the lines) or does not coincide—all of these create an expressive, flamboyant whole” (28). A syntactical unit that spills over the bounds of the line—otherwise known as enjambment—may be a case in which “the syntax is trying to speed up the line, and
the line is trying to slow down the syntax,” creating a push-and-pull dynamic that could alternately accelerate or decelerate our reading of the poem, depending on which unit—the line or the sentence—we grant priority. In either case, however, the line remains the central “unit of rhythm”; syntax may manipulate the speed of a poem, but lineation is the driving force behind its structural regularity.

In lyrical uses of polysyndeton, syntax exceeds lineation, but lineation aligns quite systematically with the structure’s smaller syntactic units in a way that produces an even and steady rhythm, since the conjunctions within these coordinations typically signal the beginning of a new line. Take, for instance, Blake’s poem “A Poison Tree” from *Songs of Experience*:

I was angry with my friend:

I told my wrath, my wrath did end,

I was angry with my foe:

I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears,

Night & morning with my tears;

And I sunnèd it with smiles,

And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,

Till it bore an apple bright.

And my foe beheld it shine,

And he knew that it was mine,
And into my garden stole,
When the night had veild the pole;
In the morning glad I see
My foe outstretched beneath the tree. (78)

The poem is in trochaic tetrameter, and because it adheres closely to the form, its meter and lineation are regular, producing a stable rhythm. In a poem like this, polysyndeton is aligned precisely with lineation, which occurs along the construction’s syntactic fault lines: the repeated coordinating conjunction, “and.” While polysyndeton does convey some degree of sequential action, its primary role in this lyric is to depict wrath’s tendency to accumulate when it is left to fester; here it operates within the conceit of the “poison tree” that yields a lethal apple to be eaten by the speaker’s “foe.” The poem’s lines, which consist of roughly even grammatical units, suggest further that wrath’s accumulation occurs not all at once but in steady increments. Just as polysyndeton derives its rhetorical force from the cumulative effect of its otherwise simple grammatical parts, so wrath derives its power from a nearly imperceptible accretion through steady rumination.

In formally traditional poems like Blake’s, polysyndeton is very clearly tied to meter, but this construction continues to bear a strong relation to lineation and, hence, to rhythm in the free verse poetry of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In fact, one might argue that this coordination becomes even more integral in helping to establish prosody since, as Frances Mayes suggests, lines become our central cue for reading verse in the absence of meter and rhyme, “broken to punctuate how the poet wants us to hear perceptions, individual speech, or breath rhythms” (268). Even in poetry that features lines of variable lengths, polysyndeton continues to
organize lineation around its repetitive coordinating conjunctions; as a result, this rhetorical structure often establishes greater metric regularity than is found in the rest of a free verse poem. Again, *Leaves of Grass* serves as an exemplar, since polysyndeton swiftly orders Whitman’s prose-like verse into a rhythmic incantation:

I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning;

You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me,

And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my barestipped heart,

And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth;

And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own,

And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own,

And that all the men ever born are also my brothers . . . . and the women my sisters and lovers,

And that a keelson of the creation is love;

And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,

And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,

And mossy scabs of the wormfence, and heaped stones, and elder and mullen and pokeweed. (15-6)

Polysyndeton shifts almost seamlessly here from articulating the motion of the lovers—“And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet”—to the compendium that
details “the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth,” another democratic list in which the quotidian gains cosmological significance.

Polysyndeton deliberately forgoes traditional syntax for drama—for repetition and rhythm, for the attribution of singular importance to each item in the construction, for the accumulation of meaning and feeling over the course of the sentence. It is a powerful device, therefore, for imbuing everyday moments with striking intensity, as its deployment within the lyric tradition bears out. D.H. Lawrence manipulates polysyndeton in order to convey the majesty of the snake, for instance, within his poem of the same name:

He drank enough
And lifted his head, dreamily, as one who has drunken,
And flickered his tongue like a forked night on the air, so black,
Seeming to lick his lips,
And looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air,
And slowly turned his head,
And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice adream,
Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round
And climb again the broken bank of my wall-face. (350)

The cadence created by these successive conjunctions enhance Lawrence’s depiction of smooth and controlled motions of the snake’s body; the passage’s long lines and uneven lineation both retard and syncopate our reading, mimicking the slow, though unpredictable, movement of the snake along the speaker’s water trough—a movement that is also simulated by the poem’s curvy visual presentation on the printed page.
As Lawrence’s poem demonstrates, polysyndeton can turn the very ordinary into a thing of wonder, but the syntactical structure is itself very simple, composed only of phrases and clauses that are linked through repeated coordinating conjunctions. The grammatical simplicity of this rhetorical construction is made explicit in the purposefully pared-down verse of Lucille Clifton, especially in her lyric, “good times”:

My Daddy has paid the rent
and the insurance man is gone
and the lights is back on
and my uncle Brud has hit
for one dollar straight
and they is good times
good times
good times

My Mama has made bread
and Grampaw has come
and everybody is drunk
and dancing in the kitchen
and singing in the kitchen
oh these is good times
good times
good times
oh children think about the
good times

The good times consist of simple pleasures: settled bills, home-cooked food, the company of family. Accordingly, they are expressed in short lines, colloquial language, and simple syntax. This poem showcases the austere structure that undergirds polysyndeton, though, as we have seen by now, this structure can be harnessed for a variety of dynamic—and complex—rhetorical effects, from Clifton’s minimalism to Whitman’s exuberance, from the controlled meter of Blake’s “A Poison Tree” to the loose syncopation of Lawrence’s “Snake.” In each case, however, polysyndeton accumulates rather than narrates details; also in each case, it generates a discernible rhythm, albeit one that is open and flexible.

Even in the absence of lineation—though probably, I suggest, because of its close alignment with lineation in the lyric tradition—polysyndeton continues to order language into rhythmic patterns within prose fiction. In fact, while Pinksy locates the line as the basic source of rhythm within free verse poetry, Paul Fussell points instead to patterns of language and syntax that do not necessarily require lineation for their effect: “free-verse lines, deprived of pattern in one dimension, the metrical, tend to compensate by employing another kind of pattern, conspicuous repetition of phrases or syntactical forms” (79). Though he does not call these constructions by their rhetorical names, Fussell cites poems that make use of anaphora and polysyndeton as prime examples of his claim. Polysyndeton’s near-Biblical repetition of the coordinator “and” creates rhythmic patterns within prose for heightened dramatic effect.

A number of prominent twentieth-century novelists have exploited polysyndeton’s rhetorical strengths within their prose fiction. Generally regarded as master stylists on opposite ends of the stylistic spectrum, both Faulkner and Hemingway maximize polysyndeton’s potential

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24 The original collection does not contain pagination; the poem is simply listed as number “10.”
for generating rhythm during emotionally climactic moments of their prose, from scenes that recount tender instances of love and passion to scenes of intense violence and trauma. These passages provide stark contrasts to the rest of their prose, though for very different reasons: polysyndeton’s reliance on coordination runs counter to Faulkner’s proclivity for complicated layers of subordination, while the sheer length of these coordinations run counter to Hemingway’s preference for brief and compact sentences. DeLillo and McCarthy use polysyndeton with greater regularity, turning this device into a stylistic staple in ways that deliberately resist narrative’s desire to sort details into hierarchies, much to Myers’s chagrin. These writers, after all, are constructing fictional worlds in which people and events are connected neither through causality nor purpose but through coincidence and chance circumstance. Polysyndeton is an ideal syntactic structure for narratives like these, in which hierarchical distinctions are flattened in favor of lateral systems of interconnectivity.

Though it contains many of the themes, ambiguities, and exegetical difficulties of Faulkner’s other works, Go Down, Moses is not generally regarded as one of his greatest literary achievements. Faulkner is admired for his experiments with structure and point of view in The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying, and Absalom, Absalom!, but somehow the generically amalgamated Go Down, Moses does not quite appeal to critics in the same way. Many insist on calling it a collection of stories, many of which were published separately prior to the publication of Go Down, Moses, but Faulkner insisted on changing the publisher’s title—originally Go Down, Moses and Other Stories—arguing that it “is indeed a novel” that has taken on “an integrated form of its own” (Faulkner, SL 144, 273). In what follows, I argue that the work also participates in the genre of the lyric, containing lengthy polysyndetic passages that mark a
departure from the hierarchical style of Faulkner’s more canonical novels and allowing him to express those themes to which he perennially returns—slavery, modernity, Southern history, and all of the moral and political questions that are bundled within these topics—in a format that deliberately refuses to sort itself out.

One of the great difficulties of reading Faulkner’s prose is his penchant for nested clauses and appositives, which causes his sentences to become so complex that their main clauses are buried under layers of subordination. Take, for instance, the following sentence from Go Down, Moses, which begins with a depiction of black tenant farmer Lucas Beauchamp and his relationship to the McCaslin plantation, though it quickly sprawls into a variety of directions that become increasingly difficult to track:

He had worked on it ever since he got big enough to hold a plow straight; he had hunted over every foot of it during his childhood and youth and his manhood too, up to the time when he stopped hunting, not because he could no longer walk a day’s or a night’s hunt, but because he felt that the pursuit of rabbits and ’possums for meat was no longer commensurate with his status as not only the oldest man but the oldest living person on the Edmonds plantation, the oldest McCaslin descendant even though in the world’s eye he descended not from McCaslins but from McCaslin slaves almost as old as old Isaac McCaslin who lived in town, supported by what Roth Edmonds chose to give him, who would own the land and all on it if his just rights were only known, if people just knew how old Cass Edmonds, this one’s grandfather, had beat him out of his patrimony, almost as old as old Isaac, almost, as old Isaac was, coeval with old Buck and Buddy McCaslin who had been alive when their father, Carothers McCaslin, got the land from the Indians back in the old time when men black and white were men. (36-7)
The main clause that begins the sentence—Lucas having worked the land since he was a small child—becomes submerged under the subordinate clause that depicts Lucas’s age, which in turn becomes submerged under the clause detailing Lucas’s genealogy, which in turn becomes submerged under the clause that traces the genealogy of the plantation itself. Sentences like these often require several re-readings, given the complexity of the grammatical hierarchies they establish.

Faulkner’s reliance on a rhetorical device that deliberately resists hierarchical arrangement during key passages of Go Down, Moses may come as something of a surprise, since it marks a significant departure from an otherwise convoluted prose that strives for structural complexity. Then again, perhaps not, since—like Absalom, Absalom! before it—Go Down, Moses is deeply indebted to the Old Testament, one of Faulkner’s most treasured literary inspirations. “The books I read are the ones I knew and loved when I was a young man and to which I return as you do to old friends: the Old Testament, Dickens, Conrad, Cervantes,” he remarked during a 1956 interview (J. Stein, “William Faulkner”). Like the Old Testament, Go Down, Moses is structured as a family saga, tracking the complete history of the McCaslin family and its various branches over a hundred-year time span. Traces of Faulkner’s Biblical influence course throughout the novel, but they are made most explicit at the level of textual and paratextual allusion, especially as Faulkner insists that we read the enslavement of blacks in the antebellum South through the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt. The novel’s title derives from the black spiritual that depicts the events of Exodus, in which Moses leads the Israelites to freedom, and in the titular section that closes the novel, Mollie Beauchamp likens her grandson Samuel’s eviction from the McCaslin plantation to his being sold into slavery: “Roth Edmonds sold my Benjamin. Sold him in Egypt. Pharoah got him” (353). Like the Biblical Isaac, Ike
McCaslin is born to older parents, and the Old Testament is even invoked by Ike himself during his lengthy debate with McCaslin Edmonds over his inheritance, the McCaslin plantation. Here, Ike rewrites “Genesis”—without introducing subordination—in order to articulate his belief that the South has broken its pact with God and humanity through the institution of slavery, a belief that will ultimately lead him to repudiate his inheritance:

Because He told in the Book how He created the earth, made it and looked at it and said it was all right, and then He made man. He made the earth first and peopled it with dumb creatures, and then He created man to be His overseer on the earth and to hold suzerainty over the earth and the animals on it in His name, not to hold for himself and his descendants inviolable title forever, generation after generation, to the oblongs and squares of the earth, but to hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood, and all the fee He asked was pity and humility and sufferance and endurance and the sweat of his face for bread. (246)

In replacing their own labor with the sweat of others, in violating the “communal anonymity of brotherhood” by creating a hierarchy instead, the plantation system violated the democratic configuration that, according to Ike, God had envisioned for mankind. Ike may adapt the content of the creation story to fit his narrative of the antebellum south, but he maintains the leveling syntax of the Biblical passage in a way that underscores its inherent resistance to hierarchy, especially the brutal stratification established under slavery.

The imposition of hierarchy onto a democratic framework is the very kernel around which Go Down, Moses is organized, along with the question of how to restore some semblance of equality to a nation irreparably damaged by slavery. The manumission of the slaves on the McCaslin plantation by Buck and Buddy, the reparations they established for the otherwise
unacknowledged black lineage of the McCaslin family—the result of Old Carother McCaslin’s affair with his slave, Eunice and with their daughter together, Tomasina—and Ike’s refusal to inherit the land that was once the plantation all mark the attempts of the McCaslins to redress the systemic inequality in which they are all complicit. In a novel that struggles to correct the injustices of a hierarchy based on racism and brute power, then, perhaps it is not so surprising after all that Faulkner would rely heavily on a syntax that, like Ike’s paraphrasing of “Genesis,” stresses equality over inequality.

One of the many uses to which polysyndeton is put in Go Down, Moses is the catalogue, which has a strong metonymic function in the novel. Concrete objects often stand in for—or replace—abstract concepts, including the enigmatic bear, Old Ben, who serves as the object of the hunt in the long section “The Bear” that constitutes nearly a third of the novel. This is no ordinary bear, after all, but an instantiation of the wilderness itself and a piece of folklore that has reached mythic proportions: “It was of the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document” (183). Until his appearance in the third subsection, Old Ben is depicted obliquely through catalogues of the damage he has left in his wake, which are as legendary as the bear itself: “the long legend of corn-cribs broken down and rifled, or shoats and grown pigs and even calves carried bodily into the woods and devoured and traps and deadfalls overthrown and dogs mangled and slain and shotgun and even rifle shots delivered at point-blank range yet with no more effect than so many peas blown through a tube by a child” (185). Like the Biblical catalogue in “Genesis,” the inventory that enumerates Old Ben’s destruction picks up momentum through polysyndeton, amassing a rhythm that matches the accumulation of the bear’s damage, which grows from ransacked corn patches to mangled animal corpses to Ben’s imperviousness to shotgun slugs and rifle bullets alike.
Inventories also, however, stand in metonymically for the competing value systems at stake in Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County at the turn of the century. One of the novel’s chief points of focus is the South’s transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy, and the agrarian South is paradoxically depicted with deep nostalgia as Faulkner romanticizes the very folk life that would seem to warrant his criticism, since it is only made possible through the exploitative conditions of slavery. In the novel’s climactic commissary scene, Ike traces this shift from agriculture to industry through the catalogues within his family’s ledgers, which chronicle the “whole land in miniature … that slow trickle of molasses and meal and meat, of shoes and straw hats and overalls, of plowlines and collars and heel-bolts and buckheads and clevises, which returned each fall as cotton” (280-1). Ike also articulates this transition through yet another rewriting of “Genesis” adapted for the antebellum South, this time exploiting the original passage’s focus on enumeration:

Until one day He said … This is enough and looked about for one last time, for one time more since He had created them, upon this land this South for which He had done so much with woods for game and streams for fish and deep rich soil for seed and lush springs to sprout it and long summers to mature it and serene falls to harvest it and short mild winters for men and animals and saw no hope anywhere and looked beyond it where hope should have been … (271)

Here, the South is an agrarian cornucopia that competes with Eden in its beauty and bounty, though it is also devoid of “hope” because of its reliance on slavery. As in all of his novels, Faulkner’s attitude toward the South is ambivalent in Go Down, Moses, and its agricultural economy is critiqued in some places, romanticized in others. The same passage, in fact, goes on
to provide a cynical panorama of the rest of the country, depicted as a depraved medicine show against the quiet, natural beauty of the rural South:

… where to East North and West lay illiminable that whole hopeful continent dedicated as a refuge and sanctuary of liberty and freedom from what you called the old world’s worthless evening and saw the rich descendants of slavers, females of both sexes, to whom the black they shrieked of was another specimen another example like the Brazilian macaw brought home in a cage by a traveller, passing resolutions about horror and outrage in warm and air-proof halls: and the thundering cannonade of politicians earning votes and the medicine-shows of pulpiteers earning Chautauqua fees, to whom the outrage and the injustice were as much abstractions as Tariff or Silver or Immortality and who employed the very shackles of its servitude and the sorry rags of its regalia as they did the other beer and banners and mottoes redfire and brimstone and sleight-of-hand and musical handsaws: and the whirling wheels which manufactured for a profit the pristine replacements of the shackles and shoddy garments as they wore out and spun the cotton and made the gins which ginned it and the cars and ships which hauled it, and the men who ran the wheels for that profit and established and collected the taxes it was taxed with and the rates for hauling it and the commissions for selling it: and He could have repudiated them since they were his creation now and forever more throughout all their generations. (272)

Northern industrial business practices, these catalogues suggest, are not much of an improvement over the conditions of slavery. In fact, these polysyndetic coordinations suggest that they are more or less equivalent. The shackles of the plantation system have been replaced by the shackles of commercialism, a low-brow version of capitalism that is premised on sales gimmicks
and peddled by charlatans. Unlike the world of agriculture, the business world does not even require a relationship with the land—unless, of course, the business is real estate, in which case the relationship is based solely on investment and profit:

And the New England mechanics who didn’t even own land and measured all things by the weight of water and the cost of turning wheels and the narrow fringe of traders and ship-owners still looking backward across the Atlantic and attached to the continent only by their counting-houses. And those who should have had the alertness to see: the wildcat manipulators of mythical wilderness townsites; and the astuteness to rationalize: the bankers who held the mortgages on the land which the first were only waiting to abandon and on the railroads and steamboats to carry them still further west, and on the factories and the wheels and the rented tenements those who ran them lived in. (275)

Hardly the bastion of “hope” it was intended to be, the North is represented in these catalogues as a de-humanizing wasteland, yet another system of profit and exploitation in which the planter has been replaced by the banker.

This schematic is also reinforced by the catalogues depicting the fate of Major de Spain’s hunting camp after he sells the land to a lumber company that has begun to deforest the area that once served as the setting for the bear hunt. Years later, Ike returns to a scarcely-recognizable camp that has been ravaged by the lumber and railroad industries:

[Ike] looked about in shocked and grieved amazement even though he had had forewarning and had believed himself prepared: a new planing-mill already half completed which would cover two or three acres and what looked like miles and miles of stacked steel rails red with the light bright rust of newness and of piled crossties sharp with creosote, and wire corrals and feeding-troughs for two hundred mules at least and
the tents for the men who drove them; so that he arranged for the care and stabling of his mare as rapidly as he could and did not look any more, mounted into the log-train caboose with his gun and climbed into the cupola and looked no more save toward the wall of wilderness ahead within which he would be able to hide himself from it once more anyway. (303-4)

The half-completed planing mill, the stacked steel rails, and the wire corrals and feeding trough for the mules that carry these materials of industry are catalogued here as metonyms for the larger process that is taking place, the erasure of the wilderness by the encroachment of industry.

From these non-narrative catalogues emerge the novel’s competing systems of economy and, subsequently, of value. The plantation carries aesthetic value but at the expense of the value of the human; business and industry apparently de-value both in favor of profit. Still, how Faulkner squares his critique of slavery with his disdain for its economic alternative remains unclear, since he presents these systems through lengthy polysyndetic inventories, the items of which are connected only through coordinating conjunctions. There is no hierarchy within or among these catalogues that would indicate what relationship the listed items bear to one another; instead, they contain only relations of equivalence, suggesting that Northern business practices are modernity’s counterpart to antebellum slavery.

Catalogues are only one of the many ways in which the apparently non-narrative structure of polysyndeton becomes an important narrative mode within Go Down, Moses. In fact, polysyndeton becomes a formal strategy for narrating scenes of intense emotional climax within the novel. When the black tenant farmer Lucas Beauchamp prepares to threaten Zack Edmonds, son of the plantation owner McCaslin Edmonds, with a razor in an effort to retrieve his wife, Mollie—whom Edmonds has taken for himself in the wake of his own wife’s death—Faulkner’s
sentences are punctured by conjunctions that build anticipation for a potentially violent confrontation: “He was waiting for daylight. He could not have said why. He squatted against a tree halfway between the carriage gate and the white man’s house, motionless as the windless obscurity itself while the constellations wheeled and the whippoorwills choired faster and faster and ceased and the first cocks crowed and the false dawn came and faded and the birds began and the night was over” (51). When grieving widower Rider returns home after burying his beloved wife Mannie, he re-imagines the hearth as it appeared during their marriage through the gentle cadence produced by polysyndeton when it joins together longer phrases:

And they married and he rented the cabin from Carothers Edmonds and built a fire on the hearth on their wedding night as the tale told how Uncle Lucas Beauchamp, Edmonds’ oldest tenant, had done on his forty-five years ago and which had burned ever since; and he would rise and dress and eat his breakfast by lamplight to walk the four miles to the mill by sunup, and exactly one hour after sundown he would enter the house again, five days a week, until Saturday. Then the first hour would not have passed noon when he would mount the steps and knock, not on post or doorframe but on the underside of the gallery roof itself, and enter and ring the bright cascade of silver dollars onto the scrubbed table in the kitchen where his dinner simmered on the stove and the galvanized tub of hot water and the baking powder can of soft soap and the towel made of scalded flour sacks sewn together and his clean overalls and shirt waited, and Mannie would gather up the money and walk the half-mile to the commissary and buy their next week’s supplies and bank the rest of the money in Edmonds’ safe and return and they would eat once again without haste or hurry after five days. (134)
Polysyndeton becomes a vehicle for Rider’s grief, the slow and deliberate rhythm of which matches Rider’s routine yet painful melancholy. When Samuel Beauchamp’s corpse is finally delivered to Aunt Mollie’s house for a proper burial in the novel’s last, titular section, the dignified solemnity of the occasion is marked by polysyndeton, as well: “Then, with the idle white men and youths and small boys and probably half a hundred Negroes, men and women too, watching quietly, the Negro undertaker’s men lifted the gray-and-silver casket from the train and carried it to the hearse and snatched the wreaths and floral symbols of man’s ultimate and inevitable end briskly out and slid the casket in and flung the flowers back and clapped-to the door” (363).

Faulkner is not noted for his tenderness; one of the great jokes in Faulkner studies is that the author reserves his most romantic and reciprocal love connection for Ike Snopes and Houston’s cow in *The Hamlet.* There are moments within “The Bear,” however, that approach this tenor, and they are depicted through the repetitive coordinations of polysyndeton, which produce an easy and flexible rhythm for these scenes of unusual softness. Ike’s love and desire for his new wife—juxtaposed against her coldness—is narrated in this way:

He wanted to see her naked because he loved her and he wanted to see her looking at him naked because he loved her but after that he never mentioned it again, even turning his face when she put the nightgown on over her dress to undress at night and putting the dress on over the gown to remove it in the morning and she would not let him get into bed beside her until the lamp was out and even in the heat of summer she would draw the sheet up over them both before she would let him turn to her. (299)

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25 This irony is continuously highlighted in studies of Faulkner and humor. See Campbell and Foster, p. 98; Cross, p. 210-11; and R. Cox, p. 2. For a serious close reading of the erotic scenes between Ike and the cow, see Godden, “Comparative Cows,” p. 609-11.
This polysyndetic passage also sets up Ike’s betrayal at the hands of his young wife, who exploits Ike’s desire for her in order to secure his promise that he will agree to inherit the plantation after all. Gradually, she turns his refusals—“’No, I tell you. I wont. I cant. Never’” (300)—into a reluctant affirmation that is muddled with passion: “then he stopped thinking and even saying Yes, it was like nothing he had ever dreamed, let along heard in mere man-talking until after a no-time he returned and lay spent on the insatiate immemorial beach and again with a movement one time more older than man she turned and freed herself and on their wedding night she had cried and he thought she was crying now at first … [but she was] laughing and laughing” (300-1). The identity of Ike’s young wife is left mysterious—she remains unnamed, and she dies young of undisclosed causes—but Ike’s heartbreaking interactions with her, narrated via polysyndeton, constitute some of the most poignant scenes in the novel.

Other scenes of high emotional intensity are propelled by coordinating conjunctions, as well, including the hunting scenes that mark Ike’s initiation into the wilderness by Major de Spain and General Compson. In a quasi-religious commemoration of Ike’s first kill, Sam Fathers anoints Ike with the blood of his buck on one of their inaugural hunting trips together: “and Sam Fathers said, ‘Now. Shoot quick and shoot slow:’ and the gun levelled rapidly without haste and crashed and he walked to the buck lying still intact and still in the shape of that magnificent speed and bled it with Sam’s knife and Sam dipped his hands into the hot blood and marked his face forever while he stood trying not to tremble” (334). The long-anticipated killing of Old Ben is also narrated through polysyndeton, elevating the ritualistic hunt to a level of Biblical significance: “then the bear surged erect, raising with it the man and the dog too, and turned and still carrying the man and the dog it took two or three steps toward the woods on its hind feet as a
man would have walked and crashed down” (231). Here, polysyndeton appears to capture this scene in slow motion, protracting several seconds of action into multiple lines of prose.

The unusual syntax of polysyndeton, it turns out, is an ideal vehicle for narrating these lyrical moments that foreground metonymic meaning and emotional intensity over plot. Those hierarchies and relationships that we would expect from narrative fiction may be deliberately obscured within key moments of Go Down, Moses—Faulkner’s nostalgia, for instance, for the agrarian way of life that is premised on the very system of slavery he also wants to critique—but whatever we might lose in terms of clarity or coherence at the level of plot we gain in terms of the drama and feeling, especially with regard to those internal conflicts that haunt Ike McCaslin and Faulkner alike. Paradoxically, polysyndeton’s disregard for complexity and conflict on a structural level also makes it an ideal syntax for representing those tensions and inconsistencies that are not easily reconciled.

Faulkner and Hemingway are often positioned as stylistic contraries, and for good reason: unlike Faulkner, Hemingway is known for a prose style that is terse and laconic, described by Philip Young as “a colloquial and, apparently, a nonliterary prose, characterized by a conscientious simplicity of diction and sentence structure” (204). Hemingway is remembered as a pioneering minimalist, and it is this iconic prose style that effectively secured his position in our literary canon: when awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954, Hemingway was honored by the committee “for his mastery of the art of narrative, most recently demonstrated in The Old Man and the Sea, and for the influence he has exerted on contemporary style” (“Nobel”).
Like Faulkner, however, Hemingway was also deeply invested in polysyndeton, a rhetorical device that expands rather than contracts the sentence, proliferating rather than eliminating words through the repetition of coordinating conjunctions. Hemingway is so renowned for his economy of style that critics have not given sustained attention to his use of polysyndeton, though he frequently used this construction to narrate scenes of emotional intensity within his fiction. The syntax of these polysyndetic coordinations is particularly striking against Hemingway’s otherwise bare and minimalist prose, marking a dramatic departure from the concise, abrupt sentences that are usually associated with his style. Polysyndeton appears in nearly all of Hemingway’s novels, but *A Farewell to Arms*—a work that spans life’s extremities, from the horrors of war to the grandeur of love—contains some of its most poignant instances, used by Hemingway to articulate the outermost limits of pain and pleasure in the time of war.

Hemingway’s reputation as a minimalist derives not only from his austerity with regard to language and syntax but also from his insistence on the power of narrative omission, now referred to as his famous “iceberg” principle: “If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer has stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water” (*Death* 154). The iceberg principle demands a mode of narration that is oblique rather than direct; consequently, it demands an active reader who is able to uncover those seven-eighths of the iceberg that remain submerged under water.

Polysyndeton contributes to Hemingway’s iceberg principle by eliding those routine hierarchies—relationships of cause-and-effect or temporal succession, statements modified by caveats and exceptions—we normally expect from narrative. The opening lines of *A Farewell to
Arms supply a beautiful example of polysyndeton’s potential for obscuring relationships among items and events in a way that forces the reader to piece them together:

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves. (3)

What appears to be an objective description of a neutral event—the movement of troops across a pastoral backdrop—is actually a subtle indictment of war, as James Phelan has aptly demonstrated in his analysis of this opening scene. The troops are not only juxtaposed to the natural world, they are disrupting it, kicking up dust that causes the leaves on the trees to fall unseasonably early (Phelan 55). Without those linking subordinators that would normally clarify the action of this passage, however, the antagonistic relationship between war and nature remains buried under a mound of conjunctions.

Hemingway too couples polysyndeton with the catalogue when setting up scenes or items of metonymic importance, including the idyll that recounts Frederic and Catherine’s bucolic Swiss hideaway, their asylum from the war they have both just deserted. It is depicted in pieces through a polysyndetic inventory of the rustic track marks, structures, and terrains that make up the landscape:
Outside, in front of the chalet a road went up the mountain. The wheel ruts and ridges were iron hard with the frost, and the road climbed steadily through the forest and up and around the mountain to where there were meadows, and barns and cabins in the meadows at the edge of the woods looking across the valley. … In front of the house where we lived the mountain went down steeply to the little plain along the lake and we sat on the porch of the house in the sun and saw the winding of the road down the mountain-side and the terraced vineyards on the side of the lower mountain, the vines all dead now for the winter and the fields, divided by stone walls, and below the vineyards the houses of the town on the narrow plain along the lake shore. (289-90)

Peppered with wheel ruts, cabins, and vineyards, their countryside sanctuary is as removed from time and the ravages of modernity as it is from the war. The Italian province of Abruzzi—the home of Frederic’s friend, the priest—receives a similar treatment as Frederic fantasizes about its rustic charm: “I had wanted to go to Abruzzi. I had gone to no place where the roads were frozen and hard as iron, where it was clear cold and dry and the snow was dry and powdery and hare-tracks in the snow and the peasants took off their hats and called you Lord and there was good hunting” (13). Here, the conjunctions not only contribute to Abruzzi’s appeal, they also convey Frederic’s accruing regret over his failure to take his military leave in Abruzzi on the priest’s recommendation: “I myself felt as badly as [the priest] did and could not understand why I had not gone. It was what I had wanted to do and I tried to explain how one thing had led to another and finally he saw it and understood that I had really wanted to go and it was almost all right. I had drunk much wine and afterward coffee and Strega and I explained, winefully, how we did not do the things we wanted to do; we never did such things.” Both Switzerland and Abruzzi are
figured as places of refuge untouched by war, though Frederic visits Abruzzi only in his imagination.

Polysyndeton not only replaces traditional narrative at points in Hemingway’s writing, it also points to narrative’s failure to articulate moments and feelings that cannot be given a coherent rationale. When Frederic attempts to articulate why he fails to visit Abruzzi, the result is a lengthy, rambling passage in which he uses the language of polysyndeton because he “could not tell it”:

I had gone to no such place [Abruzzi] but to the smoke of cafés and nights when the room whirled and you needed to look at the wall to make it stop, nights in bed, drunk, when you knew that that was all there was, and the strange excitement of waking and not knowing who it was with you, and the world all unreal in the dark and so exciting that you must resume again unknowing and not caring in the night, sure that this was all and all and all and not caring. Suddenly to care very much and to sleep to wake with it sometimes morning and all that had been there gone and everything sharp and hard and clear and sometimes a dispute about the cost. Sometimes still pleasant and fond and warm and breakfast and lunch. Sometimes all niceness gone and glad to get out on the street but always another day starting and then another night. I tried to tell about the night and the difference between the night and the day and how the night was better unless the day was very clean and cold and I could not tell it; as I cannot tell it now. But if you have had it you know. (13)

Sentences are reduced to fragments as the subjects of Frederic’s clauses disappear. Instead, his account of how he spent his leave is reduced to a series of sensations: “strange excitement,” “not caring,” “sharp and hard and clear,” “pleasant and fond and warm.” Narrative fails to articulate
why we “did not do the things we wanted to do” or how “one thing had led to another” (13), but polysyndeton addresses the disorder and momentum behind the chain of events that prevent Frederic from realizing his good intentions.

In many ways, polysyndeton is better suited to the reality of lived experience than the traditional grammatical structures of narrative, which order things and events into hierarchical arrangements somewhat artificially. Hemingway strove to recreate the immediacy of lived experience in his writing, as he reveals in his personal letters while reflecting on his craft. Writing to his father, Hemingway explains, “You see I’m trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across—not to just depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive. So that when you have read something by me you actually experience the thing” (Baker 153). Hemingway reiterates his sense that experience can be conveyed through language in a letter to Everett Perry defending his use of profanity in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: “I am trying, always, to convey to the reader a full and complete feeling of the thing I am dealing with; to make the person reading feel it has happened to them” (*SL* 380).

For Hemingway, love and war are as antithetical as Faulkner’s North and South, and these extremes are depicted through the dramatic syntax of polysyndeton, which is exploited for highly emotionally-charged moments. When the fateful mortar shell that lands Frederic in the hospital explodes near his trench and sends shrapnel into his knees, Frederic depicts his pain and confusion through a string of coordinating conjunctions:

…then there was a flash, as when a blast furnace door is swung open, and a roar that started white and went red and on and on in a rushing wind. I tried to breathe but my breath would not come and I felt myself rush bodily out of myself and out and out and out and all the time bodily in the wind. I went out swiftly, all of myself, and I knew I was
dead and that it had all been a mistake to think you just died. … There was a great splashing and I saw the starshells go up and burst and float whitely and rockets going up and heard the bombs, all this in a moment. (54-5)

A single “moment” is protracted through polysyndeton to span nearly a paragraph of prose in this dramatic recreation of Frederic’s fraught psychological state during the attack.

This dramatic syntax is also, however, used to depict those tender and intimate moments between Frederic and Catherine that have made this novel one of the best-known love stories of the last century. Before he is injured, Frederic fantasizes about joining Catherine in Milan, where she has been transferred, and imagines their first romantic encounter in a hotel room:

Maybe she would pretend that I was her boy that was killed and we would go in the front door and the porter would take off his cap and I would stop at the concierge’s desk and ask for the key and she would stand by the elevator and then we would get in the elevator and it would go up very slowly clicking at all the floors and then our floor and the boy would open the door and stand there and she would step out and I would step on and we would walk down the hall and I would put the key in the door and open it and go in and then take down the telephone and ask them to send a bottle of capri bianca in a silver bucket full of ice and you would hear the ice against the pail coming down the corridor and the boy would knock and I would say leave it outside the door please. Because we would not wear any clothes because it was so hot and the window open and the swallows flying over the roofs of the houses and when it was dark afterward and you went to the window very small bats hunting over the houses and close down over the trees and we would drink the Capri and the door locked and it hot and only a sheet and the whole night and we would both love each other all night in the hot night in Milan. (38)
By the end of the passage, Frederic’s narration is reduced again to sentence fragments—“and the
door locked and it hot and only a sheet.” The passage becomes a rhythmic incantation of images
and sensations as Frederic and Catherine finally bring to fruition the mounting sexual
anticipation that drives the passage.

The smooth rhythm of polysyndeton also propels those passages depicting the illicit
nights Catherine and Frederic spend together in the Milan hospital following his injury.
Ministering to Frederic and the other injured soldiers during the day, Catherine pays special
visits to Frederic during the night:

Once in the night I went to sleep and when I woke she was not there but I heard her
coming along the hall and the door opened and she came back to the bed and said it was
all right she had been downstairs and they were all asleep. … She brought crackers and
we ate them and drank some vermouth. … I went to sleep again in the morning when it
was light and when I was awake I found she was gone again. She came in looking fresh
and lovely and sat on the bed and the sun rose while I had the thermometer in my mouth
and we smelled the dew on the roofs and then the coffee of the men at the gun on the next
roof. (101-2)

The same syntax is used for one of the most sensuous passages in the novel, an iterative love
scene in which the soft and controlled movements of the two lovers are channeled through the
rolling conjunctions polysyndeton supplies:

I loved to take her hair down and she sat on the bed and kept very still, except suddenly
she would dip down to kiss me while I was doing it, and I would take out the pins and lay
them on the sheet and it would be loose and I would watch her while she kept very still
and then take out the last two pins and it would all come down and she would drop her
head and we would both be inside of it, and it was the feeling of inside a tent or behind a falls. (114)

All of the rhetorical advantages of polysyndeton work together in this passage. Each motion is isolated and imbued with a solemn significance, from Catherine’s kiss to Frederic’s handling of her hair pins; the conjunctions convey the smooth continuity of their movements; and their repetition creates a steady, lyrical rhythm. In fact, one could easily translate this passage into a free-verse poem by inserting line breaks before each conjunction:

I loved to take her hair down
And she sat on the bed
And kept very still
Except suddenly she would dip down to kiss me while I was doing it
And I would take out the pins
And lay them on the sheet
And it would be loose
And I would watch her
While she kept very still
And then take out the last two pins
And it would all come down
And she would drop her head
And we would both be inside of it
And it was the feeling of inside a tent
Or behind a falls. (114)

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26 Michael Reynolds also experiments with breaking Hemingway’s prose into verse lines in *Hemingway’s First War*, pp. 56.
Hemingway achieves rhythmic regularity by distributing these coordinating conjunctions more or less evenly throughout the passage, since—as the visual form of the free verse poem indicates—the length of the clauses that are separated by conjunctions are roughly equal. Hemingway buttresses these moments of lyrical intensity with a rhythmic cadence that propels these non-narrative passages through a formal, patterned movement.

Hemingway reverts to the lyrical syntax of polysyndeton to articulate those feelings that narrative cannot always sort out: confusion and failure, pain and trauma, sensual pleasure. Polysyndeton’s refusal to subordinate any one detail to another may render these passages difficult to read as narrative prose, but they make perfect sense as pieces of lyric poetry, which derives its momentum not from story but from feeling and form. While Faulkner and Hemingway generally reserve this syntax for moments of emotional climax, however, polysyndeton becomes a more frequent fixture for DeLillo and McCarthy, who exploit its non-narrative structure for building fictional worlds in which the traditional hierarchical arrangements of narrative—cause and consequence, degrees of importance and magnitude—no longer apply.

Hemingway’s polysyndetic sentences may remain overlooked by critics who have focused on Hemingway’s minimalism at the expense of his rhetorical flourishes, but they are not lost on Don DeLillo. “The Hemingway sentence is what makes Hemingway,” he once declared during an interview. “It’s not the bullfights or the safaris or the wars. It’s a clear, direct, and vigorous sentence. It’s the simple connective—the word ‘and’ that strings together the segments of a long Hemingway sentence. The word ‘and’ is more important to Hemingway than Africa or Paris” (qtd. in Nel 20-1). In another interview, DeLillo quotes the opening lines from *A Farewell*
to Arms, paraphrasing the action but preserving the polysyndeton of the original passage as he recounts his formative reading experiences as a teenager in the Bronx: “And I’d look at a sentence in Ulysses or in Moby-Dick or in Hemingway—maybe I hadn’t gotten to Ulysses at that point, it was Portrait of the Artist—but certainly Hemingway and the water that was clear and swiftly moving and the way the troops went marching down the road and raised dust that powdered the leaves of the trees. All this in a playground in the Bronx” (Begley).

The rhythm of Hemingway’s sentences left an indelible impression on DeLillo, who states in the same interview that the sentence is the rhythmic kernel around which he builds his own prose:

> The basic work is built around the sentence. This is what I mean when I call myself a writer. I construct sentences. There’s a rhythm I hear that drives me through a sentence. And the words typed on the white page have a sculptural quality. They form odd correspondences. They match up not just through meaning but through sound and look. The rhythm of a sentence will accommodate a certain number of syllables. One syllable too many, I look for another word. There’s always another word that means nearly the same thing, and if it doesn’t then I’ll consider altering the meaning of a sentence to keep the rhythm, the syllable beat. I’m completely willing to let language press meaning upon me. Watching the way in which words match up, keeping the balance in a sentence—these are sensuous pleasures. (Begley)

DeLillo discusses his prose as if it is syllabic verse. “One syllable too many,” and the whole form threatens to collapse; rhythm takes precedence over content, which is malleable and subordinate to form. Readers of DeLillo may be surprised to learn of the careful attention to craft at the level of the sentence the author articulates in these interviews. DeLillo, after all, is known
as a postmodernist maximalist who forgoes craftsmanship for volume as well as “range and discursive multiplicity” in his effort to create narratives that are “encyclopedic” in length, scope, and allusiveness (O’Donnell 108). By the time he delivered his 1993 interview with the Paris Review, DeLillo had already published some of his most voluminous work to date, including Ratner’s Star (448 pages) and Libra (480 pages), and he would expand on his novella, “Pafko and the Wall,” in his next massive undertaking, the critically acclaimed Underworld (1997), which weighs in at a staggering 827 pages; yet it is this, DeLillo’s longest novel, that most frequently employs “the Hemingway sentence.” Certain passages sound close enough to A Farewell to Arms to qualify as rewrites, including the spontaneous love scene between Nick and Klara Sax, an older woman and an installation artist, which takes place in her art studio: “She liked stopping and watching, or looking away actually, or guiding his hand, or going into the kitchen for a glass of water and coming back and pouring it partly on his chest, a body disproportionate to the bedding, and then handing him the glass and watching him drink and thinking there was nothing crazy going on that she should clearly locate except that she was naked in her workroom” (DeLillo 733). This iterative passage contains strong echoes of the (also iterative, also polysyndetic) free-verse love scene between Frederic and Catherine in the Milan hospital, in which Frederic reports that he “loved to take her hair down” while they made love (Hemingway, Farewell 114).

Typically regarded as his magnum opus, Underworld is DeLillo’s most ambitious project to date. The novel contains both fictional and historical characters, with cameo appearances by Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, J. Edgar Hoover, and Lenny Bruce. Underworld also attempts to balance the global with the personal by chronicling the Cold War through the story of Nick Shay, who eventually becomes an executive for a nuclear waste management company. Nick’s story is

27 Philip Nel touches briefly on Hemingway’s influence on DeLillo, p. 20-21.
only one of the novel’s many fractured plotlines, however. Another tracks the fate of the famous baseball that was hit by Bobby Thomson, causing the Giants to win the 1951 National League pennant. Another tracks the career of Klara Sax, who has become quite successful since her affair with Nick years ago. Another tracks subway graffiti artist Ismael Muñoz, whose artwork commemorates the dead in the down-and-out underworld of the Bronx. Still another chronicles Sister Edgar as she ministers to the Bronx’s poor and homeless, taking special pains to try and save a young girl named Esmeralda who is eventually murdered. Unlike most of the other novels treated in this study, Underworld suffers from a surplus of plot, which splinters into a number of apparently unrelated strands.

In contradistinction to those bulky Victorian novels whose multiple plot strands eventually coincide in causally meaningful ways—in Eliot’s Middlemarch, for instance, Mary Garth’s refusal to carry out Featherstone’s dying wish in one subplot has a profoundly (and unexpectedly) negative impact on the fortune of her sweetheart, Fred, in another subplot—the characters and plotlines of DeLillo’s Underworld only ever appear to converge by happenstance. The novel is loosely organized around two major, though disparate, events of purportedly international significance: the home run that won the pennant for the Giants, dubbed “The Shot Heard Round the World,” and the explosion of a Soviet-engineered atomic bomb. Hoover is in the stands of the pennant game when he is informed about the Soviet atomic testing, and the game-winning baseball changes hands until finally ending up with Nick Shay, but the two plotlines do not meet again until much later in the novel when Klara’s husband, Bronzini, picks up a newspaper as he sips his morning coffee:

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28 For a reading of the juxtaposition of these two plots and what they might reveal about the relationship between plot and motive, see Bérubé.
The front page astonished him, a pair of three-column headlines dominating. To his left the Giants capture the pennant, beating the Dodgers on a dramatic home run in the ninth inning. And to the right, symmetrically mated, same typeface, same-size type, same number of lines, the USSR explodes an atomic bomb—\textit{kaboom}—details kept secret.

He didn’t understand why the Times would take a ball game off the sports page and juxtapose it with news of such ominous consequence. (668)\textsuperscript{29}

Bronzini is mystified by the juxtaposition of these two unrelated events, one of which seems so insignificant on a global scale. “The Shot Heard Round the World? Is the rest of the world all that interested?” he asks his friend, the priest Father Paulus, who replies,

“We may take it that the term applies to the suddenness of the struck blow and the corresponding speed at which news is transmitted these days. Our servicemen in Greenland and Japan surely heard the home-run call as it was made on Armed Forces Radio. You’re right, of course. They’re not talking about this in the coffeehouses of Budapest. Although in fact poor Ralph Branca happens to be half Hungarian. Sons of immigrants. Branca and Thomson both. Bobby himself born in Scotland, I believe. You see why our wins and losses tend to have impact well beyond our borders.” (670)

Father Paulus effectively recalibrates Bronzini’s conception of the global, shifting the terms from scope and importance to terms of interconnection. Americans across the globe can share in the same national event at the same time thanks to modern media technology. The players’ status as second-generation immigrants suggests the interconnectedness of nations by way of immigration. One of the great themes of Underworld is this vague relational quality that DeLillo identifies as interconnection. In fact, the novel ends not in the Bronx, nor in Phoenix where Nick

currently lives, but in cyberspace, where even the novel’s most disparate characters and plotlines become hyperlinked to one another: “The bulldog fed, J. Edgar Hoover, the Law’s debased saint, hyperlinked at last to Sister Edgar—a single fluctuating impulse now, a piece of coded information. Everything is connected in the end” (826).

“Everything is connected”—a line from *Gravity’s Rainbow* that is iterated and reiterated by waste manager Jesse Detwiler (289) Matt Shay (465), and by the novel’s intermittent third-person narrator (408, 825, 826)—and indeed, many things in the novel are connected, on a rhetorical level, through polysyndeton. *Underworld* contains a number of lengthy, non-narrative passages in which items are connected ambiguously through the coordinating conjunction. Naturally, given Nick Shay’s field work, many of these polysyndetic passages are devoted to mounds of waste—trash dumps, atomic waste burial sites, and piles of garbage heaped on residential street corners: “The garbage was down there, stacked in identical black plastic bags, and she [Klara] walked home past a broad mound that covered a fire hydrant and part of a bus sign and she saw how everyone agreed together not to notice” (388). *Underworld* notices; as its title suggests, it compulsively unearths the waste that everyone else tries to bury. “We built pyramids of waste above and below the earth,” Nick muses to himself. “The more hazardous the waste, the deeper we tried to sink it. The word plutonium comes from Pluto, god of the dead and ruler of the underworld” (106).

Nick’s colleague, Brian Glassic, shares Nick’s fascination with the waste that no one else ever “saw or thought about.” For Brian, as for Nick, a trash heap is a “unique cultural deposit” that invites us to imagine, via metonymy, the lives of others through their discarded items:

Specks and glints, ragg tails of color appeared in the stratified mass of covering soil, fabric scraps from the garment center, stirred by the wind, or maybe that teal thing is a bikini
brief that belonged to some secretary from Queens, and Brian found he could create a flash infatuation, she is dark-eyed and reads the tabloids and paints her nails and eats lunch out of molded styrofoam, and he gives her gifts and she gives him condoms, and it all ends up here, newsprint, emery boards, sexy underwear, coaxed into high relief by the rumbling dozers. (185)

Brian manages to spin an entire life portrait—complete with steamy relationship—around a bikini bottom through the mounting drama of polysyndeton as each new, imagined detail is appended to the last.

Nick’s depictions of waste also tend toward romanticism, particularly in the novel’s closing passages. Nick describes his pilgrimage to the local landfill with his granddaughter through the soft rhythm produced by polysyndeton:

I drive out there sometimes and see grackles sparking across the landfill, down past the Indian tribe streets, and sometimes I take our granddaughter along when she is here on a visit and we see the sage gray truss of the waste facility and the planes in their landing patterns and the showy desert plants spilling over the pastel walls above the parking area.

(805)

The passage, which depicts a wasteland—a waste facility amid a desert—almost approaches the pastoral. Birds and patterned airplanes alike flying overhead, plants “spilling” over pastel-colored walls: these polysyndetic sentences create a strangely aesthetic aerial depiction of an unremarkable garbage dump. Once inside the recycling shed that stands across from the landfill, Nick even admits that he feels a certain “reverence for waste, for the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard” (809). The public is mesmerized by the inner- and outer-workings of the plant, which are again depicted through the hypnotic rhythm of polysyndeton:
The kids love the machines, the balers and hoppers and long conveyors, and the parents look out the windows through the methane mist and the planes come out of the mountains and align for their approach and the trucks are arrayed in two columns outside the shed, bringing in the unsorted slop, the gut squalor of our lives, and taking the baled and bound units out into the world again, the chunky product blocks, pristine, newsprint for newsprint, tin for tin, and we all feel better when we leave. (810)

Waste—its content, its many afterlives—is elevated to a level of profound consequence when the novel’s careful attention to trash is coupled with this lyrical syntax. The waste plants and recycling centers that recur in the novel also function, however, as an important conceit for the complex network of interconnections by which our waste, whether via decay, recycling, or radioactivity, inevitably returns to us in alternate forms.30

Garbage is only one of the many quotidian assortments of items to receive lyrical treatment in Underworld. Father Paulus once again raises an important metafictional insight into the novel while discussing the importance of the ordinary with his pupil, a young Nick Shay: “Everyday things represent the most overlooked knowledge. These names are vital to your progress. Quotidian things. If they weren’t important, we wouldn’t use such a gorgeous Latinate word. … An extraordinary word that suggests the depth and reach of the commonplace” (542). The “depth and reach” of the commonplace, in fact, is quite emotional for a number of the novel’s characters. When Nick Shay recalls his long-absent father, who left when Nick was eleven years old, he evokes his father’s quotidian shaving routine:

He used to shave with a towel draped over his shoulder, wearing his undershirt, his singlet, and the blade made a noise I liked to listen to, a sandpaper scrape on his heavy

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30 For an extended treatment of the motif of “recycling” and its connection to the novel’s “vision of art,” see David Cowart.
beard, and the brush in the shaving cup, the Gem blade and the draped towel and the hot water from the tap—heat and skill and cutting edge. (106-7)

Nick’s distant memory of his father consists of the discrete parts of his father’s shaving kit, isolated here through the syntax of polysyndeton. Though Nick never divulges his feelings toward the man who abandoned his family, the detail with which he recalls father’s morning ritual betrays his pain.

Polysyndeton also sheds light on another vexed father-son relationship. As Manx Martin prepares to forever mar an already strained relationship with his son, Cotter, by selling the pennant-winning baseball that Cotter caught in the stands while playing hooky from school, he is overwhelmingly touched by the scene he encounters as he approaches the long line of people who are waiting to buy World Series tickets:

He sees fathers and sons standing around the fires to warm themselves, masses of people if you could count them, and mounted police with horses breathing steam, and he feels a rare elation, a wanting-to-be-among-them, and he is pulled along a little slack-jawed because it’s a great thing to see, and they’re singing and roaring warring songs, they’re back-and-forthing on the street with rough-and-tumble humor, all these ball fans striding toward the ticket lines at two or three in the morning or whatever the actual hour. (366)

The scene itself is unremarkable—a crowd waiting for baseball tickets—but the filial intimacy Manx witness between the other fathers and their sons produces a certain longing for connectedness within this otherwise aloof character: connectedness to his son, connectedness to this crowd and its spirit, connectedness to humanity. Manx’s desire for these human connections is articulated through the coordinating connectors that link all of these people together on a
structural level, even those who root for opposing teams: “and they’re all singing and roaring warring songs” (366).

Those passages in *Underworld* that strive most to represent connectivity rely on the syntax of polysyndeton. Artist Klara Sax has an epiphanic moment when she considers her preference for certain paints and materials in relation to her working-class background. She contemplates this connection through a polysyndetic inventory of the remarkably ordinary items that captured her imagination in her childhood:

For a while she used house paint, radiator paint. She liked rough surfaces, flaked paint on metal, she liked puttied window frames, all the gesso textures, the gluey chalks and linseeds that get mixed and smeared, that get *schmeered* onto a weathered length of wood. And it took her years to understand how this was connected to her life, to the working-class grain, the pocked sidewalks, beautiful blue slate in fact, cracked and granule at the corners, and the tar roofs, and the fire escapes of course, painted green and then black and how the flowoff of drips and trickles became elements of memory, and the aluminum paint on the whistling radiators, and the paint her father carried home to recoat the kitchen chairs, a chair upended on a newspaper page, and the spidery plash of white paint on the inked page, and the spattered page on the old linoleum. (471-2)

Klara realizes that her avant-garde painting style derives from her fascination with the non-artistic materials of her blue-collar background: cracked paint on a fire escape, aluminum paint on a radiator, the paint that her father accidentally slops on the floor as he coats the kitchen chairs. In the eyes of the artist, the ordinary is made extraordinary, a transmutation that is conveyed to the reader through these connecting coordinators.
Viewed one way, *Underworld* contains a surplus of plot; viewed another way, it is not really a plotted novel at all, but a novel about the relational quality of interconnection. These thin and fractured plotlines only seem to exist to intersect in ways that are coincidental: a ball game and a nuclear explosion appear side-by-side on the front page of the newspaper in the same summer that Nick and Klara embark on their affair; long afterward, Nick purchases the winning baseball from a seller; Bronzini happens to be both Klara Sax’s husband and chess teacher to Nick’s younger brother, Matt; Sister Edgar shares a name with J. Edgar Hoover. Polysyndeton too plays an important structural role in forging connections and erasing difference. This syntax elevates the quotidian to the level of the profound in a way that erases hierarchies between high and low culture, between orders of magnitude that would suggest the minute—a discarded bikini bottom, a father’s shaving routine, a painted fire escape, or, in Bronzini’s eyes, a pennant game—is any less consequential than the detonation of an atomic test bomb.

The idea that “everything is connected in the end” has a number of obvious moral, social, and political implications, but *Underworld* seems more interested in exploring the aesthetic dimensions of this mantra. The middle of the novel features a lengthy digression as Klara and her artist friends attend a viewing of a lost film—titled *Unterwelt*, or *Underworld*—by legendary Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, one of the first practitioners and theorists of montage. Montage is, in many ways, the visual equivalent of polysyndeton: images are conjoined in rapid succession for heightened emotional effect without any hierarchical connectors. As Klara watches the film, she admits to herself that “the plot was hard to follow. There was no plot” (430). In this sense, the film is a mise-en-abyme of *Underworld* since, like DeLillo, Eisenstein abandons traditional narrative for new modes of expression that do not build stories based on hierarchical arrangements.
The anonymous young street artist Ismael Muñoz, known to the public only as his “Moonman 157” the signature he appends to his work, combines the experimental aesthetics of Klara Sax and Sergei Eisenstein by collapsing the distinction between high and low-brow art and also in creating art that relies on the succession and juxtaposition of montage. A graffiti artist in the Bronx who uses the sides of subway cars as his canvas, he becomes an international spectacle whose work is photographed by tourists and coveted by New York’s finest art galleries. Much like Eisenstein’s montage, Moonman’s art necessarily appears in successive fragments, available to the observer only in fleeting glimpses as the subway blows past, a scene that is depicted, perhaps predictably, through polysyndeton:

But you have to stand on a platform and see it coming or you can’t know the feeling a writer gets, how the number 5 train comes roaring down the rat alleys and slams out of the tunnel, going whop-pop onto the high tracks, and suddenly there it is, Moonman riding the sky in the heart of the Bronx, over the whole burnt and rusted country, and this is the art of the backstreets talking, all the way from Bird, and you can’t not see us anymore, you can’t not know who we are, we got total notoriety now, Momzo Tops and Rimester and me, we’re getting fame, we ain’t ashamed, and the train go rattling over the garbagy streets and past the dead-eye windows of all those empty tenements that have people living there even if you don’t see them, but you have to see our tags and cartoon figures and bright and rhyming poems, this is the art that can’t stand still, it climbs across your eyeballs night and day, the flicker jumping art of the slums and dumpsters, flashing those colors in your face—like I’m your movie, motherfucker. (440-1)
The passage itself is sandwiched in-between scenes of the *Unterwelt* screening in a juxtaposition that suggests connections with the Eisenstein passages; in effect, Moonman’s subway car graffiti becomes the “underworld” equivalent of Eisenstein’s montage.

Connections abound in this novel, but their meaning and significance remain less certain. Thanks largely to *Libra*, DeLillo’s 1988 speculative novel in which Lee Harvey Oswald’s assassination of Kennedy has been orchestrated by the CIA as part of an elaborate plot to lead the U.S. into war with Cuba, DeLillo is often classified alongside Pynchon with the great “paranoid” writers of postmodernism. Webs of interconnection among seemingly disparate characters and events are taken by critics to be paranoid projections on the part of author and characters alike. To be sure, certain connections within the novel warrant this paranoid reading, not the least of which is the cause-and-effect relationship between nuclear testing and its human toll on the health of “downwinders,” deliberately obscured by the U.S. government. “Nobody’s supposed to know this. It’s something more or less out in the open but at the same time. … Secret. Untalked about. Hushed up,” Eric explains to Matt Shay, both of whom work for a government think tank that helps to construct bomb components (405). Nor is the U.S. the only government that is keeping secrets: the Soviets have their own “downwinders” to whom this relation of cause-and-effect is vehemently denied. On a work trip to the Russian city of Semipalatinsk, Nick and Brian are taken by their host, Viktor, himself a detonator for underground nuclear testing, to a nearby radiation clinic: “Viktor has been here four times, he says … to prove to himself he is not blind to the consequences. … The clinic has disfigurations,

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31 Mark Osteen argues that “what unites these disparate events and strands is capitalism” (243), but the passages I have quoted at length in this chapter reveal other, emotional dimensions of connectivity that are not easily explained by “capitalism.”

32 For “paranoid” readings of interconnection in *Underworld*, see Knight, Kellman, Ostrowski, and Apter.
leukemias, thyroid cancers, immune systems that do not function. … For many years the word radiation was banned” (800-1).

Other connections, however, are far less malignant, if no less unpleasant, than the case of nuclear fallout. Sister Edgar’s grief for Esmeralda, the murdered homeless girl she desperately tried to rescue from the gutter, leads her toward a nihilistic view of the world as a random and purposeless series of accidents: “She believes she is falling into crisis, beginning to think it is possible that all creation is a spurt of blank matter that chances to make an emerald planet here, a dead star there, with random waste between” (817). Sister Edgar’s worldview shifts yet again, however, at the novel’s close when Esmeralda’s face inexplicably appears on a billboard advertisement for orange juice: “She sees Esmerelda’s face take shape under the rainbow of bounteous juice and above the little suburban lake and there is a sense of someone living in the image, an animating spirit—less than a tender second of life, less than half a second and the spot is dark again” (822). The vision is witnessed by a large crowd of elated onlookers. It is nothing short of a miracle—an effect without a natural cause.

DeLillo presents a fictional world that sits atop a “tunneled underworld” of complex interconnections (826). Most of these connections, however, are coincidental and non-hierarchical, not the type we typically expect within narrative fiction. Which plotline(s) most deserves our narrative attention? Which connections of plot and character are more meaningful than others? DeLillo’s novel deliberately fails to supply answers to these questions. As a result, Underworld is a remarkably difficult novel to read, demanding that we direct our attention everywhere, but its lyrical syntax provides an important insight into the novel’s rhizomatic structure and its stubborn refusal to allow events of even the greatest magnitude—the threat of a nuclear apocalypse—to dwarf the quotidian.
If DeLillo may be taken to be Hemingway’s stylistic descendent, Cormac McCarthy is invariably taken to be Faulkner’s, and why not—the two writers have shared the same editor and publisher. Orville Prescott, Jonathan Yardley, Michael Herr, Caryn James, Richard Woodard, James Wood, Harold Bloom, and Mark Royden Winchell have all drawn the comparison between McCarthy and Faulkner, though Winchell provides one small but significant caveat: “Faulkner was at heart a moralist who believed in an irreducible core of human dignity,” Winchell argues. “His works possess a moral center, either explicit or implicit, that judges the evil and depravity of the world. In McCarthy’s universe that center either doesn’t exist or cannot hold” (294). McCarthy out-Faulkners Faulkner, these reviewers and critics often suggest: his subject matter is darker, his diction more arcane and esoteric, his syntax more tortuous, and *Blood Meridian*—the anti-Western that chronicles the bloody exploits of the historical Glanton gang—is widely regarded as his supra-Faulknerian magnum opus.

The novel’s syntax—now characteristic of McCarthy’s style— is one of the reasons for this compulsory comparison to Faulkner, and critics such as Dana Phillips and Andrew Hoberek have remarked on *Blood Meridian*’s “complex,” even “convoluted” sentence structure (Phillips 434; Hoberek 487). Perhaps the illusion of syntactic complexity is created by the novel’s recondite vocabulary, but in fact, the basic structure that underpins McCarthy’s syntax is remarkably simple: like Faulkner, Hemingway, and DeLillo, McCarthy too relies heavily on

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33 Albert Erskine served as Faulkner’s editor from 1958 until Faulkner’s death in 1962 (Williamson 322); he served as McCarthy’s editor from 1965 until his retirement in the mid-1980s, *Blood Meridian* marking their final collaboration. Faulkner published all of his novels subsequent to, and including, *Absalom, Absalom* with Random House; McCarthy has published all of his work to date with Random House, confessing that he sent his first manuscript there because “it was the only publisher I had heard of” (“Guide”).
polysyndeton, heightening drama at the expense, as early reviewers of the novel have complained, of narrative coherence.\textsuperscript{34}

B. R. Myers shares this complaint, arguing that “novels tolerate epic language only in moderation”; strong narrative prose requires those hierarchical relations that are flattened by the “pseudo-Biblical” syntax of polysyndeton (111). What’s more, he argues, McCarthy shows a lack of artistic discrimination in using the same dramatic syntax to depict events of unequal importance: “To record with the same somber majesty every aspect of a cowboy’s life, from a knife fight to his lunchtime burrito, is to create what can only be described as kitsch,” he maintains. “Here we learn that out west even a hangover is something special” (108).

Of course, this is the very point: McCarthy has taken pains within his border fiction to create fictional worlds that are devoid of the meaning, order, and hierarchical arrangement we ordinarily expect from narrative fiction, and he is quite explicit about this during passages of what Mieke Bal labels “argumentative” prose, or those occasional, non-narrative parts of a text that refer outside the story proper to a general fact or opinion (32-33). McCarthy’s universe is not structured around any moral—or narrative—order:

The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by any latitude in its conception to repeat what exists in one part in any other part. Even in this world more exists without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man’s mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others. (245)

\textsuperscript{34} See especially Caryn James’s 1985 review in the \textit{New York Times}, which concludes: “There are, of course, no answers to the life-and-death issues Mr. McCarthy raises, but there are more rigorous, coherent ways to frame the questions.”
Passages like these have led some critics to read a good amount of nihilism into the novel (see V. Bell, Shaviro, and Winchell), but more than that, they participate in a strain of anti-humanism that courses throughout all of McCarthy’s fiction. As I have argued elsewhere, the human realm is at once dwarfed by and integrated into the forces of natural history within McCarthy’s southern novels (Owens-Murphy 159). In Blood Meridian, the bleak landscape of the disputed border between Texas and Mexico plays as much a role in the novel as any of its characters, and no one detail is subordinated to any other. McCarthy is quite deliberate in his artistic “democracy,” as he calls it in another passage, and uses polysyndeton to express the inherent parity of each inhabitant of the landscape:

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (247)

These “unguessed kinships” resonate against Underworld’s insistence that “everything is connected”—and, as in DeLillo’s novel, these kinships, which remain mysterious, are necessarily non-hierarchical.

Because differences in value and import are flattened through the “unguessed kinships” represented by polysyndeton, this device depicts events ranging from the quotidian to the monumental. The ordinary is rendered suddenly dramatic, especially when coupled with McCarthy’s erudite vocabulary. Sunrises are theatrical, terrifying, and practically sentient:
They rode on and the sun in the east flushed pale streaks of light and then a deeper run of color like blood seeping up in sudden reaches flaring planewise and where the earth drained up into the sky at the edge of creation the top of the sun rose out of nothing like the head of a great red phallus until it cleared the unseen rim and sat squat and pulsing and malevolent behind them. (44-5).

The movement of the wagons across the desert landscape receives similar treatment:

The wagons drew so dry they slouched from side to side like dogs and the sand was grinding them away. The wheels shrank and the spokes reeled in their hubs and clattered like loomshafts and at night they’d drive false spokes into the mortices and tie them down with strips of green hide and they’d drive wedges between the iron of the tires and the suncracked felloes. (45)

The very change of seasons becomes a thing of wonder. Even the bloodthirsty Glanton, the leader of the scalp-hunting clan chronicled in the novel, pauses to admire a single leaf as the snow finally gives way to spring:

The leaves shifted in a million spangles down the pale corridors and Glanton took one and turned it like a tiny fan by its stem and held it and let it fall and its perfection was not lost on him. They rode through a narrow draw where the leaves were shingled up in ice and they crossed a high saddle at sunset where wild doves were rocketing down the wind and passing through the gap a few feet off the ground, veering wildly among the ponies and dropping off down into the blue gulf below. (136)

Because these apparently insignificant details of setting—a sunrise, a wagon, a leaf—receive as much dramatic attention in the novel as matters of life and death, we are asked, as readers, to focus our attention in a different way.
The dark converse of McCarthy’s artistic “democracy,” of course, is that the extraordinary necessarily sinks to the level of the ordinary. This is one of the most shocking aspects of *Blood Meridian*: its apparent disregard for human life, which receives as much—or as little—narrative attention as the leaf admired by Glanton in the above passage. Before joining the Glanton gang, the kid travels with a group of American filibusters, a number of whom become ill and die en route to Sonora, the Mexican territory they are charged with seizing:

On this day two men fell sick and one died before dark. In the morning there was another ill to take his place. The two of them were laid among sacks of beans and rice and coffee in the supply-wagon with blankets over them to keep them from the sun and they rode with the slamming and jarring of the wagon half shirring the meat from their bones so that they cried out to be left and then they died. (44)

One might fail to notice these deaths, sandwiched as they are inbetween long, descriptive passages depicting their journey to Sonora. The same syntax, after all, depicts their movement across the dusty terrain: “The dust the party raised was quickly dispersed and lost in the immensity of that landscape and there was no dust other for the pale sutler who pursued them drives unseen and his lean horse and his lean cart leave no track upon such ground or any ground” (44).

In fact, this syntax depicts a range of deaths—animals, strangers, characters—suggesting that no loss is more or less dramatic than any other. Violence in *Blood Meridian*, after all, is disturbingly indiscriminate. Glanton demonstrates as much with his casually reckless target shooting:

The pistol roared and one of the birds exploded in a cloud of feathers … He fired again.

A second bird spun and lay kicking. The others flared, piping thinly, and Glanton turned
with the pistol and shot a small goat that was standing with its throat pressed to the wall in terror and it fell stone dead in the dust and he fired upon a clay garraffa [sic] that burst in a shower of potsherds and water and he raised the pistol and swung toward the house and rang the bell in its mud tower above the roof, a solemn tolling that hung on in the emptiness after the echoes of the gunfire had died away. (83)

A bird, a goat, a water carafe, a bell—all are equivalent in the bulls-eye of Glanton’s pistol.

This very system of equivalence undergirds the novel’s thin but violent plot. Governor Angel Trias hires the Glanton gang to protect the villagers of Chihuahua from Apache attacks, and under their contract with Trias, the gang may cash in Apache scalps for $200 a piece: that is, one life is the equivalent of $200. One scalp, however, looks like any other, and the gang soon realizes that they can trade in any scalp—Apache, Tigua, or Mexican—for bounty: that is, all lives are equivalent to $200. Before long, the Glanton gang is murdering the very villagers it has been hired to protect, and the violence they wreak is consistently narrated through polysyndeton, the syntax of equivalence. Among Glanton’s first casualties is an innocuous old woman: “A fistsized hole erupted out of the far side of the woman’s head in a great vomit of gore and she pitched over and lay slain in her blood without remedy. … He took a skinning knife from his belt and stepped to where the old woman lay and took up her hair and twisted it about his wrist and passed the blade of the knife about her skull and ripped away the scalp” (98). Nor does the Glanton gang limit itself to defenseless villagers; it also attacks uniformed Mexican militia groups: “The Mexican captain was bleeding from a gunshot wound in the chest and he stood in the stirrups to receive the charge with his sabre. Glanton shot him through the head and shoved him from his horse with his foot and shot down in succession three men behind him” (182).
Of course, the Glanton gang members also slaughter a fair number of Apaches, though they are indiscriminate in their killing of men, women, children, and even those Mexicans who have been enslaved by the Apaches. Another polysyndetic passage depicts their gruesome raid on a refugee encampment:

When Glanton and his chiefs swung back through the village people were running out under the horses’ hooves and the horses were plunging and some of the men were moving on foot among the huts with torches and dragging the victims out, slathered and dripping with blood, hacking at the dying and decapitating those who knelt for mercy. There were in the camp a number of Mexican slaves and these ran forth calling out in Spanish and were brained or shot and one of the Delawares emerged from the smoke with a naked infant dangling in each hand and squatted at a ring of midden stones and swung them by the heels each in turn and bashed their heads against the stones so that the brains burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew and humans on fire came shrieking forth like berserkers and the riders hacked them down with their enormous knives and a young woman ran up and embraced the bloodied forefeet of Glanton’s warhorse. (156)

When they finally cash in their scalps at Chihuahua, they are greeted as heroes, though “within a week of their quitting the city there would be a price of eight thousand pesos posted for Glanton’s head” (185).

The violence does not end there, however. The Glanton gang soon gains a foothold in a lucrative ferry business, displacing the doctor in charge and exacting outrageous prices from travelers. Though they had “come to terms with the Yumas in conspiring to seize the ferry” (256), the gang secures the ferry on its own and destroys the Yumas for good measure:
On the floodplain below the fort a terrible destruction had passed and upward of a dozen of the Yumas lay dead or writhing in the sand. A great howl went up among them and Glanton and his riders defiled out of the wooded littoral upriver and rode upon them and they cried out in rage at their betrayal. Their horses began to mill and they pulled them about and loosed arrows at the approaching dragoons and were shot down in volleys of pistolfire and the debarkees at the crossing scrabbled up their arms from among the dunnage. … The horses of the Yumas reared and screamed and churned about in the loose sand with their hoopshaped nostrils and whited eyes and the survivors made for the willows from which they’d emerged leaving on the field the wounded and the dying and the dead. (261-2)

Here, polysyndeton combines with McCarthy’s use of passive voice and the ambiguous, shifting pronouns “they” and “them” to underscore the chaos of this violent scene; and though the gang can no longer cash in scalps for cash at Chihuahua, “they took the scalps” anyway (262). The Yumas exact their revenge, however, in a retaliative strike, killing Glanton, the doctor, and a number of others in an equally bloody and frenzied ambush:

The savages built a bonfire on the hill and fueled it with the furnishings from the white men’s quarters and they raised up Glanton’s body and bore it aloft in the manner of a slain champion and hurled it onto the flames. … The doctor’s torso was dragged up by the heels and raised and flung onto the pyre and the doctor’s mastiff also was committed to the flames. … The other bodies eight in number were heaped onto the fire where they sizzled and stank and the thick smoke rolled out over the river. (275-6)
The violence in *Blood Meridian* may be brutal, but it is often reciprocal. The counter-offensives launched by bands like the Yumas are as vicious and cruel as those offensives initiated by the Glanton gang.

The type of violence portrayed in *Blood Meridian*—ruthless, senseless, indiscriminate, and multi-directional—resists the hierarchical grammatical order of traditional narration, which would require a logic that is deliberately missing from the novel. Why does Judge Holden rescue an Apache child only to murder and scalp him several days later? (164) Why does the Glanton gang continue to practice scalping after their contract with Trias has been cancelled? Why, in a novel that is often read in postcolonial terms, are the Apaches, Comanches, and Yumas as aggressively violent as the Glanton gang, the emblem of Western civilization itself?35 The lyrical syntax of polysyndeton foregrounds the visceral reality of violence over any rationale. After all, “it makes no difference what men think of war,” as Judge Holden declares during one of his philosophical orations. “War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way” (248).

War in *Blood Meridian* is not only ubiquitous, it is banal. As Winchell puts it, “McCarthy proves conclusively that it wasn’t the Nazis who invented the banality of evil” (308). In large part, this effect is achieved through McCarthy’s use of polysyndeton, which deliberately flattens traditional narrative hierarchies of order and value. Though B. R. Myers complains that McCarthy does not, in the manner of Faulkner and Hemingway, reserve this syntax for scenes of

35 According to Nick Monk, *Blood Meridian* critiques “a version of modernity that owes its existence to the European Enlightenment” and that is used to justify colonialism (83). Likewise, Mark Eaton argues that “the violence in *Blood Meridian* clearly occurs … as one consequence of a larger conflict over land and cultural dominance” (157).
momentous climax, this is precisely the point. Natural landscapes, the seasons, life and death—
all occupy the same order of magnitude within McCarthy’s fictional world.

According to Myers, polysyndeton creates linguistic “obscurity” that amounts to “bad
poetry” reformatted as prose (108). His assessment, however, reveals as much about his disdain
for lyric as it does his disdain for avant-garde narrative fiction. Literature, after all, does more
than organize experience into neat hierarchies of magnitude and cause-and-effect: it also captures
the messiness of felt experience in which these relations are not always clear, or even true; it
aims for drama over logical coherence; and it takes a wide variety of forms and styles, each of
which shapes our perception of its content in ways that are as meaningful and varied as they are
deliberate. In these respects, polysyndeton carries a certain advantage over traditional prose
syntax, equipped as it is to depict moments of intensity and networks of connection that are
difficult to narrate through the hierarchical structures of most prose fiction.

Those rhythmic passages that are rendered dramatic through polysyndeton also tend to
reveal the ideological and aesthetic stakes of these novels. Faulkner uses this syntax to dramatize
the conflict between the competing systems of value and economy between the North and South,
though it is also used to dramatize the inherent equality of all people—an idea that exists in
tension with Faulkner’s aggrandizement of the antebellum South. Hemingway too uses this
syntax to express the extreme polarities of love and war, both of which are invested with feelings
that are inarticulable by traditional narrative standards. DeLillo explores his philosophy of
interconnection formally through the coordinating conjunctions of polysyndeton, which also
flatten hierarchies of value so that the quotidian becomes exalted; McCarthy unearths the darker
aspects of this structural democracy through violence that is wreaked so frequently and so
indiscriminately that life itself depreciates in value.
In examining the role of polysyndeton in twentieth-century American fiction, this chapter demonstrates significant overlap among writers that are generally taken to be stylistically disparate. Mark McGurl asserts in *The Program Era*, for example, that “postwar American fiction has been driven by a strong polarity of minimalist and maximalist compositional impulses that might alternatively be called the Hemingway/Faulkner dialectic” (377). As we have seen, however, Hemingway is not always sparse, and Faulkner is not always tortuous. Both rely heavily on a lyrical syntax that is structurally simple—polysyndeton merely consists, after all, in the repetition of a single conjunction—but that produces an array of nuanced rhetorical effects, from rhythm and accumulation to the leveling or democratizing effect that is exploited by their literary descendants, DeLillo and McCarthy. Organizing these writers around a single rhetorical device not only uncovers their debt to the lyric tradition, it also highlights dimensions of their writing that are too often overlooked when we insist on placing them within the same familiar schematic. Maximal in length but minimal in structural complexity, polysyndeton enables these writers to achieve a difficult balance between two extremities of prose composition. The result is a lyrical style that forges rhythm and erases subordination in ways that work against the hierarchical tendencies of conventional narrative fiction.
A scientist, desperate to grasp the mystery of human life, inadvertently creates a monster. A young man murders his pregnant mistress so as not to jeopardize his romance with a wealthy socialite. Plots are rooted in concrete events that operate in time, and while the actions of both Victor Frankenstein and Clyde Griffiths may advance a number of abstract themes—including the moral dimension of scientific and social advancement and the dangers of unbridled ambition—these abstractions are epiphenomenal, or secondary to the plots that produced them. We can only arrive at these abstractions, after all, once we’ve completed the novels and fully apprehended the trajectory of each story’s events; and had things ended less unhappily for either protagonist, we might have generated an entirely different set of themes around these works through which the mad scientist and the social climber might be vindicated rather than rebuked.

Plotted novels demand that we read their events in primarily literal and temporal terms, which is why we ask people not to tell us “what happens” if we haven’t yet finished one. To be sure, we can and do read more deeply for those elements—like theme—that tend toward abstraction, but such considerations are generally ex-post facto and not a part of our immediate reading experience.

Unlike fiction, lyric poetry demands that we read primarily for abstraction, a tendency that is not without its own problems, which Billy Collins nicely dramatizes in his “Introduction to Poetry”: “I ask them to take a poem/ and hold it up to the light/ like a color slide/ or press an ear against its hive … But all they want to do/ is tie the poem to a chair with rope/ and torture a confession out of it./ They begin beating it with a hose/ to find out what it really means” (16).
The strong version of the claim that poems yield abstract readings, as Collins suggests, presents poems as coded mysteries that possess secret meanings. The weak or less extreme version of the claim, however, merely suggests that lyric poems rely more heavily than do other genres on tropes of figuration. Cleanth Brooks famously argued that “the essence of poetry is metaphor” (248), a point that has been echoed by many others, including poet-critic John Hollander: “Good verse of any sort is only half the story of good poetry, whose essential character is what Wallace Stevens called ‘fictive,’ and Robert Frost ‘ulterior,’ or ‘saying one thing and meaning another,’ or what we would simply call not being literal” (x).

This chapter addresses figuration in one of its most radical forms, the so-called metaphysical conceit made famous by T. S. Eliot in his 1921 essay, “The Metaphysical Poets.” Under the metaphysical conceit, metaphor is distended and rendered ever more elaborate. The conceit functions still more dramatically, however, within novels by Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Henry Miller, and Russell Banks by foregrounding the elaboration of figures over the concrete action we typically expect from a plotted novel, demanding that we read plot in terms of metaphor rather than vice versa. This chapter examines metaphysical conceits that frame and even compete with plot in terms of primary importance, effectively pushing these novels closer to the meditative lyric than to traditional narrative fiction.

Metaphor, the dominant trope of figuration within poetry, has an elusive quality that underpins Hollander’s sense of poetry as “saying one thing and meaning another.” Because it relies on concrete images for depicting abstract qualities or concepts, a metaphoric utterance never “means” precisely what it says. Max Black refers to this phenomenon as metaphor’s “mystery”: “that, taken as literal, a metaphorical statement appears to be perversely asserting
something to be what it is plainly known not to be” (21). From this perspective, Black argues, metaphors are “plainly false and absurd. But such ‘absurdity’ and ‘falsity’ are of the essence: in their absence, we should have no metaphor but merely a literal utterance.” Black’s characterization of metaphor’s “mystery” may position him as something of a Platonist—here, as in the Republic, poets are liars, at least in a sense—but it effectively demonstrates the necessity of shifting our reading practices to suit these modes of figuration, since literal readings of figurative utterances yield nonsense.

At its most basic level, metaphor departs from literal uses of language by representing one thing in terms of another through the logic of analogy. This basic theory of transference by which a term is “transferred” to a new context was first fleshed out by Aristotle in the Poetics: “Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being … on the grounds of analogy” (1457b8-10). Evening depicted as the “old age of the day,” or old age as the “evening” or “sunset of life,” is a poetic condensation of the analogy “as old age is to life, so is evening to day” (1457b23-5). Metaphor dislodges terms from their literal usage by placing them in unusual contexts—a cognitive exercise that promotes a new understanding of the metaphor’s referent, as Aristotle acknowledges in the Rhetoric (1410b10-15). In recent decades, critics such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have expanded on this point, arguing that metaphor is not simply linguistic but also conceptual in its function, and that it underpins our most fundamental cognitive activities: “the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor” (Metaphors 3). In fact, they argue, metaphor structures and conditions our experience in ways that we largely take for granted. Take, for instance, the act of arguing. “Your claims are indefensible” and “he shot down all of my arguments” are common figurative phrases that we use to recount arguments, and they indicate
our understanding of argument primarily “in terms of war” at the exclusion of its other, more cooperative dimensions such as “mutual understanding” (4, 10).

Some theories of metaphor, however, favor a more reciprocal relationship between the terms within a metaphor’s implied analogy. Proponents of “interactionist” theories of metaphor, most notably Max Black, argue against the one-way relationship of “transference” articulated by Aristotle and, to some extent, by Lakoff and Johnson, maintaining instead that each term in a metaphor necessarily illuminates the other—that, for instance, a conceptual metaphor like “ARGUMENT IS WAR” also shapes our understanding of war which, in this context, is figured as a form of rational disagreement. According to interactionist theories, “the two subjects [of a metaphor] ‘interact’ in the following ways: (a) the presence of the primary subject incites the hearer to select some of the secondary subject’s properties; and (b) invites him to construct a parallel implication-complex that can fit the primary subject; and (c) reciprocally induces parallel changes in the secondary subject” (Black 29). Our reading of one subject in terms of the other shapes our understanding of both. The result is a meaning that emerges from their interaction with one another—a meaning that is not inherent in either subject in isolation.

Metaphor can cause us to see new dimensions of familiar concepts by placing them within unusual analogical pairings. While cognitive theorists such as Lakoff and Johnson have demonstrated that metaphor is not necessarily unique to poetic language, relying on “conceptual schemas … that we use in comprehending our experience and in reasoning about it” on a daily basis (Cool Reason 65), poets do, they concede, take metaphor one step further, venturing “beyond the normal use of conventional metaphor to point out, and call into question, the boundaries of our everyday metaphorical understandings of important concepts. Indeed, the major poetic point being made can be the inadequacy of the conventional metaphor” (Cool
Reason 69). Some metaphors become so “fixed and standardized” within language that they no longer stand out as metaphors at all, but poets who strive to develop new metaphors “breathe force and energy into discourse” through unexpected pairings of terms and concepts, prompting theorists like Paul Ricoeur to classify them under the rhetorical canon of “invention” (62, 63). Metaphors, after all—especially those “inventive” metaphors to which Ricoeur refers—do not simply reflect resemblance, they create it. “Some metaphors enable us to see aspects of reality that the metaphor’s production helps to constitute,” Black argues (39). In other words, metaphors do not simply articulate some “objectively given similarity” that exists “prior to the formation of the metaphor itself,” they forge similarity and communicate it to the reader through the vehicle of figuration (Kittay 17).

This anti-objectivist view, which stresses figuration’s creative capacity, is not always held to be in metaphor’s favor, however. It was on these grounds that Samuel Johnson famously condemned the seventeenth-century “metaphysical poets,” as he disdainfully called them, through whom “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together” (12). These poets, he argued, are overly concerned with wit and ingenuity at the expense of the emotions, bent as they are on “a voluntary deviation from nature in pursuit of something new and strange” (26). Yet this is precisely the significance and legacy of what we now know as the metaphysical conceit, the extension of metaphor to its outermost limits in terms of the disparity between the objects of comparison. Take, for instance, an example provided by Johnson himself, an excerpt from Donne’s now widely-anthologized “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” in which two lovers’ souls are likened to the legs of a compass:

If they be two, they are two so

As stiffe twin compasses are two,
Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the’ other doe.

And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth rome,
It leanes, and hearkens after it,
And growes erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must
Like th’ other foot, obliquely runne.
Thy firmnes makes my circle just,
And makes me end, where I begunne. (98)

Donne famously forges a connection between two unlikely subjects—romantic love and a mechanical drawing implement—by concentrating on the relationship between the compass’s legs. Just as the central leg leans toward the leg that draws the circle, the poem claims, so the soul of one lover hearkens toward the other, regardless of the distance that separates them; and like the roaming leg, the departed lover will always return home. What’s more, the shape created by his departure is a perfect circle that indicates the “firmnes” and the “just[ness]” of their spiritual bond even in the face of physical distance. The interaction between these two subjects produces a two-fold result. Love’s comparison to a compass in the poem characterizes it as steady, exact, and reliable; conversely, the personification of the compass invests this drawing tool with a surprising sentimental quality, transforming a mechanical metal leg into a pining lover. Such a metaphor is an exercise in intellect, since the cognitive labor required to read
romantic love in terms of a compass is much greater than something like Burns’s “O my luve’s like a red, red rose,” in which the objects of comparison are more obvious and more readily joined in our minds. Metaphor, especially in the case of the metaphysical conceit, resides chiefly within the reader’s apprehension of similarity, since “we, the readers, are doing the elaborating and extending [of the metaphor] in ways that we take to be indicated or at least suggested by the poem” (More Than Cool Reason 67).

Eliot famously rescues the metaphysical poets from Johnson’s rebuke in his review of Herbert Grierson’s edited collection, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler*. Whereas Johnson accuses these poets of striving for wit at the expense of affective power, Eliot argues that, to the contrary, “they were, at best, engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling” (65). So inarticulable are these moods and feelings, he suggests, that poets must reach for the unlikeliest of metaphors in order to approximate them in language. Eliot himself employs his own conceit in the opening lines of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” which, in many ways, set up the rest of the poem. The first two lines are hopeful and dreamy—“Let us go then, you and I,/ When the evening is spread out against the sky”—though they are immediately deflated by a macabre conceit of a drugged patient lying unconscious on an operating table—“Like a patient etherized upon a table” (3). So goes the rest of the poem, in which Prufrock makes a series of grandiose claims—“I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each”—only to retract them immediately—“I do not think that they will sing to me” (7). The conceit of the etherized patient, in other words, articulates in material terms the feelings of paralysis and self-doubt that will plague the speaker throughout the lyric.
To a certain degree, Eliot notes, the metaphysical poets simply render explicit the operations of metaphor that underpin all poetry, which are after all a “heterogeneity of material compelled into unity by the operation of the poet’s mind” (61). All metaphors cultivate similarity between items that are more or less dissimilar. Brief conceits like Eliot’s own rely on the “telescoping of images” in a “sudden contrast of associations” that are executed within a handful of lines (60). A number of metaphysical conceits, however, also rely on spatial extension for their effect, the “elaboration (contrasted with the condensation) of a figure of speech to the furthest stage to which the ingenuity can carry it” (60). It is this quality of elaboration, Eliot maintains, that chiefly distinguishes the conceit from other metaphors. Whereas Eliot’s etherized patient, for example, only spans a single line, three of the nine stanzas of Donne’s poems are devoted to the extension and development of the compass and its relationship to the geographically estranged lovers.

Eliot’s essay marked a return to the metaphysical conceit in twentieth-century American poetry, with a number of poets making use of the conceit and its capacity for elaboration to frame entire poems. Langston Hughes’s “Mother to Son” (1926) establishes a metaphor in its opening lines—“Well, son, I’ll tell you:/ Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair”—that is developed throughout the poem so that the speaker can convey the importance of firmness in the face of adversity:

It’s had tacks in it,

And splinters,

And boards torn up,

And places with no carpet on the floor—

Bare.
But all the time
I’ve been a-climbin’ on,
And reaching’ landin’s,
And turnin’ corners,
And sometimes goin’ in the dark
Where there ain’t been no light.
So, boy, don’t you turn your back.
Don’t you set down on the steps.
‘Cause you finds it’s kinder hard.
Don’t you fall now—
For I’se still goin’, honey,
I’se still climbin’,
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair. (30)

The same conceit functions not only as a testament to the speaker’s hardship but also as a prescription for perseverance. Though the figurative stairs of life are an uphill climb littered with “tacks,” “splinters,” “boards torn up,” and patches that are altogether “bare,” the boy is dissuaded from defeat in a deeper elaboration of the original metaphor, cautioned against both despair and exhaustion: “Don’t you set down on the steps,/ ‘Cause you finds it’s kinder hard./ Don’t you fall now—/ For I’se still goin’, honey,/ I’se still climbin’” (30). Life—the poem’s referent—disappears after the second line; the poem is devoted primarily to the figuration of the staircase as an expression of life’s struggles.

George Szirtes’s “Piano” personifies the instrument’s velocity sensitivity by comparing the body of a baby grand to that of a woman:
…It is a hybrid creature with only
Three legs and a faint ephemeral grin,

With feminine curves, a gorgeous womanly
Voluptuousness. It seems almost indecent
To be sitting beneath her, guilty and lonely,

Ignorant of the role she will play. The crescent
Of her one hip is a shelter and the gloss
Of her body temptation. Concupiscent

Discords swell into proper fifths, zealous
Arpeggios clamber over her. Learning
Her vast bourgeois temperament is the cross

A child must bear as she stands burning
In the summer sun. And Chopin and Bartok
Can be enticed from her with their strut and yearning.

You must woo her carefully with wealth and work,
Until one day, like the butterfly she is,
She shrugs and vanishes into the sudden dark
The conceit, which draws out the responsiveness of the piano to the player’s touch, constructs the instrument as a sensual but temperamental lover. The relationship between pianist and piano is a courtship, and the piano has all of the power, as their spatial positioning would indicate: “It seems almost indecent/ To be sitting beneath her, guilty and lonely./ Ignorant of the role she will play.” Her sound is unpredictable and can be coaxed from her only under the right conditions: “And Chopin and Bartok/ Can be enticed from her with their strut and yearning./ You must woo her with wealth and work.” The pianist is in a position of complete subordination to the baby grand, an aspect of piano-playing that is dramatized through the conceit of the fickle lover.

The poems of Donne, Hughes, and Szirtes are examples of lyrics that are dominated by figuration. So integral are their conceits to an understanding of each poem’s referent that one wonders which is the primary term—the pair of lovers or the compass? life’s hardships or the staircase? the piano or the capricious lover? The metaphor rivals, even surmounts, the referent in terms of importance, though the metaphor and referent occupy very different realms of existence, since metaphors “exist” in a stylistic sense but not in an ontological one. Under the operations of the metaphysical conceit, metaphor swells to new magnitudes, foregrounding what Roman Ingarden has termed metaphor’s opalescence, its simultaneous existence and nonexistence within the world of the poem (Falk 142). In a literal sense, there is no woman in Szirtes’s lyric, though the figuration of the woman is what makes possible the very depiction of the piano that serves as the basis for the poem.

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36 According to Hrushovski, metaphors establish two “frames of reference”: “the first frame of reference (fr1) is presented as existing in the world of the poem (it is further enriched from what we know about the external world indicated by the real geographical names). The second frame of reference (fr2) … is introduced as non-existing in the fictional world of the poem … it is presented to the imagination of the reader for the sake of metaphorical transfers” (8).

37 For a discussion of the opalescence of metaphor in postmodernist fiction, which prolongs metaphor’s hesitation between the realms of style and ontology, see Brian McHale, Postmodernist Fiction 134-7.
Certain novels also make use of the metaphysical conceit in ways that cause the text to hover between these “two frames of reference with different ontological statuses” (McHale 134). The pronounced role of figuration within these novels forces us to turn away from literal readings of narrative fiction in ways that may seem counter-intuitive. In his discussion of “narrativity,” or the degree to which a text adheres to traditional narrative conventions, Gerald Prince argues that texts depicting concrete particulars are more “narrative” than those that depict abstract generalizations: “An event which is individualized will contribute more to narrativity than one which is not. Narrative shies away from abstraction and thrives on concreteness. It concentrates on the particular and not the general” (Narratology 149). Metaphor departs from the fictional world of a text by pointing to abstractions that exist outside of it. In channeling our attention away from a narrative’s concrete events to analogical frames that are based on abstraction, novels that rely heavily on metaphor score low marks for “narrativity.”

As Mieke Bal has argued, metaphor also participates in description, the atemporal suspension of narrative action for the sake of illustrative elaboration. Descriptive passages are often considered anti-narrative because they suspend time in order to dilate a given moment, the details of which are not sorted according to any particular hierarchy. “Theoretically, unbound by narrative sequentiality, the enumeration of the elements of the object in description is fundamentally arbitrary,” Bal writes. “In contrast, the narration of events follows the chronology in which the events take place” (“Over-writing” 577). Metaphor, then, not only appears to violate narrative’s commitment to literal action, it also violates narrative’s investment in temporal succession and hierarchical arrangement in a way that is reminiscent of those polysyndetic constructions treated in the previous chapter.
What is the function of such descriptive or metaphoric passages within narrative fiction? For Bal, they are important indicators of narrative perspective. “Description tends to follow the order of the object as it is commonly perceived,” she writes (“Over-writing” 577). “In the same way as word order is regulated by syntax and narrative order by chronology, so descriptive order is guided by the double agency of the focalizer and the narrative this agent’s gaze generates” (593-4). Description and metaphor are linked to focalization, or “the relation between the vision and that which is ‘seen,’ perceived” (Bal, *Narratology* 142). Descriptive passages, in other words, align readers with the perspective of the “focalizer” or perceiver (typically a narrator, a character, or both). Consequently, they can provide important and revealing insights into a character’s feelings, perceptions, and motivations.

This chapter treats novels by Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Henry Miller, and Russell Banks that, in order of increasing insistence, rely on the metaphysical conceit as an important conceptual framework for understanding the narrative’s story-events as well as its characters. While Morrison and Hurston use conceits to supply interpretive frames for their plots, the novels of Miller and Banks are almost wholly devoted to elaborations on a single conceit so that narrative action is effectively subordinated to figuration. Within all four novels, plot and metaphor “interact” to produce new and reciprocal meanings by which figuration shapes the way we read the story’s events—and vice versa.

For Toni Morrison, the stakes of metaphor are not only cognitive and creative, they are ideological. Her widely-cited 1992 study, *Playing in the Dark*, suggests that our cultural conceptions of race have been expressed and reified in American literature primarily through the trope of figuration. Beginning with an observation regarding “the pervasive use of black images
and people in expressive prose” by white authors ranging from Willa Cather to Ernest
Hemingway, Morrison goes on to identify what she calls an “Africanist presence” in the
American literary canon that allowed these writers to “talk about themselves” through figurations
of blackness (x, 17). These figurations, however, are “Eurocentric” at best, racist at worst,
consistently constructing blackness as an alien, taboo, or otherwise undesirable counterpoint to
whiteness. For Morrison, metaphor’s deployment in American literature has been inextricably
tied to power and racial politics; she even goes so far as to argue that race itself “has become
metaphorical—a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of
social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological ‘race’
ever was” (63)

As Morrison demonstrates, the question of who employs metaphor, for what audience,
and toward what end is important for uncovering metaphor’s potentially ideological investments.
Yet it is these contexts, and not the figure of metaphor itself, with which Morrison takes issue.
Her solution is the thoughtful deployment of metaphor within fresh contexts that are not
overburdened by clichés, including the prejudices of routine racism:

The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways
to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always
predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains. ... Both [writing and
reading] require being mindful of the places where imagination sabotages itself, locks its
own gates, pollutes its vision. Writing and reading mean being aware of the writer’s
notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and
response-ability” (xi)
Conventional metaphors are not only “sinister,” they are “lazy” and “predictable.” In calling for the liberation of metaphor from its more commonplace contexts and a renewed arousal of reader “response-ability,” Morrison advocates an approach to figurative language that places her in the company of some strange bedfellows: Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, not to mention their twentieth-century champion and one of American modernism’s worse offenders in terms of the racially-charged figurations within his own poetry and prose, T. S. Eliot.\textsuperscript{38}

In fact, however, metaphysical conceits appear in nearly all of Morrison’s fiction, and more often than not, they depict poignant instances of black suffering—a deliberate reversal of those de-humanizing figurations of blackness Morrison has identified in \textit{Playing in the Dark}. When the schoolboys harass Pecola for her skin color and her father’s rumored tendency to sleep naked in \textit{The Bluest Eye}—“it was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth”—they surround her “like a necklace of semiprecious stones” (65). A heartbroken Hagar, desperate for the lost attentions of Milkman, embarks on a futile cosmetic shopping spree in \textit{Song of Solomon}, hoping that she can once again win his affections by assimilating to Western, consumer-driven standards of beauty: “Hagar breathed deeply the sweet air that hung over the glass counters. Like a smiling sleepwalker she circled. ... Lipsticks in soft white hands darted out of their sheaths like the shiny red penises of puppies” (311). The scars on Sethe’s back from the beatings she incurred as a slave in \textit{Beloved} are figured as a “chokecherry tree,” the “wide roots and intricate branches” of which provide a corporeal mapping of her sorrows (17). Morrison frequently asks us to see images and events in new contexts, especially those that illustrate the humanity and anguish of the black characters who populate her fictional world.

Morrison’s second novel, \textit{Sula}, is filled to the brim with conceits such as these, but figuration in \textit{Sula} is concerned not only with anguish but its relief. In-betweens these two poles

\textsuperscript{38} For accounts of Eliot’s literary anti-Semitism, see Strauss, Cheyette, and Julius.
lies a grieving process that consumes the novel and connects its wide cast of characters, all of whom are suffering in different ways and from different ailments—war trauma, failed parenthood, lost friendship, lost love. So skilled, however, is Morrison at counterbalancing pain with pleasure and sorrow with humor that few critics have given attention to the novel’s extended focus on suffering. In what follows, I argue that *Sula* focuses not only on the felt experience of suffering and its corollary aesthetic representation but also on its resolution through the catharsis made possible by grief—all of which are conducted through the vehicle of the metaphysical conceit.

Following the exposition that provides a brief history of “The Bottoms,” the fictional town that supplies the novel’s setting, *Sula* opens with a scene of disturbing violent intensity witnessed by Shadrack during his service in the First World War:

...he turned his head a little to the right and saw the face of a soldier near him fly off. Before he could register shock, the rest of the soldier’s head disappeared under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet. But stubbornly, taking no direction from the brain, the body of the headless soldier ran on, with energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back. (8)

The conceit depicted here establishes an important pattern in the novel, the articulation of felt trauma through disparate terms within a strained analogy. Nothing, save maybe shape, would naturally link a soldier’s helmet to a soup bowl beyond the single element the conceit is designed to emphasize: its contents. The soupy brain tissue that slides down the decimated soldier’s back

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39 Two exceptions are Barbara Johnson and Phillip Novak. Johnson argues that Morrison “aestheticizes” violence—rape, war, murder, slavery—in order to display, with irony, the deeply political dimension of aesthetics. In positioning aesthetics as “the domain of the contemplation of forms, implying detachment and distance,” however, Johnson reads into Morrison’s fiction an emotional distance between narrator and character that, I argue, is closed by her reliance on the conceit (170).

40 This passage is also cited in Novak and Thompson as microcosmic of the novel’s preoccupation with violence and decapitation, respectively.
seeps from the helmet like soup from an upside-down bowl. The image evoked by this conceit unsettles not only because of its graphic violence but because the soldier’s maimed body is depicted in terms of food. The metaphor, after all, not only shapes our conception of the soldier’s brains in terms of soup, it also shapes our understanding of soup in terms of the soldier’s brains.

Similar, if less gruesome, strained analogies are used by Sula’s third-person narrator in order to focalize Shadrack and his residual war trauma. Strapped to a hospital bed in a psych ward, he struggles to make sense of his wartime experiences: “Laced and silent in his small bed, he tried to tie the loose cords in his mind” (10). Unlike the laces that hold him together, the thoughts in Shadrack’s mind are hanging together tenuously, ready to fall apart at any moment. Upon his release, Shadrack finds it hard to connect to other people. They appear to him as “thin slips, like paper dolls floating down the walks. Some were seated in chairs with wheels, propelled by other paper figures from behind. ... A good high wind would pull them up and away and they would land perhaps among the tops of trees” (11). Mistaken for a drunk, Shadrack is arrested for “vagrancy and intoxication” (13) and sinks at last into “a sleep deeper than the hospital drugs; deeper than the pits of plums; steadier than the condor’s wing; more tranquil than the curve of eggs” (14). Psychological instability is figured as physical instability: slackness, weightlessness, hollowness. In struggling to articulate emotions that refuse to sort themselves out, the narrator, who takes on Shadrack’s perspective, turns toward some unlikely metaphors—loose cords, paper dolls—as a way of approximating Shadrack’s otherwise inexpressible felt experience.

Metaphor—sometimes articulated directly by Sula’s characters, and sometimes by its narrator on a character’s behalf—becomes one of the only available avenues for understanding character motivation in the novel. One of the most puzzling and disturbing events in Sula is
Eva’s decision to murder her son, Plum—like Shadrack, another shell-shocked veteran of the First World War. Upon Plum’s return home, Eva could sense that “there was obviously something wrong” (45); before long, he is discovered to be stealing money from his family, making mysterious trips to Cincinnati, and cooking heroin. He also appears to have retreated into childhood, as the contents of his bedroom suggest: “There in the corner was a half-eaten store-bought cherry pie. Balled-up candy wrappers and empty pop bottles peeped from under the dresser. On the floor by [Eva’s] foot was a glass of strawberry crush and a Liberty magazine” (46). As Eva gathers him into her arms one night, he even begins to speak like a child: “Mamma, you so purty. You so purty, Mamma,” he murmurs, half-asleep (47). Moments later and without warning, Eva douses him in kerosene and sets him on fire, leaving Plum to burn to death. A year later, when Eva’s daughter Hannah gathers the courage to ask Eva about the awful incident—“What’d you kill Plum for, Mama?”—Eva’s responds with a rambling attempt to construct a metaphysical conceit that can help her to explain her actions:

It was such a carryin’ on to get him born and to keep him alive. Just to keep his little heart beating and his little old lungs cleared and when he came back from that war he wanted to git back in. After all that carryin’ on, just gettin’ him out and keepin’ him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well ... I ain’t got the room no more even if he could do it. There wasn’t space for him in my womb. And he was crawlin’ back. Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the time. I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more. I birthed him once. I couldn’t do it again. He was growed, a big old thing. Godhavemercy, I couldn’t birth him twice. I’d be laying here at night and he be downstairs in that room, but when I closed my eyes I’d see him ... six feet tall smilin’ and
crawlin’ up the stairs quietlike so I wouldn’t hear and opening the door soft so I wouldn’t hear and he’d be creepin’ to the bed trying to spread my legs trying to get back up in my womb. He was a man, girl, a big old grewed-up man. I didn’t have that much room. I kept on dreaming it. Dreaming it and I knowed it was true. One night it wouldn’t be no dream. It’d be true and I would have done it, would have let him if I’d’ve had the room but a big man can’t be a baby all wrapped up inside his mamma no more, he suffocate. I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn’t and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man. (70-1)

In trying to articulate her sense of Plum’s psychological regression, Eva re-constructs him as a helpless and needy infant. Eva’s conceit oscillates between the literal and the figurative throughout this passage. While Plum is not actually attempting to crawl back into Eva’s womb—and Eva more or less admits that this image is from a recurring “dream” that has figurative importance for her—the distinction that Eva draws between her heart and her womb is less clear. “I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more,” she insists. In what figurative sense would the womb fail to align with the heart, especially since one appears to follow from the other, Eva’s love for Plum (heart) deriving from her relationship to Plum as his mother (womb)? This portion of the conceit demands a literal reading: as a grown man, Plum cannot possibly fit “all scrunched up” inside of Eva’s womb (71). Such a literal understanding, however, points right back toward figuration: a grown man cannot fit inside of his mother’s womb because he no longer belongs there.

This obscure conceit is the only window we have into Eva’s reasoning for murdering Plum. It is a complicated attempt to articulate complicated and conflicting feelings of love,
contempt, sacrifice, and sorrow. The metaphor depicts Plum as staging an unnatural retreat from life back to the womb. While portions of the conceit are obscured by Eva’s vacillation between literal and figurative realms, one thing is made clear: as a mother, Eva believes she is acting in Plum’s best interests, even if the result is filicide. Having identified Plum’s suffering, Eva sought to relieve it.

Figurations of suffering, grief, and relief from pain course throughout *Sula*, especially in those sections that center on the friendship between Sula and Nel. As Morrison herself has noted, the novel is a celebration of their friendship, but it is also an elegy for Chicken Little, whose death will haunt the two girls and cause a rift between them that only widens as the years progress (Nissen 272). Just prior to the tragedy, the girls are engaged in “grass play,” a literal game that holds a great deal of figurative meaning for their relationship. “In concert, without ever meeting each other’s eyes,” Nel and Sula stroke grass leaves, strip twigs of their bark, and dig into the soil with their twigs “until the two holes were one and the same” (58). The two girls have achieved the same understanding of this arbitrary game, though “neither one had spoken a word” (59). The grass play scene demonstrates a unity and mutual understanding between these friends that is breached by two events, the first of which is the accidental drowning of Chicken Little.

Shortly after grass play, Nel and Sula are approached by the small neighborhood boy whom Sula swings from a tree in jest, but who slips from her fingers and falls into the river, never to resurface. The panicked girls never confess to their role in the drowning, though their culpability drives a palpable wedge between them. They remain distant from one another at the funeral: “There was a space, a separateness, between them” (64). Guilt-stricken and afraid of retribution, they are unable to properly grieve for Chicken Little. Nel finds that her legs have
“turned to granite” and Sula cries “soundlessly and with no heaving and gasping for breath” (65). In stark contrast, the local women in attendance are wildly expressive in their grief:

As Reverend Deal moved into his sermon, the hands of the women unfolded like pairs of raven’s wings and flew high above their hats into the air. … They spoke, for they were full and needed to say. They swayed, for the rivulets of grief or of ecstasy must be rocked. And when they thought of all that life and death locked into that little closed coffin they danced and screamed, not to protest God’s will but to acknowledge it and confirm once more their conviction that the only way to avoid the Hand of God is to get in it. (65-6)

Grief is expressed through the body—swaying, dancing, screaming—and its suppression is figured, via Sula and Nel, as stoical silence. It will be many years, and many pages, before Nel finally learns how to grieve.

Chicken Little’s funeral is an important scene in Sula that is recalled in the aftermath of the second event that drives Nel and Sula apart ten years later: Sula’s affair with Nel’s husband, Jude. At a loss for words to describe this feeling of deep betrayal, Nel is focalized by the narrator, who constructs another conceit to articulate Nel’s despair: “She waited for something to happen... inside. There was stirring, a movement of mud and dead leaves.” Her distress is vaguely identified as a “stirring,” the thickness of her sorrow as mud. As Nel explores her sadness through the frame of this conceit, she recalls the mourners at Chicken Little’s funeral:

The women who shrieked over the bier and at the lip of the open grave. What she had regarded since as unbecoming behavior seemed fitting to her now; they were screaming at the neck of God, his giant nape, the vast back-of-the-head that he had turned on them in death. But it seemed to her now that it was not a fist-shaking grief they were keening
but rather a simple obligation to say something, do something, feel something about the
dead. (107)

Yet even now, Nel finds herself incapable of grief:

She waited. The mud shifted, the leaves stirred, the smell of overripe green things
enveloped her and announced the beginnings of her very own howl.

But it did not come.

The odor evaporated; the leaves were still, the mud settled. And finally there was
nothing, just a flake of something dry and nasty in her throat. (108)

Again, mourning is figured as movement and its suppression as stillness. This earthy conceit in
which sorrow is likened to mud also recalls the “grass play” game that signaled the strength of
Nel and Sula’s bond, which has been broken by Jude’s—and Sula’s—infidelity. Unsatisfied with
this metaphor, however, the narrator shifts to a second, much lengthier and less coherent conceit,
the ontological status of which is more dubious than the first:

She stood up frightened. There was something just to the right of her, in the air, just out
of view. She could not see it, but she knew exactly what it looked like. A gray ball
hovering just there. Just there. To the right. Quiet, gray, dirty. A ball of muddy strings,
but without weight, fluffy but terrible in its malevolence. She knew she could not look, so
she closed her eyes and crept past it out of the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. ...  
She spent a whole summer with the gray ball, the little ball of fur and string and hair
always floating in the light near her but which she did not see because she never looked.
But that was the terrible part, the effort it took not to look. But it was there anyhow, just
to the right of her head and maybe further down by her shoulder, so when the children
went to a monster movie at the Elmira Theater and came home and said, “Mamma, can
you sleep with us tonight?” she said all right and got into bed with her children and told herself each time that they might dream a dream about dragons and would need her to comfort them. It was so nice to think about their scary dreams and not about a ball of fur. She even hoped their dreams would rub off on her and give her the wonderful relief of a nightmare so she could stop going around scared to turn her head this way or that lest she see it. That was the scary part—seeing it. It was not coming at her; it never did that, or tried to pounce on her. It just floated there for the seeing, if she wanted to, and O my God for the touching if she wanted to. But she didn’t want to see it, ever, for if she saw it, who could tell but what she might actually touch it, or want to, and then what would happen if she actually reached out her hand and touched it? Die probably, but no worse than that. Dying was OK because it was sleep and there wasn’t no gray ball in death, was there? Was there? (109-110)

Here, Nel’s betrayal is figured as a “gray ball” alternately described as “a ball of muddy strings,” “a ball of fur, and a “little ball of fur and string and hair.” Whatever its composition, the ball has an ethereal quality—light and floating, it is always in the very margins of Nel’s purview, too frightening to be confronted head-on. Like Shadrack’s conception of psychological instability, Nel’s sense of despair is figured as a mess of strings that hang together loosely. Unlike the conceits developed by Shadrack and Eva, however, Nel’s has a decidedly material dimension. It startles her; it can be seen and touched; it is present in the way that other material objects in the book are present. The gray ball hovers in-between the concrete storyworld and the realm of metaphor, providing a quasi-material formulation of the inexpressible sorrow that is haunting Nel. Ironically, however, this material conceit circles right back around to the very object it aims
to represent: “She would have to ask somebody about that [ball], somebody she could confide in and who knew a lot of things, like Sula” (110).

The narrator also plays devil’s advocate, however, alternately focalizing Sula, who fails to comprehend Nel’s feelings. In fact, Sula justifies her affair with Jude through the very bond of friendship Nel believes to have been severed. After all, Sula reasons, the two girls “had always shared the affection of other people: compared how a boy kissed, what line he used with one and then the other. Marriage, apparently, had changed all that, but having had no intimate knowledge of marriage ... she was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to” (119). Sula, it turns out, feels an equal and opposite sense of betrayal by Nel, who no longer shares her understanding of the world. “Nel was the one person who had wanted nothing from her, who had accepted all aspects of her. ... Now Nel was one of them,” (119-120), she broods, grouping Nel with the townsfolk who judge Sula for her failure to conform to standards of social propriety. The narrator now constructs an elaborate conceit for Sula, who struggles to articulate her own sense of betrayal:

Now Nel was one of them. One of the spiders whose only thought was the next rung of the web, who dangled in dark dry places suspended by their own spittle, more terrified of the free fall than the snake’s breath below. Their eyes so intent on the wayward stranger who trips into their net, they were blind to the cobalt on their own backs, the moonshine fighting to pierce their corners. If they were touched by the snake’s breath, however fatal, they were merely victims and knew how to behave in that role (just as Nel knew how to behave as the wronged wife). But the free fall, oh no, that required—demanded—invention: a thing to do with the wings, a way of holding the legs and most of all a full surrender to the downward flight if they wished to taste their tongues or stay alive. But
alive was what they, and now Nel, did not want to be. Too dangerous. Now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways. She had given herself over to them, and the flick of their tongues would drive her back into her little dry corner where she would cling to her spittle high above the breathing of the snake and the fall.

It had surprised her a little and saddened her a good deal when Nel behaved the way the others would have. (120)

The people of the Bottoms are figured as the snake in this elaborate metaphor, their propensity for gossip signaled by the “flick of their tongues.” Like the snake, they are predatory, and they use fear to police the behavior of potential nonconformists. Nel is the spider whose only concern is constructing a web to keep itself beyond the reach of the snake, more afraid of the “free fall”—or freedom—itself than of the snake itself. Though Nel “behave[s] as the wronged wife,” Sula is the victim in this scenario. Now the spider, as well as the snake, has turned against her; alone, Sula must navigate the free fall that will allow her to “stay alive” apart from the snares of spider and snake alike.

That Sula and Nel each feel equally betrayed by the other, and that we as readers are invited to understand both of their positions through metaphor and focalization, emphasizes the impossibility of moral judgment in *Sula* and the importance of the conceit in framing their respective points of view. 41 Though critics have tended toward moralizing readings that are allied only with Nel’s perspective, 42 the sympathetic attention given to both Sula and Nel’s interiority, accessed through the vehicle of metaphor, suggest that we are not invited to join the flickering

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41 For more on the impossibility of moral judgment in *Sula*, see Yung-Hsing Wu’s excellent article on this topic.
42 Samuels and Hudson-Weems, for instance, argue that Sula “seems to lack interest in assuming any responsibility for her fellow human beings” (43). La Vinia Delois Jennings even argues that Sula is “evil” in a way that she claims is consistent with the African Ndoki paradigm (27). Similarly, Christopher Okonkwo likens her to the “malevolent ogbanjeabiku” of West African folklore.
tongues in the snake pit. Both Sula and Nel are suffering on account of a friendship that has been irreparably damaged by a lack of understanding regarding the extent to which their lives can be shared. Though Sula’s return to the Bottoms after a ten year absence had been welcomed by Nel as “like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed” (95), the two women soon find that what was an easy and simple friendship in childhood becomes more complicated in adulthood.

Nel’s conceit returns in the last pages of the novel after Sula has passed away from an unstipulated illness. Visiting Sula’s gravesite, Nel observes what could be a literal shift in wind patterns, but a reader attuned to lyrical conventions will recognize a figurative shift in Nel’s emotions, the continuation of an earlier conceit: “Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze” (174). The mysterious ball of fur that has been haunting Nel finally disappears, and the reappearance of the earthy odor and the movement of leaves and mud recalls the metaphor’s original deployment in which “the odor evaporated; the leaves were still, the mud settled” (108). The continuation of the conceit at the novel’s close is important, since it signals the continuation of Nel’s grieving process, which had been suddenly truncated in the earlier passage. This time, Nel is able to come to terms with her grief, allowing herself to indulge in her feelings of loss and to finally recognize the true purpose behind her suffering: “All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude,” she discovers. Finally, like the women at Chicken Little’s funeral, she allows herself to cry out: “It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (174).

*Sula* is not so much a novel of plotted events as it is a novel of feelings, the most difficult of which are expressed through the metaphysical conceit. How does one begin to grieve for
something that is irretrievably lost? The responses to this question that are offered in *Sula* are consistently framed in terms of metaphor, which becomes an important lyrical proxy for felt experience.

Like Morrison after her, Zora Neale Hurston pairs metaphor with focalization as a way of articulating her characters’ feelings of loss and disenchantment. Overwhelmed by her failing marriage, Janie “was a rut in the road. Plenty of life beneath the surface but it was kept beaten down by the wheels” (76); and though Janie knows her own worth, her husband takes her for granted: “She had found a jewel down inside herself and she had wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it around. But she had been set in the market-place to sell” (90). Unlike *Sula*, however, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is also anchored by a single conceit to which the novel repeatedly returns. It is rooted in the moment when Janie’s “conscious life had commenced,” her first kiss with Johnny Taylor:

It was a spring afternoon in West Florida. Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the back-yard. She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried
themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness. … Oh
to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the
world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to
struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her? …
Through pollinated air she saw a glorious being coming up the road. In her former
blindness she had known him as shiftless Johnny Taylor, tall and lean. That was before
the golden dust of pollen had beglamored his rags and her eyes. (10-12)
The “golden dust of pollen” does magical things to Janie’s perception, transforming Johnny
Taylor from a shiftless nobody into a “glorious being” (12). The sustained attention to the
blossoming pear tree, the pollen it produces, and the bees that fertilize the blossoms in this
passage not only suggests Janie’s sexual awakening, it also establishes these images as important
and recurring figurations for Janie’s expectations of love and marriage. Though she anticipates a
life of charmed romance, one that is “beglamored” by “the golden dust of pollen,” she is
continuously confronted by a reality that falls significantly short of her expectations.

A number of critics have pointed to the pear tree as a crucial image that marks a turning
point for Janie. Mary Helen Washington points out that “Hurston uses two images from nature to
symbolize Janie’s quest: the horizon and the blossoming pear tree” (15). Others have made
similar observations. Matthew Wynn Sivils argues for a regionalist reading of the novel in which
the pear tree “marks [Janie’s] first and most powerful connection with the natural world of the
South,” thereby “inscription[ing] Janie’s environment upon her [sexualized] body” (95, 96). Glenda
B. Weathers offers a religious, typological reading of the pear tree as a stand-in for the tree of
knowledge in which Janie plays the role of Eve (202). These critics tend toward uni-directional,
allegorical readings by depicting Janie’s sexuality as instantiated by the pear tree which, in turn,
functions metonymically for some larger concept—for the rural South, in Silva’s case, or for knowledge of good and evil, in Weathers.’ These allegorical readings are certainly useful, but there is also a complex and multi-directional interplay between Janie’s sexuality and the cluster of images that make up the pear tree conceit, one that is sustained throughout the novel as Janie moves through relationships with three very different men.

How does the pear tree frame marriage, and how does marriage frame the pear tree? This passage is filled with enchantment—“with kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world”—and Janie has been faulted by critics for adhering to an unrealistic picture of marriage (D. Clarke 605). A closer look at the pear tree, however, reveals a more balanced and nuanced picture of marriage than what critics have recognized. A solid relationship is poised here as a work-in-progress, a fertile plant that is only beginning to approach full bloom; and though it eventually morphs into something beautiful, it develops quite unevenly. Just as the parts of the pear tree range “from barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom,” so every marriage contains its own rough patches, as Janie will learn soon enough (10). The most successful marriage, the narrator suggests through this conceit, is as natural as this spring scene, one that is given the chance to bloom without being hampered or stunted by artificial constraints.

Janie’s first two marriages fail precisely because of the constraints that are imposed on her by self-centered and insecure husbands. The prospect of the much older Logan Killicks is foisted on Janie by her grandmother in the immediate aftermath of her kiss with Johnny Taylor. “Yeah, Janie, youse got yo’ womanhood on yuh,” her grandmother remarks. “So Ah mout ez well tell yuh what Ah been savin’ up for uh spell. Ah wants to see you married right away” (12). Janie tries to shirk the suggestion, which runs counter to her own desires, now embodied in the
blossoming pear tree: “The vision of Logan Killicks,” she ruminates unhappily, “was desecrating the pear tree” (14). Janie dutifully obeys her grandmother and marries Killicks, but she frequently returns to the pear tree in the days leading up to her marriage: “Janie asked inside of herself and out. She was back and forth to the pear tree continuously wondering and thinking” (21). A monument to Janie’s sexual awakening, the pear tree has now become a site of contemplation and a source of power. It has also, however, become an ideal to which her marriage fails to measure up. “Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think,” she cries to her grandmother a mere three days after the wedding, to which her grandmother replies, “Wait awhile, baby. Yo’ mind will change” (24).

Janie’s mind doesn’t change, however; contrary to her grandmother’s counsel, she continues to adhere to a vision inspired by the initial image of the pear tree. While all of Nanny’s advice to Janie stems from a single axiom derived from her own hardships—that “de nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (14)—the natural world appears to offer something much more promising. Disenchanted with her marriage to Killicks within a matter of days, Janie “waited a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time. But when the pollen again gilded the sun and sifted down on the world she began to stand around the gate and expect things” (25). Janie discovers that the natural world has its own epistemology, a kind of knowledge that she begins to intuit as she becomes increasingly attuned to its inner workings: “She knew things that nobody else had told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind. ... She knew the world was a stallion rolling in the blue pasture of ether. She knew that God tore down the old world every evening and built a new one by sun-up. It was wonderful to see it take form with the sun and emerge from the gray dust of its making.” The world is full of wonder, but it is also balanced: what is torn down is built up again as night gives way to day.
Janie seeks to replicate both the marvel and balance of the cosmos within her relationships. When the scales tip, she becomes restless, and the pear tree imagery reappears.

Initially on his best behavior, Killicks shows his true colors “long before the year was up,” demanding that Janie perform double-duty in the kitchen and in the fields (26). In a reversal of the sultry pear tree moment, Killicks forces Janie into a less ideal relationship with nature through a life of perpetual hard labor. She plows the fields and shovels manure, and she is threatened with violence when she voices her unhappiness: “Ah’ll take holt uh dat ax and come in dere and kill yuh!” Killicks warns her (31). When Janie finally musters the courage to abandon the cranky Killicks and to begin a new life with Joe Starks, who promises her a life of pleasure, the imagery of the pear tree returns again: “From now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom” (32).

Almost immediately, however, Starks—like Killicks before him—begins to take Janie for granted. He becomes totally immersed in his new political and industrial ventures as mayor and lumber tycoon of Eatonville, respectively. Left behind to do the cooking and cleaning, Janie feels lonely and isolated. “Naw, Jody, it jus’looks lak it keeps us in some way we ain’t natural wid one ‘nother. You’se always off talkin’ and fixin’ things, and Ah feels lak Ah’m jus’ markin’ time” (46). Worse still, Starks begins to impose severe restrictions on Janie’s freedom, forcing her to cover her beautiful hair with a rag and preventing her from participating in public forums and group discussions. Though Starks makes good on his promise to rescue Janie from a life of forced manual labor, his alternative is equally imprisoning, since he decides that “her place is in de home” and in the store that she operates for him—and nowhere else (43). The gradual deterioration of Janie’s relationship with Starks is articulated as a reversal of the pear tree imagery that represented Janie’s expectations of marriage. Starks “took the bloom off of things”
by refusing to allow Janie to speak in public (43). After he becomes physically abusive, Janie finds that she is unable to be “petal-open anymore with him,” a remark with decidedly sexual overtones (71). She no longer finds “blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be” (72). These extensions of the pear tree conceit reveal a relationship that is in a premature state of decay.

After twenty years of unhappiness, the marriage ends when Starks dies of kidney failure, and following a six-month mourning period, Janie meets Tea Cake, the last of her three husbands. In a paraphrase of her expectations regarding Joe Starks—that she was finally going to have “a bee for her bloom” (32)—Janie allows her hopes to rise once again with regard to Tea Cake: “He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God” (106).

Janie’s marriage to Tea Cake is the closest she will come to the marital bliss depicted in the pear tree conceit. Their relationship achieves a balance that is not reached during Janie’s first two marriages. Tea Cake teaches Janie how to drive and how to shoot. The two play checkers and other games together. In contradistinction to Joe Starks, Tea Cake appreciates Janie’s hair, even combing it for her; and unlike Starks, Tea Cake encourages Janie to spend time with their mutual friends and to “tell big stories” alongside everyone else (134). They also elect to work side-by-side together in the fields. They manage to balance leisure and labor in a way that works for them. Certainly, their marriage is not without its own flaws, especially from a 21st century perspective. Shawn E. Miller has drawn out some of these undesirable aspects of their relationship, aligning Tea Cake with Killicks and Starks in terms of his occasional machismo,
possessiveness, and “sexual jealousy” (79). On one occasion, these tendencies even motivate Tea Cake to hit Janie in order to “show he was boss” (Hurston 147).

Despite these imperfections, however, Janie does achieve the happiness with Tea Cake that she has envisioned in her grandmother’s pear tree, which is made evident by the role that fertile plant life plays in their marriage. Tea Cake routinely “mak[es] flower beds in Janie’s yard and seed[s] the garden for her” and, following his untimely death in the aftermath of the hurricane, Janie gives away “everything in their little house except a package of garden seed that Tea Cake had bought to plant. The planting never got done because he had been waiting for the right time of the moon when his sickness overtook him. The seeds reminded Janie of Tea Cake more than anything else because he was always planting things. … she meant to plant them for remembrance” (110, 191). In contrast to the decaying blossoms that characterized her marriage to Starks, Janie’s marriage to Tea Cake is represented by the seed, a clear symbol of fertility and promise.

Recent scholarship runs counter to traditional readings of the novel by positioning Tea Cake as yet another oppressive patriarch and Janie as a woman who only manages to “master conventional marriage” rather than “escap[ing] from it” (Miller 76). This is certainly not how Janie would view her own story, though, and the narrator’s perspective is continuously tied to Janie’s by way of focalization. By tracing the pear tree conceit and its extension throughout the novel, we can see that Janie’s final marriage is a felicitous realization of the expectations Janie has harbored since her first kiss with Johnny Taylor. Our twenty-first century perspective may shape our readings of the narrative events in one direction, but Hurston’s metaphor shapes them in another. For Janie, there is no one formula for a successful marriage; rather, every relationship has its own tone and tenor: “love ain’t somethin’ lak uh grindstone dat’s de same thing
everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it touch,” she explains. “Love is lak de sea. It’s uh movin’ thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it’s different with every shore” (191). Certainly, not all relationships are equal, or even equally healthy, as Janie herself came to realize within her first two marriages, but each is unique and cannot be measured against an ideal that attempts to standardize relationships for all people. With Tea Cake, Janie manages to find a natural balance through which she is finally able to blossom, and without sacrificing her bloom.

Most people are familiar with Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* through the highly-publicized obscenity trials that followed its U. S. publication in 1961 by Grove Press. The novel also reached new generations of Americans through its appearance on a 1991 episode of “Seinfeld” in which the sitcom’s characters recall having passed around a copy of the book on account of its steamy content when they were in high school. *Tropic of Cancer* is so well-known for its sexually explicit content that its aesthetic strategies largely remain overlooked, though it is precisely the novel’s lyrical aims that rescue it from charges of prurience. Miller’s use of the metaphysical conceit links sexuality to physical, emotional, and psychological vigor, whereas its repression is linked to weakness and death. Sexuality is deeply connected to Miller’s aesthetic agenda, which seeks to rescue art from the overly-intellectualized ennui of modern culture, or what Miller diagnoses as “a cancer eating itself away” (2). By using sexuality to revitalize art, Miller restores art to its primal function as a generative and life-affirming act of creativity.

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43 Charged with obscenity by five state courts (CT, FL, IL, PA, and NY), a landmark 1964 Supreme Court decision overturned these verdicts and vindicated *Tropic of Cancer*, declaring that "material dealing with sex in a manner that advocates ideas, or that has literary or scientific or artistic value or any other form of social importance, may not be branded as obscenity and denied the constitutional protection" (Karolides, Bald & Sova, 325-7).
“This is not a book,” warns *Tropic*’s narrator, also named Henry Miller. “This is libel, slander, defamation of character … this is a prolonged insult, a gob of spit in the face of Art, a kick in the pants to God, Man, Destiny, Time, Love, Beauty … this is a song. I am singing” (2). To be sure, *Tropic of Cancer* is more akin to prose poetry than to narrative. Few events of significance occur; most of the novel is an apostrophic praise song delivered to the female body. With these opening lines, Miller also anticipates his novel’s reception, moving from the point of view of the novel’s detractors—“this is a prolonged insult, a gob of spit in the face of Art”—to his own sense of the novel’s aesthetic, even lyrical, achievements—“this is a song. I am singing.” This discrepancy between the tastes and values of the world and those of the serious artist is a theme that is developed throughout *Tropic of Cancer*, in which Miller the artist is a visionary and a doctor who can identify, diagnose, and treat those illnesses to which the rest of civilization falls pray: sexual repression, social conformity, and the tendency to retreat from life rather than experiencing it.

For Miller, one of the most disgraceful retreats from the world of the senses is a life of contemplation. “[Man] will debauch himself with ideas,” Miller writes, “he will reduce himself to a shadow if for only one second of his life he can close his eyes to the hideousness of reality” (96). Intellectual deliberation is consistently figured through illness, and even characters that are marked by their contemplative nature are also marked by an embodied sickness, such as Sylvester, “the sick dramatist” (29): “The dramatist is sick and from above his scalp looks more scabrous than ever. His hair is made of straw. His ideas are straw” (27). Too much thought yields sterility, a point which Miller expresses in any number of ways: “In Europe one gets used to doing nothing,” he complains. “You sit on your ass and whine all day. You get contaminated. You rot” (49). “Ideas have to be wedded to action,” he maintains in another argumentative
passage; “if there is no sex, no vitality in them, there is no action. Ideas cannot exist alone in the vacuum of the mind” (242).

Sex, in fact, is the sole indicator of spiritual and physical vitality within the novel. Those who are in touch with sexuality are in touch with their most primal desires, and the new literature is charged with bringing these desires to light through “the recording of all that which is omitted in books” (11). “We have evolved a new cosmogony of literature, Boris and I,” Miller writes. “It is to be a new Bible—The Last Book. Now we shall have a vessel in which to pour the vital fluid, a bomb which, when we throw it, will set off the world” (26). The new literature is at once a religious “vessel”—a “Bible”—and a revolutionary “bomb” that will forever change the literary landscape. Great literature—like great sex—should be “capable of resuscitating the body and soul” (257). Only the “live wire of sex” can revive literature and humankind alike (249). In the transvaluation of values enacted here, sex is no longer a source of embarrassment; it is celebrated in explicit, carnal detail.

Of course, such an approach to literature isn’t entirely new; an important precursor for Miller’s agenda is Walt Whitman, whose Leaves of Grass is the only book Miller carries with him to Paris (Turner 7). In Tropic of Cancer, Miller heralds Whitman as “the Poet of the Body and the Soul” and “the first and last poet,” a literary shaman for whom Europe has no equivalent: whereas “Goethe is an end of something, Whitman is a beginning” (240). Whitman is an anachronism in his own time just as Miller is an anachronism in his, though it is difficult for the novel’s characters to pinpoint just where these “poets of the body” belong. Miller writes of his friends, “Now and then they would compliment me on being alive, but in such a way that I felt embarrassed. They made me feel that I was alive in the nineteenth century, a sort of atavistic remnant, a romantic shred, a soulful Pithecanthropus erectus” (168-9). Miller’s temporal

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44 Miller’s original title for Tropic of Cancer.
dislocation from the literature and culture of his own milieu does not seem to grant him any special advantage. He is the sole survivor among the walking dead. “Boris especially seemed to get a great kick out of touching me,” Miller continues; “he wanted me to be alive so that he could die to his heart’s content” (169).

Even so, it is the role of the writer to rescue humanity from its own tyranny through his artistic creation. “The race of artists” must “take the lifeless mass of humanity and by the fever and ferment with which they imbue it turn this soggy dough into bread and bread into wine and the wine into song” (254). The artist is alternately depicted as Promethean and Christ-like: Promethean in his ability to give shape to lifeless matter and Christ-like in his ability to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary through a miracle. Like Christ, the artist also offers himself as a sacrifice for a greater good: “A man who belongs to this race must stand up on the high place with gibberish in his mouth and rip out his entrails. It is right and just, because he must! And anything that falls short of this frightening spectacle, anything less shuddering, less terrifying, less mad, less intoxicated, less contaminating, is not art. The rest is counterfeit. The rest is humanity” (255). The martyrdom is public, graphic, and fatal to the artist. The image that Miller supplies is a man who very literally bares his insides to his readership, only to destroy himself in the process.

In baring his own insides, Miller spares no detail of his sexual exploits, which are consistently depicted through the language of art in a way that fuses sexuality with creative production. The novel opens, for example, with a vivid description of Tania’s genitals, staged as a lyrical apostrophe that is filled with mixed metaphors:

O Tania, where now is that warm cunt of yours, those fat, heavy garters, those soft, bulging thighs? There is a bone in my prick six inches long. I will ream out every wrinkle
in your cunt, Tania, big with seed. I will send you home to your Sylvester with an ache in your belly and your womb turned inside out. Your Sylvester! Yes, he knows how to build a fire, but I know how to inflame a cunt. I shoot hot bolts into you, Tania, I make your ovaries incandescent. Your Sylvester is a little jealous now? He feels something, doesn’t he? He feels the remnants of my big prick. I have set the shores a little wider, I have ironed out the wrinkles. After me you can take on stallions, bulls, rams, drakes, St. Bernards. You can stuff toads, bats, lizards up your rectum. You can shit arpeggios if you like, or string a zither across your navel. … I will bite into your clitoris and spit out two franc pieces. … (5-6)

The penis is figured as an iron, a lightning bolt, and a force of geologic erosion; the vagina becomes a vaquero, the rectum a jungle, and the clitoris a slot machine. The genitals are sites that bustle with activity, and proving that vital art begets still more art, they even yield music. Miller also uses mixed metaphors of a very different type to depict Llona, whose cunt is too large to accommodate any lover: “Not a prick in the land big enough for her ... not one. ... A valise without straps. A hole without a key. She had a German mouth, French ears, Russian ass. Cunt international. When the flag waved it was red all the way back to the throat. You entered on the Boulevard Jules-Ferry and came out at the Porte de la Villette” (7). Llona’s body is an international way station complete with its own street map. Feminists may cringe at these figurations, which position women as sexual receptacles for male organs, but the female body in all of its carnal detail becomes a source of staggering poetic inspiration for Miller. Staring into the open cunt of a prostitute, he catches a glimpse of the “Absolute” in an epiphanic moment that approaches the Romantic sublime:
A glance at that dark, unstitched wound and a deep fissure in my brain opens up: all the images and memories that had been laboriously or absent-mindedly assorted, labeled, documented, filed, sealed and stamped break forth pell-mell like ants pouring out of a crack in the sidewalk; the world ceases to revolve, time stops, the very nexus of my dreams is broken and dissolved and my guts spill out in a grand schizophrenic rush, an evacuation that leaves me face to face with the Absolute. ... Great whore and mother of man with gin in her veins. Mother of all harlots, spider rolling us in your logarithmic grave, insatiable one, field whose laughter rives me! ... When I look down into that crack I see an equation sign, the world at balance, a world reduced to zero and no trace of remainder. (246-7)

She is at once the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, the “mother of man” and a “great whore.” Her cunt is infinite—“the Absolute”—and yet finite, a mathematical equation that is perfectly reducible. The body of a woman is presented here through a series of paradoxical metaphors that align her with two extremes at once, the virginal and the infinite on the one hand, the sordid and the circumscribed on the other.

The sexualized body is understood in terms of art, and in turn, art is understood in terms of the sexualized body. This is most explicit when Miller channels Joyce, transforming Molly Bloom’s motto—“I love everything that flows”—into a paratactic prose poem that celebrates the body, warts and all: “I too love everything that flows: rivers, sewers, lava, semen, blood, bile, words, sentences,” he writes, placing linguistic artifice on the same plane as bodily fluids. “I love the amniotic fluid when it spills out of the bag. I love the kidney with its painful gallstones, its gravel and what-not; I love the urine that pours out scalding and the clap that runs endlessly. ... I love everything that flows, even the menstrual flow that carries away the seed unfecund” (257-
In another homage to an artistic contemporary, Miller depicts Matisse’s impressionistic painting style through the language of sexual climax: “Even as the world falls apart the Paris that belong to Matisse shudders with bright, gasping orgasms, the air itself is steady with a stagnant sperm, the trees tangled like hair” (166). Sex and art, for Miller, are inextricably linked; and, his extended metaphor argues, good art—like good sex—is revitalizing, an antidote to the “cancer” of complacency that eats away at the modern world.

_Tropic of Cancer_, when not studied for its obscenity, is often studied as an exemplary novel of expatriation in the late modernist period. The novel’s first half depicts Paris as the “incubator” that promotes the kind of artistic freedom and uninhibited sexuality Miller is unable to find in the U.S. (29). New York is a “hollow pit of nothingness,” a “double-harness” that yokes Miller to the “treadmill” of daily living, but Paris palpitates like “a heart just removed from a warm body” (68-9; 63); it is “the very navel of the world to which, like a blind and faltering idiot, one crawls back on hands and knees” (182). Gradually, however, even Paris begins to lose is charm, especially from the vantage point of a starving artist living in squalor, plagued daily by lice and hunger. “Paris is a whore,” Miller writes during one bout of depression. “From a distance she seems ravishing, you can’t wait to have her in your arms. And five minutes later you feel empty, disgusted with yourself” (209). The city is particularly inhospitable—even “excrable” (219)—in the winter months: “the cold of a Paris winter is a cold unknown to America,” he writes. “It is psychological, an inner as well as an outer cold” (240). The substance that Miller thought he has found in Paris turns out to be illusory; in fact, Miller even contemplates a return to the U.S. in the novel’s closing pages. The disease that Miller initially detects within American culture loses its local specificity and becomes a global problem in the latter half of the novel. Gradually, Miller forgoes the language of the nation for the language of
universal humanism, and his references to Americans and Parisians are replaced with references to “human beings” and “the world” at large. The rhetoric of expatriation is ultimately subsumed under Miller’s sexual-aesthetic agenda, his quest to prove that “there has been a constant and steady decline of man in art, in thought, in action. The world is pooped out: there isn’t a dry fart left” (249).

In 1940, a destitute Miller was commissioned to write smut stories for a dollar per page, but “simply found that he couldn’t write acceptable pornography,” and quickly gave it up (Martin 341-2). Miller is not a pornographic writer, though this has been his ironic legacy, even in the wake of the obscenity trials that cleared him from precisely these charges. Unfortunately, Miller’s reputation continues to confirm the thesis laid out in _Tropic of Cancer_: that human beings are deeply repressed, and that literature is “capable of resuscitating the body and soul,” if only through controversy (257). _Tropic of Cancer_ deliberately departs from the eventfulness of traditional narrative fiction in order to deliver this lyrically affective message. The metaphysical conceit that drives the novel—literature as sex, sex as literature—not only demonstrates its own thesis, it deliberately sets out to erase the very boundary between sex and literature that would, unfortunately, become the central focus of its own critical and legal reception.

In the first chapter of Russell Banks’s _Contintental Drift_, we are introduced to Bob Dubois and his unhappy existence within a marriage and career that leave something to be desired; but the second chapter opens, quite unexpectedly, with an elaborate, five-page conceit that guides the novel and inspires its title. The figuration likens human traffic to the movement of continents in a globalized world that increasingly resembles the planet as it has been modeled by geologists and meteorologists:
It’s as if the creatures residing on this planet in these years, the human creatures, millions of them traveling singly and in families, in clans and tribes, traveling sometimes as entire nations, were a subsystem inside the larger system of currents and tides, of winds and weather, of drifting continents and shifting, uplifting, grinding, cracking land masses. ...

We map and measure jet streams, weather patterns, prevailing winds, tides and deep ocean currents; we track precisely scarps, fractures, trenches and ridges where the plates atop the earth’s mass drive against one another; we name and chart the Southeast and Northeast Trades and the Atlantic Westerlies, the tropical monsoons and the doldrums, the mistrals, the Santa Ana and the Canada High; we know the Humboldt, California and Kuroshio currents—so that, having traced and enumerated them, we can look on our planet and can see that all the way to its very core the sphere inhales and exhales, rises and falls, swirls and whirls in a lovely, disciplined dance in time. It ages and dies and is born again, constantly, through motion, creating and recreating its very self, like a uroborous, the snake that devours its tail. (34-5)

The conceit depicts human migration as something that is worthy of being “mapped,” “tracked,” “named and charted,” and “known” in the same way that science records and analyzes the movement of land masses and weather currents. It also presents a bird’s-eye view of humankind through which the lives of human beings are as patterned and cyclical as the natural currents of the planet. When viewed from a distance, individual lives appear to be swept up by larger forces that are beyond their control. Banks’ narrator combines the rhetoric of geological science with the aesthetic values of ancient Greek tragedy to create a metaphoric frame in which the transnational migrations of people, especially those from the third world, warrant a deterministic and, consequently, tragic reading:
Seen from above, then, the flight of a million and a half Somali men, women and children with their sick and dying beasts out of the drought- and war-shattered region of Ogaden in the Horn of Africa would resemble the movement of the Southwest Monsoon Current... The movement of the Somalis would seem inevitable, unalterable and mindless; and because we would have watched it the way we watch the weather, it would seem tragic” (35).

What is more, just as continental drift explains how geographically disparate parts of the world were once connected under Pangaea, so Banks’s metaphor accounts for the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate human communities:

Systems and sets, subsystems and subsets, patterns and aggregates of water, earth, fire and air—naming and mapping them, learning of the intricate interdependence of the forces that move and convert them into one another, this process gradually provides us with a vision of the planet as an organic cell, a mindless, spherical creature whose only purpose is to be born as rapidly as it dies and whose general principle informing that purpose, as if it were a moral imperative, is to keep moving ... it’s the only argument we have against entropy. And it’s not truly an argument; it’s a vision. (39)

The world is “an organic cell” in which all of its parts serve some unseen vital and interconnected function. The human world, as modeled by continental drift, is sharply distinguished from the world as it appears on the surface, the realm of history and political science: fast-paced, war-torn, a constant influx of “news” that is filtered to the first world, only to be replaced by tomorrow’s news in the form of another crisis: whereas “the metabolic rate of history is too fast for us to observe it,” that of geology is “too slow” for human perception (36).
One of the novel’s goals, then, is to render human lives and the unexpected relationships they bear toward one another in a global economy perceptible through the conceit of continental drift.

*Continental Drift* is a dual narrative in which two stories, unfolded in alternating chapters, “drift” toward one another before finally converging in the novel’s climax. One depicts the unhappy life of the white, working-class Bob Dubois, who fixes oil burners for a living and who, disaffected with his wife and children, spends his nights getting drunk at the local bar and conducting a relatively meaningless affair with Doris Cleeve; the other chronicles Vanise Dorsinville, a Haitian refugee who flees her country with her nephew and infant child in fear for her life. Both Bob and Vanise cling to a vision of the American dream that will better their stations and give them the opportunity to start a new life under better circumstances. For Bob, this entails a series of career switches that gradually draws him into a world of criminal activity with the promise of money and leisure, both of which he imagines will bring his family closer together. Vanise absconds from Haiti when her nephew’s theft of a ham for their starving family threatens their already tenuous safety with the local crime lord who controls the area. She hopes that a new life in America will finally secure their safety and freedom and will help them to advance beyond poverty.

In the plot’s most obvious parallel to continental drift, Bob and Vanise move toward one another geographically until finally meeting in the Florida Keys. Beginning with a job as a repairman for an oil company in Catamount, New Hampshire, Bob moves his family to Oleander Park, Florida to begin a new life manning a liquor store for his brother, who continuously promises—and fails—to make Bob a co-owner. Disillusioned again, Bob moves to Moray Key to takes up with an old friend, Avery, who runs illegal shipments of cocaine and, ultimately, immigrants along the coast for large amounts of money. Vanise begins in Haiti and spends all of
her money on a boat ride that is supposed to take her to Florida but that lands instead on North Caicos Island; she manages to embark on a second voyage to the Bahamas, where she is effectively forced into prostitution before finally securing a boat ride to Florida—from none other than Bob Dubois.

Ironically, their meeting suggests the fallaciousness, rather than the realization, of the American dream that they have both been chasing and that has caused them to drift together. Vanise’s nephew and fellow refugee, Claude, is hell-bent on America and all of the opportunities it represents, especially after having endured such hardship—starvation, rape, humiliation, exploitation—on the illicit voyages that brought them from Haiti to Florida. But when Claude and Bob stand face-to-face on the boat that will finally take Claude and Vanise to the U.S., the narrator focalizes Bob, who now sees himself as the disaffected product of the American dream that Claude will inevitably become:

Claude stands next to Bob, and pointing out across the bow, says, “America?”

Bob nods. … America! Land, ho! Only, like Columbus and all those guys looking for the Fountain of Youth, when you finally get to America, you get something else. You get Disney World and land deals and fast-moving high-interest bank loans, and if you don’t get the hell out of the way, they’ll knock you down, cut you up with a harrow and plow you under, so they can throw some condos up on top of you or maybe a parking lot or maybe an orange grove.

Bob looks down at the boy’s black profile, and he thinks, You’ll get to America, all right kid, and maybe, just like me, you’ll get what you want. Whatever that is. But you’ll have to give something away for it, if you haven’t already. And when you get what
you want, it’ll turn out to be not what you wanted after all, because it’ll always be worth
less than what you gave away for it. In the land of the free, nothing’s free. (311-12)

Bob knows all too well the pitfalls of the Horatio Alger myth in which he, too, has become
hopelessly ensnared. No happier than he was at the beginning of the novel—actually, he is
substantially less happy, and less stable, both materially and emotionally—Bob has come to
realize that he has been chasing after an unattainable ideal in abandoning the safety of his life in
New Hampshire for life on the edge as a trafficker of drugs and Haitian refugees. He has also
become acutely aware of the moral tradeoffs he has made along the way. While the Haitians
would appear to have much more to gain than Bob as a result of their migration, their sacrifices
have been equally great. Both Claude and Vanise have traded not only all of their savings but
also their bodies, their autonomy, and their dignity.

Claude’s optimism in this passage is not only thrown into relief by Bob’s cynicism, it is
also undermined by the fate of Claude and the other Haitians. When the boat is spotted by the
Coast Guard as it nears the shore, Bob’s partner pushes the refugees overboard in a desperate
attempt to rid the boat of its human contraband, and all of the Haitians drown, save for Vanise.
Bob is so wracked with guilt by his unwitting role in the drownings that he tracks down Vanise
and attempts to give her his share of the profit. When she refuses, Bob is immediately killed and
robbed by the men who have led him to her. Disparate lives collide in *Continental Drift*, though
with tragic consequences. At the beginning of the novel, Bob and Vanise inhabit very different
lives in very different parts of the hemisphere, but through the mechanism of “continental drift,”
their fates are inextricably tied together: Bob dies at the hands of Vanise, just as she nearly dies
at his.
The conceit of continental drift also calls into question, however, the degree of control that Bob and Vanise have over their fates. If the activities of human beings, like geologic and weather patterns, are “inevitable, unalterable and mindless” (35), how could Bob, Claude, and the other Haitian refugees have possibly avoided their untimely deaths? This determinism within this framing metaphor would appear to detract from the novel’s social critique of the illicit traffickers who profit from illegal immigration by treating human lives as commodities. Bob and his partner cannot reasonably incur moral responsibility for the drownings of the refugees, after all, if all of their fates are unalterably fixed. This determinism, however, is illusive rather than substantive, a matter of perspective that results from the bird’s eye view of the novel’s metaphoric passages. Human movement only “seems” inevitable from the remote vantage point of the cartographer (35). From another, closer perspective, the individual will remains intact: deliberations occur, choices are made, and consequences result from those choices.

*Continental Drift* attempts to balance these two perspectives—the distant view of the cartographer and the proximate view of the novelist—against one another. The novel’s conceit, which tracks human beings en masse, is counter-measured by the focus on individual lives that typically occurs in a novel. This balance, in fact, is also at the forefront of Bob’s mind as he contemplates the subject-positions of the Haitians on his boat:

Why do they do that? he wonders. Why do they throw away everything they know and trust, no matter how bad it is, for something they know nothing about and can never trust? He’s in awe of the will it takes, the stubborn, conscious determination to get to America that each of them, from the eldest to the youngest, must own. But he can’t put that willfulness together with what he sees before him—a quiescent, silent, shy people
who seem fatalistic almost, who seem ready and even willing to accept whatever is given them. (305)

From a distance—that is, from Bob’s external perspective as a cultural outsider— the refugees seem “fatalistic[ally]” shy, but even Bob marvels at the strength and sheer “will” that has caused them to risk their lives for a new start in the U.S. The refugees, like all of the characters and events in the novel, are filtered through two perspectives: distance and proximity, the former examining people in aggregate, the latter examining them as individuals.

Novels typically focus on individual lives from close proximity, but the anchoring conceit of “continental drift” reframes these lives from a remote purview, instead. Unlike the other novels treated here, Continental Drift works to widen, rather than close, the distance between its narrator and its characters. Such a gap, however, is not intended to detract from our readerly sympathy. If we studied human lives from a geologic perspective, the conceit continues, “we could not argue over who was at fault or what should have been done; ideology would seem a form of vanity, a despicable self-indulgence” (35). Reserving judgment, readers should provide sympathy and aid to the novel’s characters as if we are all people with the same ontological status: “We would rise from our shaded seat in front of our hut alongside the dusty road that leads from the treeless Damisa hills in Ethiopia to our village near the trading town of Samaso in Somalia, and we would step forward onto the road with a cup of water and a small bowl of millet and whey for the family we have been watching approach for the last hour.” This example, of course, is deliberately metaleptic: as readers, we cannot offer water to these hypothetical Somali characters any more than we can prevent Bob’s fatal stabbing, but we can feel the requisite sympathy that would inspire these interventions, were they possible.
A conceit that relies so heavily on geology may seem to dwarf individual lives within an impossibly large context, but such distance also effectively erases particularities of place, race, and culture and, consequently, foregrounds commonality. Continental drift points to common origins that render these differences accidental rather than essential. The metaphysical conceit framing Banks’s novel also encourages a very different reading practice from that to which we have become accustomed. Many critics have pointed to the relationship between readerly judgment and the novel as a form. In contrast, Russell Banks explicitly discourages judgment, using a metaphoric frame to create enough distance between readers and his characters in order to elicit pity and compassion in its stead. The conceit of continental drift, then, yields more than a vision or perspective; it yields a theory of reading. The novel concludes on this note, an extension of the earlier imperative to practice “distant” reading from the vantage point of the cartographer:

Knowledge of the facts of Bob’s life and death changes nothing in the world. Our celebrating his life and grieving over his death, however, will. Good cheer and mournfulness over lives other than our own, even wholly invented lives—to, especially wholly invented lives—deprive the world as it is of some of the greed it needs to continue to be itself. Sabotage and subversion, then, are this book’s objectives. Go, my book, and help destroy the world as it is. (366)

45 According to James Phelan, the dynamic progression we experience as we read narratives from beginning to end actively engages our ethical judgment; indeed, Phelan argues that readerly judgment is essential to “our experience of – and understanding—of narrative form” in marked contrast to the lyric, which places readers “less in the position of the observer and judge and more in the position of participant” (Experiencing Fiction 3, 22). Martha Nussbaum’s Aristotelian-inspired study of the intersection of ethics and literature in Love’s Knowledge likewise privileges the novel as a model for ethical judgment based on its richness of detail and context; consequently, her case studies consist of lengthy novels by Marcel Proust and Henry James.
Sympathy, initially directed toward fictional lives, is imbued here with the power to change the world. In these closing lines, the novel’s conceit broadens further still, developing from a point of view to a reading practice to an ethical theory.

The novels treated here apply metaphoric frames to their plots in ways that foreground figurative meaning over concrete action. Though they operate as interpretive frameworks in Morrison and Hurston that guide our readings of the plot, these conceits become more distended and more elaborate in Miller and Banks, stalling, rivaling, and even supplanting the narrative events that occur around them. *Tropic of Cancer* can hardly boast of a plot; aside from its overriding metaphor, the novel is largely a picaresque depiction of Henry Miller’s sexual conquests. Twin plots develop in Banks’s *Continental Drift*, but they are demonstrative dramatizations of the axioms laid forth in the novel’s introductory conceit. In their own elaborations of metaphor, the metaphysical poets are important literary-historical precursors to these novelists. Their conceits become so extensive, so intricate, that one questions whether the conceit frames the poem or vice versa. Likewise, the novels in this chapter rely so heavily on framing metaphors that readers wonder whether the metaphor serves the novel or whether the novel, in fact, works in the service of the metaphor.

Poetry has traditionally been the realm of figuration, but a number of twentieth-century novels have begun to inhabit this realm by developing metaphysical conceits that compete with, rather than serve, plot. Brian McHale has argued that extensive metaphors in prose fiction that deliberately blur ontological boundaries between the storyworld of the novel and its narration are a hallmark of postmodernist fiction: “As the metaphorical frame of reference swells and complicates, the language of the passage becomes increasingly abstract, making it easy to forget
that the concrete scene upon which this abstract language has been brought to bear is not itself *ultimately* concrete, but an elaborate figure” (139). While Morrison, Hurston, and Banks are hardly considered experimental, much less “postmodernist,” they too rely on metaphor in ways that challenge traditional notions of narrative fiction as concrete events that occur in time.

Reading for the plot is often taken to be a “passive” form of reading by which readers simply follow a series of events to their conclusion without necessarily pausing to consider complexities like abstract themes or tropes. By contrast, reading for figuration requires an active engagement between the text and the mind of the reader, who must use a combination of imagination and intellect in order to apprehend the metaphor and its application. The metaphysical conceits developed in novels by Morrison, Hurston, Miller, and Banks facilitate dynamic interactions between pairings of objects and concepts that do not bear obvious relations to one another. To understand grief in terms of a grey ball that hovers just outside of one’s peripheral vision, marriage in terms of a blossoming pear tree, literature in terms of sexual vitality, and human lives in terms of continental drift forces us to stretch our conceptions of the ordinary or the conventional in ways that render them suddenly extraordinary. These conceits yield rich, conceptual readings that venture far beyond plot—readings made possible when we approach these novels in lyrical terms.

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46 For a critique of this claim and an argument for plot’s dynamic relationship to our psychological needs, see Peter Brooks.
Thanks to its ubiquity in critical discourse surrounding modernist and postmodernist novels, the concept of the unreliable narrator has become quite worn-out to readers and scholars of narrative prose. The term’s prevalence in classrooms and in scholarship has caused its application, and its efficacy, to become diluted since its initial deployment in Wayne Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). By re-situating this device within the context of the lyric tradition, which does not take for granted an inverse relationship between subjectivity and trustworthiness, this chapter seeks to restore our understanding of unreliable narration as a special manipulation of the reader that challenges naively literal readings of plot. A truly unreliable narrator, after all, articulates events and perceptions that cannot be taken at face value; they must be scrutinized, re-evaluated, and even re-constructed in light of the narrator’s inconsistencies, contradictions, and rationalizations.

The Victorian dramatic monologue figures as an important literary predecessor for the unreliable narrator of the twentieth-century novel, since it too urges readers to re-conceptualize events in ways that account for the calculating manipulation or psychological instability of their speakers. In what follows, I trace the dramatic monologue’s transformation of the relationship between subjectivity and authority in the lyric tradition before examining its indelible imprint on the narrative tradition in works by Henry James, Vladimir Nabokov, Bret Easton Ellis, and Chuck Palahniuk. These novels, arranged in order of increasing instability at the level of plot, feature radically unreliable narrators that urge readers toward figurative understandings of ostensibly literal events. Like those examined in the previous chapter, these novels too demand
that we read beyond the plane of events that are depicted by their unreliable narrators, effectively subordinating plot to the elaborate development of a dramatic persona.

When Wayne Booth coined the term “unreliable narrator” in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, he reserved this concept for narratives that exhibited contradictions in fact or moral value between the narrator and implied author: “I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not” (158-9). This moral and epistemological distance between the perspective of the narrator and that of the implied author is what he identifies as irony, which—within this richly complex rhetorical triangle of reader, author, and narrative perspective—effectively places the reader in alignment with the implied author at the narrator’s expense: “The author and reader are secretly in collusion, behind the speaker's back, agreeing upon the standard by which he is found wanting” (*Rhetoric* 304). Unreliable narration, as Booth conceived it, places a great hermeneutical burden on readers, who must identify the textual markers of narrative irony and adjust their readings accordingly. As Greta Olson puts it, “One reads literally until textual markers and indications force one to revise one's interpretation” (95).

The aim of Booth’s study was to unearth the partiality that underpins not only unreliable narration but all narration, however objective or transparent it may seem. “The author’s judgment is always present,” Booth writes, “always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it” (20). *The Rhetoric of Fiction* served as a blueprint for uncovering the artist’s hidden agenda through extended rhetorical analyses of the relationship between reader, narrator, and implied author. Its legacy, however, has been its attention to “dramatized” narrators generally and the unreliable narrator in particular, which initiated a flurry of studies focused on those
slippery speakers within twentieth-century fiction whose stories we cannot entirely trust. The
term’s expansive application and its subsequently diminished utility is partially a result of
Booth’s own definitional vagueness. “Our terminology for this kind of distance in narrators is
almost hopelessly inadequate,” he admits (*Rhetoric* 158). Critics have used this slackness,
however, as an occasion for lightening the interpretive burden that Booth’s concept was meant to
place on the reader. Monika Fludernik claims that any homodiegetic narrator’s “lack of
objectivity” necessarily renders him unreliable by virtue of his limited point of view (76). As
Olson has convincingly argued, however, fallibility is not the same as unreliability, and narrators
might be fallible for any number of reasons that do not necessarily make them untrustworthy,
including inexperience, bias, or limited access to information (101, 103). Fallible narratives, after
all, may well contain gaps or local mistakes that are to be filled in by the reader, but they are not
undermined by the implied author in any radical way, and so do not demand the hermeneutical
re-orientation that the classic unreliable narrator requires (Olsen 104). Ansgar Nünning has also
pointed to the vagueness of Booth’s concept of unreliable narration, especially Booth’s
imprecision with regard to what, precisely, constitutes an implied author. As it stands, Nünning
argues, the implied author is merely a mechanism through which readers project their own,
culturally-contingent values onto a text. Nünning advocates a shift to a reception-based model in
which readers are the sole determinants of reliability. “In a pluralist, postmodernist, and
multicultural age like ours it has become more difficult than ever before to determine what may
count as ‘normal moral standards’ … a pederast would not find anything wrong with Nabokov’s
*Lolita,*” he argues (64, 61). By this same account, readers could also posit unreliability wherever
they do not agree with a text’s values. Fludernik’s model asks that we merely supplement the
narrator’s story by supplying wanting information; Nünning’s leaves unreliability in the eye of
the beholder. These expansive understandings of unreliability and the reading practices they engender differ markedly from the term’s original use in which readers were encouraged to “depart from a literal reading” of the text through a figurative or interpretive approach that makes sense of the text’s contradictions (Olsen 105). Moreover, they are made possible through the fallacious premise that to tell a story from a subjective perspective, infused with a subjective set of values, is to sacrifice one’s rhetorical credibility. That is, they take for granted that subjectivity necessarily compromises narrative authority. Such an assumption, however, is quite genre-specific; one need only look to the lyric to see that these two concepts are not as discordant as scholars of fiction tend to assume.

In wake of the Romantic revolution enacted by Shelley, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, lyric poetry became increasingly identified with the realm of private consciousness as articulated through a first-person speaker. Wordsworth famously championed the lyric as a wellspring of emotional subjectivity in the preface to his lyrical ballads, where he characterized the genre as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (82). The philosophy of the period also placed a heavy emphasis on interiority. The idealism espoused first by Kant and then by Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel established subjective perception as the primary frame of reference with regard to an external world that is otherwise inaccessible—what Kant referred to as the noumena, or “things-in-themselves.” According to the epistemology that undergirds idealism, subjectivity—the realm of the phenomenal—is our only gateway to the world of the noumenal, which is ultimately unknowable except through our personal experience of it. Subjectivity, then, actually yields epistemic authority, since we may only gain reliable knowledge of the world through the direct access our senses and ideas afford. Likewise, as readers, we have no cause for doubting the credibility of the subjective experiences articulated by the Romantic poets, including
Wordsworth’s impressions of the landscape near Tintern Abbey or the opium-induced dream that inspired Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan.” These are intensely personal meditations that cannot be assigned any truth value, and they are related by speakers with whom both the poet and the reader easily identify.

The Victorian lyric saw a significant shift in this relationship between subjectivity and authority, however, within the mask lyrics and dramatic monologues that became increasingly popular during this period. As Ralph Rader has noted, the lyric “I” that reigns over these poems differs markedly from that of the “expressive” lyric that dominated the Romantic period (150). Whereas the “expressive” speaker is, by and large, an extension of the poet, the speaker within a dramatic monologue is a fully developed character with a personality, identity, and temperament of his or her own. According to Robert Browning’s formulation in an advertisement for the first edition of his *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842, these persona poems were a generic hybrid between lyric and drama, “for the most part Lyric in expression, always Dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine” (qtd. in Howe 5). Scholars continue to dispute the definition of the dramatic monologue, some arguing for more expansive definitions that include mask or persona poems including Tennyson’s “Ulysses” while others try to restrict the term to only those poems that include “oral discourse, presence of an auditor, and psychological self-revelation” (Howe 3). For Browning, however—the primary practitioner of the form in his own time and a model for Pound, Eliot, and a host of other mask poets of the modernist period—the key to the dramatic monologue was its disassociation from the poet (or, to use Booth’s terminology, the implied poet): whatever we might say of the speaker’s voice, his early advertisement insists, it is “not mine.”
One should certainly hope not—Browning’s speakers are duplicitous, psychotic, narcissistic, and murderous. They are also distinguished from Browning the poet, however, through their individuated fictional or historical identities, which are flagged by their titles: “Porphyria’s Lover,” “Fra Lippo Lippi,” and a Duke of Ferrara in “My Last Duchess.” These are not the vaguely universal “I” speakers of the Romantic lyrics; they are personalities with unique occupations, reputations, and psychological neuroses. They are, in effect, the lyrical equivalent of character-narrators. As such, they are equally removed from the poet and the reader, as Elisabeth Howe has argued: “dramatic monologues assume a certain separation or distance between poet and speaker on the one hand and between reader and speaker on the other” (original emphasis, 6); or, as William Rogers puts it, “we feel the ‘otherness’ of the speaker’s voice as a difference not only from the author, but from ourselves” (82).

The distance that is created through these particularities of identity, however, is widened by the ironic distance that develops in these monologues between the speaker and the implied poet. In keeping with Booth’s notion of unreliable narration, the reader of the dramatic monologue finds herself in cahoots with its poet at the expense of the lyric speaker, who gradually reveals himself to be rhetorically untrustworthy. Contradictions emerge between the poem’s state of affairs and the speaker’s evaluations of them, between the speaker’s perception of himself and the way he presents himself to the reader, and between the speaker’s sense of authority and the reader’s mounting skepticism. In some cases, the speaker is quite duplicitous, deliberately seeking and cultivating the reader’s trust, though he is unworthy of it. One of the more famous instances of this type is Browning’s Duke of Ferrara. In the opening lines of “My Last Duchess,” the Duke tries to disarm his addressee, an envoy for the Count, through a combination of manners, flattery, and feigned intimacy:
That’s my last duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf’s hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will’t please you sit and look at her? I said
‘Frà Pandolf’ by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance. (349)

Beginning with a polite invitation—“Will’t please you sit and look at her?”—the Duke claims to be forthcoming about his motives—“I said/ ‘Frà Pandolf’ by design”—and also singles out the envoy as a person with special, sharp discernment, suggesting that no one else has understood the painting with such emotional acuity. When the speaker moves to his criticism of the Duchess’s moral character, he does so with an artfully-feigned delicacy: “She had/ A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,/ Too easily impressed” (349-50). The litotes in these lines, however, is undermined by a gross exaggeration in the line that follows: “she liked whate’er/ She looked on, and her looks went everywhere” (350). The Duke transforms his duchess’s graces into flaws, commending her etiquette only to re-cast it as a personal slight based on very little evidence: “She thanked men—good! but thanked/ Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked/ My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name/ With anybody’s gift.” It appears, too, that the Duke thinks quite highly of himself: his name is a “gift” not only equivalent but superior to any material gift, and he is highly aware of its social value. The Duke is formally duplicitous, as well; as Howe points out, the Duke’s speech works to disguise the poem’s form: its syntactic punctuation does not align with the poem’s line breaks, giving the monologue a conversational
cadence that masks its otherwise regular form (11). And just as it becomes clear that the Duke has murdered his last duchess for her ostensibly wandering eye—“I gave commands;/ Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands/ As if alive”—he diffuses this tension by insinuating that he has merely been discussing art all along: “Notice Neptune though,/ Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,/ Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!”

Earlier critics of the poem such as Robert Langbaum tend to read the Duke as a delusional character who is more worthy of sympathy than of judgment (qtd. in Rader 135-6). Ralph Rader convincingly argued against this reading in his now-classic essay, “The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms.” The Duke, Rader contends, knows exactly what he’s doing: he “reveals himself with deliberate calculation, for a specific purpose,” to warn a future wife of the previous duchess’s fate through the oblique hints he drops to the envoy (136). According to Rader, reading this monologue as a manipulative admonition creates a more powerful experience for the reader. “The revelation is more massive; probability and surprise are both increased as the Duke’s motives become completely cogent and more deeply hidden” (138).

As Rader describes it, the experience of reading a dramatic monologue is akin to reading a detective novel. The reader identifies traces of a crime, pieces together a larger picture of the truth, and eventually uncovers the criminal’s motives.

Other, equally powerful monologues, however, feature speakers who are less manipulative than they are unstable. Consider, for example, “Porphyria’s Lover,” which appeared alongside “My Last Duchess” under the subheading in Browning’s collection, *Dramatic Lyrics*. The speaker in this lyric does not make the pretenses of authority and trustworthiness that are made by the Duke, though he is no less unreliable in his evaluation of his lover. After describing Porphyria’s selfless efforts to start a fire in his hearth after entering from
a storm—indeed, she only “withdraw the dripping cloak and shawl” from her shoulders once the
fire is lit for him—the speaker accuses her of “pride” and vanity (380). Though she assures him
of “how she loved [him],” he decides that the only way to win her forever is in death: “all her
hair/ In one long yellow string I wound/ Three times her little throat around,/ And strangled her”
(381). While the speaker faults Porphyria for her unwillingness to “give herself to [him] for
ever,” a claim that is inconsistent with her behavior, his actions betray his own desire for
complete control (380). Prior to her strangulation, she had “made her smooth white shoulder
bare,/ And all her yellow hair displaced,/ And, stopping, made my cheek lie there”; afterward,
their roles are deliberately reversed, and the speaker becomes the caretaker, instead: “I propped
her head up as before,/ Only this time my shoulder bore/ Her head, which droops upon it still”
(381).

Rader insists that, in contradistinction to the deceitful speaker, we react to the delusional
speaker with “comic condescension” (139), but there is nothing “comic” about our apprehension
of the speaker’s unreliability in “Porphyria’s Lover.” In fact, the progression here looks quite
similar to that of “My Last Duchess”: a speaker gives the impression that he inhabits a loving
and stable relationship until his depiction takes a sudden, criminal turn that contradicts this
picture and instead reveals his own mental instability. Subsequently, we are urged to re-
evaluate—even re-construct—the poem in a way that accounts for his unreliability.

These monologues discourage prima facie readings that uncritically accept the depiction
presented by the speaker. Instead, they introduce contradictions that can only be resolved by
readings that venture beyond the literal. It would be a mistake to assume that the women in these
lyrics are faithless lovers who deserve their lot, as the Duke and Porphyria’s lover would have it.
These are not lyrics that chronicle the murders of fickle women who ultimately received their
just deserts. In fact, they are not really about the Duchess or Porphyria at all. These monologues reveal far more about their speakers than they do about either woman. They are complex psychological portraits of men who have projected their own insecurities onto powerless partners.

The link between the unreliable speaker of the dramatic monologue and the unreliable narrator of the modern novel may seem obvious, but it has only been so much as hinted at within literary scholarship; in fact, the link is primarily articulated as a complaint by scholars of lyric poetry regarding our critical tendency to conform all lyrics to the model of the dramatic monologue and, hence, the novel. Jonathan Culler asks that we stop treating every lyric speaker “as a character in a novel whose motivations must be elucidated” and that we adopt a long view of the lyric that recovers its roots in the rhetoric of ancient Greece, situating the speaker instead “as a performer picking up traditional elements and presenting them to an audience” (“Why Lyric” 204). Virginia Jackson too asks that we diversify our notion of the lyric in a way that is more responsible to historical practice: “the notion of the lyric I as a speaker in a dramatic monologue came to dominate modern interpretation—and, in my experience, still does” (183).

Both critics rightly point out that the popularity of the novel with both academic and commercial audiences has led to the novelization of lyric poetry, in which we force lyric poems to “assimilate… to the form of narrative fiction” (Culler 201). They also make the important point, however, that the dramatic monologue does not stand in for the lyric tradition but rather represents a deliberate break from traditional notions of the lyric speaker in which the speaker was not as sharply distinguished from the poet as we now take for granted. While poets had

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47 An exception is Dorrit Cohn, who makes a similar observation from the other direction, arguing that all dramatic monologue is first-person narration: “The presence of a fictive speaker relates the dramatic monologue not only to soliloquy in drama, but also to fictional narrative in the first person—a relationship that has been largely disregarded in discussions of the dramatic monologue, perhaps because of the ‘dramatic’ emphasis of the English term. Viewed from this vantage point, all dramatic monologues are first-person narratives in verse form” (257).
certainly written poems in the personae of fictional-historical figures prior to the nineteenth century—examples include “epistolary forms of monologue” in which lyrics positioned themselves as letters from, say, Dido to Aeneas or Penelope to Odysseus (Howe 18)—the dramatic monologue exacerbated the distance between poet and speaker to new proportions with the added dimension of unreliability.

Unreliability deliberately unhinges authoritativeness from subjectivity in order to facilitate a particular reading practice. It asks that we read beneath the surface of the text to make sense of its contradictions. The accusation of infidelity that the Duke launches at his last duchess is dramatically undermined by his own erratic vacillation between litote and exaggeration when he attempts to describe her behavior. As readers, we are unable to gain a clear picture of what, precisely, her transgression has been; coupled with the Duke’s own vanity regarding his social status, the accusation appears to be groundless. Likewise, the charge of vanity issued against Porphyria by her lover is directly contradicted by her behavior in the poem, which demonstrates self-abnegation and devotion. We are meant to read these charges not as literal depictions of events but as figurative indications of the paranoid mental states of our speakers.

Truly unreliable narration effectively erases, or at the very least obscures, the event-structure that is so foundational to narrative fiction. As the previous chapter has established, narrative fiction would typically have us track characters through a plot that is to be read, more or less, literally. The radically unstable narrators of the twentieth-century, however—James’s governess, Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert, Ellis’s Patrick Bateman, and the unnamed narrator of Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*—demand that we, as readers, continuously revise what we think we know about these character-narrators and the fictional worlds they simultaneously narrate and inhabit. While James and Nabokov have created highly manipulative narrators who take pains to
establish their authority and credibility before introducing markers of unreliability, the narrators in Ellis and Palahniuk—more in line with Porphyria’s lover than with the Duke—are deeply mentally ill, though neither seems to understand the depth and extent of his illness. All four novelists urge readers toward increasingly figurative understandings of their ontologically dubious story worlds, in which our only access to plot is filtered through highly unreliable reportage.

This brand of unreliability, which deliberately conflates psychology with ontology, also challenges the often-cited model of unreliability put forth by Phelan and Martin, a multi-dimensional, updated version of Booth’s model. According to Phelan and Martin, the conflict between the narrator and the implied author or audience that transpires under unreliable narration may occur on any or all of three general levels: misreporting, or contradictions between the narrator’s reportage of events and the facts of the events within the fictional world; misregarding, or contradictions between the narrator’s moral evaluation of events and the implied author’s evaluation of them; and misreading, or contradictions between the narrator’s perception of events and the implied author’s perception of them. Phelan and Martin freely admit that this separation of levels is for heuristic purposes only and that narrators may exhibit more than one brand of unreliability, but their application of the model to Ishiguro’s Remains of the Day suggests otherwise. If Stevens is “underreporting” his feelings for Miss Kenton, they argue, then he “does not admit to the narratee what both he and the authorial audience know about his personal interest … Stevens is being intentionally deceptive” (92). As a corrective, Phelan and Martin introduce the axis of “misreading” to allow for such forms of unintentional unreliability as Stevens’s. In opposing misreporting to misreading, however, the authors gloss over the complex ways in which these two concepts interact and even constitute one another, since the narrator’s
(mis)perception of reality necessarily constructs a (mis)representative picture of the fictional world he or she is narrating. Indeed, the greater the distortion within a homodiegetic narrator’s perception, the more distorted the fictional world will be, and some narrators—unlike Stevens—never realize the extent of their derangement.

As Browning’s monologues demonstrate, such radically distorted worlds require extensive re-configurations on the part of the reader, who must not only identify narrative unreliability but who must also determine, subsequently, which facets of the plot are concrete events occurring in the storyworld and which are extensions, or projections, of the narrator’s fraught mental state. The novels treated in this chapter are prime examples of the ways in which psychological and ontological unreliability are mutually constitutive, presenting a serious stumbling block for readers of fiction who are accustomed to reading for a plot that is at least somewhat independent of its narrator; or, to use Phelan and Martin’s terminology, they deliberately erase the boundary between misreading and misreporting that separates plot from its representation by a character-bound narrator.

Criticism of James’s The Turn of the Screw—especially the early criticism—tends to focus on whether or not the ghosts that populate this gothic novella were “real” or whether they were the delusional imaginings of an unstable character-narrator, the unnamed governess who presides over the story. One strain of scholarship, beginning with prominent early critics such as F. O. Matthiessen, Allen Tate, and even Wayne Booth, argues for more or less straight readings of the governess’s first-person account. “When she says that she saw Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, or that she felt a gust of icy air in a sealed room, there is no reason to suppose her hysterical,” concurs Alexander E. Jones (121). “At most, the governess can be charged only with
ambiguity,” he maintains; otherwise, “the governess’ testimony is generally reliable.” The other strain, beginning with Edmund Wilson and Harold Goddard, argues for Freudian readings in which the ghosts are hallucinations as a result of “a neurotic case of sex repression” (Wilson 90). (In a more damning verdict, R. P Blackmur asserts that “any respectable servant a hundred and fifty years ago would have known her as a witch and have called on the vicar to exorcise her if not hang her” [185]). The misguided question driving these analyses, however—“are they or aren’t they?”—creates a false dichotomy that the novella itself does not bear out. Readings that take only one of these extreme positions into account necessarily suppress those details in the novella that also support the alternative. James sets up a deliberately ambiguous narrative that prompts these questions of ontology versus psychology but does not admit of an answer. The Turn of the Screw quite systematically tantalizes, frustrates, and manipulates its reader in a way that stymies any definitive understanding of its plot, which is inextricably bound up in its untrustworthy narrator.

This manipulation is largely achieved through the lengths to which the text’s multiple narrators desperately attempt to establish authoritativeness for its multiple audiences. Much like the stories that make up The Canterbury Tales, the main plot of Turn of the Screw is an embedded narrative that is framed as one of several stories that a group of travelers exchange as they pass their nights in a boarding house together. This frame establishes a complicated three-

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48 Several critics have also suggested that the text’s ambiguities cannot be resolved. See especially Perry and Sternberg’s discussion of “gap-filling” in Biblical and literary texts: “the main compositional principle in The Turn of the Screw is the impossibility of choosing between the alternative hypotheses,” they write (317). The essay does not, however, detail the evidence for each reading that precludes readers from adopting a single hypothesis. For a more thorough analysis of the text’s dueling, “mutually exclusive” interpretations, see Shlomith Rimmon, who carefully traces the “linguistic ambiguities” that lead readers toward different readings (116, 154). In contrast, I locate the plot’s obscurity within our dramatized narrator, who becomes incrementally unreliable as the novella unfolds. Christine Brooke-Rose argues for an ambiguous reading that is structured around the “long glasses” or mirrors at Bly that supply “the sudden expansion of a previously restricted consciousness” (161). She also argues that the mirror lends the story a “poetic structure” by analogy since, “with all the play of vision-variation it affords, [it] functions around this same system of repetition and reversal at work in the projection of these images” (165). I argue that the relationship between The Turn of the Screw and the lyric tradition is more direct than this, and that it inheres in the persona of its character-narrator.
tiered narration: a first-person speaker relays the story of the governess that is, in turn, relayed through another group member named Douglas, who claims to be in possession of the governess’s manuscript (and who appears to have a crush on the governess, as well). That is, the novella contains three discernible narrators: the first-person account of the governess; Douglas, who relates her account to the group; and the unnamed first-person narrator who relates the account, in turn, to us.

By the time it is transmitted to the reader, the governess’s story is a third-hand account with plenty of room for human error. As a corrective, Douglas takes pains to render it authoritative. He informs the group, for example, that he knows the governess personally and can attest to her character: “She has a most charming person … the most agreeable woman I’ve ever known in her position; she’d have been worthy of any whatever. … She struck me as awfully clever and nice” (2). She has transcribed her account of the events at Bly, which she has not related to anyone else, in a manuscript that Douglas keeps under lock and key. The shroud of secrecy that surrounds this primary document is further dramatized by the lengths to which Douglas must go to retrieve it, since he refuses to paraphrase the governess’s words. Sending a letter and key to his servant first thing the next morning, he—along with the others, who express some mixture of irritation and suspense—must wait for the manuscript to return through the mail three days later. This elaborate frame not only elevates the governess’s account to the status of a rare manuscript, transforming her narrative into a literary artifact, it is also invests her account with the veracity of a testimonial: when the narrator refers to her story as a “written statement,” he loans it a quasi-legal status (4).

Douglas also prefaces his reading of the manuscript with further testimonies to the governess’s character. The governess did not, he informs the group, take her charges lightly. She
knew in advance that her position at Bly would be lonely and isolating, that she would be completely in charge of two small children, and that she was under no circumstances to contact their guardian, her employer. “She hesitated,” Douglas relays, “took a couple of days to consult and consider” (5). Other applicants had found these requirements too “prohibitive” or “strange” and had turned the position down (6). Her decision to accept the position after carefully weighing its demands demonstrates a mature sense of responsibility and sacrifice that is all the more remarkable given her youth.

Just as the Duke of Ferrara tries to secure the trust of the envoy, so the paratextual apparatus surrounding the governess’s story works to establish its credibility despite its distance from the events that are relayed. Our narrator even confesses in this prefatory material that the account he supplies is a transcription of the governess’s faded original. Though he professes it to be faithful and exact, his transcription adds yet another layer between the reader and the plane of story-events, which are now revealed to be at a fourth remove from the narrative that appears in *Turn of the Screw*. From the outset, the reader is tantalized with the promise of a reliable and authoritative narrative, though this promise becomes increasingly strained not only as these added layers are introduced but as contradictions emerge within the governess’s first-person account, which comprises the rest of the novella.

In keeping with the rhetorical aims of the paratextual material, the governess begins her narrative by (re)asserting her trustworthiness in ways that are quite subtle. Even as she travels to Bly to begin her new position, she remains incredulous: “[I] found all my doubts bristle again, felt indeed sure I had made a mistake” (6). The hesitation that both precedes and follows her decision establishes the governess not only as someone who takes responsibility very seriously but also as a thoughtful skeptic more prone to doubt than to belief. She also proves herself to be
remarkably perceptive, as Bly makes an indelible impression on her memory once she arrives there:

I suppose I had expected, or had dreaded, something so dreary that what greeted me was a good surprise. I remember as a thoroughly pleasant impression the broad clear front, its open windows and fresh curtains and the pair of maids looking out; I remember the lawn and the bright flowers and the crunch of my wheels on the gravel and the clustered tree-tops over which the rooks circled and cawed in the golden sky. (7)

Her attention to detail and her reliance on the senses in this otherwise unremarkable passage establish her perspective as one that is grounded in keen discernment and objectivity. Her description, after all, is quite matter-of-fact, even understated; though she stands in front of a large country manor, one would not know it from her description here.

Her first impressions of her two charges, Miles and Flora, show her appreciation of their innocence and her sense of responsibility for their well-being. Introduced first to Flora, she is carried away by a sense of awe mixed with duty: “To watch, teach, ‘form’ little Flora would too evidently be the making of a happy and useful life … what I had undertaken was the whole care of her” (8). Flora seems to her one of “Raphael’s holy infants” (8), and Miles too is described as an “angel” (19). She has unshakable faith in their good intentions, even in those of Miles, who has been expelled from his school under mysterious circumstances. She recalls her first meeting with him: “What I then and there took him to my heart for was something divine that I have never found to the same degree in any child—his indescribable little air of knowing nothing in the world but love. It would have been impossible to carry a bad name with a greater sweetness of innocence” (13). Having already established herself as a discerning skeptic who does not trust
easily, the governess now establishes herself as placing complete trust in the goodness of these children, encouraging readers to do the same.

The relationship between her trustworthiness and the children’s innocence is important, since the governess’s unreliability coincides with her growing suspicion toward Miles and Flora. Her unreliability is also flagged, however, by important contradictions within the text itself. The governess introduces contradictions at all three rhetorical levels articulated by Phelan and Martin, the most obvious of which is her “misreading” of ghosts that are not necessarily observed by the other characters. She is startled by the appearance of a strange man on one of the towers as she stands outside the manor looking in; the same man appears to her again through a window as she stands inside the manor looking out. Though she takes him to be an intruder and “a horror” (22), she does not investigate his presence or mention him to Mrs. Grose, the head of the staff, until she learns of Peter Quint, a former staff worker at Bly whose description matches that of the apparition. Mrs. Grose divulges that Quint had been conducting an affair with the former governess, Miss Jessel, who left under mysterious circumstances. She also implies that Quint had been molesting the children. “Quint was much too free,” she euphemizes, evoking a “sudden sickness of disgust” within the governess (25).

The governess is convinced that she has been encountering their ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel on the property, both of whom have died under mysterious circumstances. Initially, their presence heightens her sense of duty toward protecting the children. “I was a screen,” she explains. “I was to stand before them. The more I saw, the less they would” (27). Her third encounter with an apparition, however—this time it is Miss Jessel—occurs while Flora is present, though the child is distracted as she plays on the edge of a lake. Once again, the governess never doubts her perception, which now appears to be guided by intuition rather than
the senses: “There was no ambiguity in anything; none whatever at least in the conviction I from one moment to another found myself forming as to what I should see straight before me and across the lake as a consequence of raising my eyes” (28). Though Flora is only “ten yards away” from the apparition, she never looks up from her play or acknowledges the governess’s vision in any way. One might deduce that she has not seen the apparition, but the governess jumps to a different conclusion that is even less likely: that “Flora saw … [and] she kept it to herself” (29).

The governess’s insistence to Mrs. Grose that the children are not only aware of the ghosts but are in collusion with them—“They know—it’s too monstrous: they know, they know!” she cries—marks a pivotal turning point in which her misreading and subsequent misreporting gives way, in turn, to further misreading, revealing the porousness of the categories for unreliability put forth by Phelan and Martin. Unable to provide a convincingly objective portrait of reality, which would require some corroboration from the novella’s other characters, the governess now begins to misinterpret those facts to which only she appears to be privy. She becomes deeply wary of the children and their virtuousness: “He could play no longer at perfect propriety, nor could he pretend to it,” the governess says of Miles (45). The children, she decides, are in compliance with “evil” spirits—a misreading that contradicts her earlier estimation of Miles and Flora as angels. What’s more, their innocence, which has already been compromised once by Peter Quint, is compromised again as the governess dares to assume that these children would welcome back their molester. Miles, she decides, has a “secret precocity—or whatever I might call the poison of an influence that I dared by half-phrase” (61). Formerly a victim of Quint’s corrupting influence, Miles now appears to her as a willing participant. Like
the Duke of *My Last Duchess*, the governess projects her internal apprehensions onto the world around her.

Neither Miles nor Flora seem to exhibit the changes that the governess ascribes to them, but the governess’s misreading leads to a transformation in her own behavior that gradually places a strain on their relationship with her. She becomes at once fiercely protective and almost violently punitive, as her dedication to guarding the children is matched by her urge to castigate them wherever they do not cooperate with her. Her emotional outbursts vacillate between tenderness and fury. “There were moments when I knew myself to catch them up by an irresistible impulse and press them to my heart,” she confesses (37). And yet, convinced that Flora is lying when she does not admit to seeing Miss Jessel by the lake, the governess becomes passionately angry. “Why not break out at her on the spot and have it all over? – give it to her straight in her lovely little lighted face?” she briefly considers (41). Always on her guard, she is unable to sleep, sitting up at night “till I didn’t know when” and makes herself utterly inscrutable to Miles and Flora: “we each [Mrs. Grose and I] felt the importance of not provoking—on the part of the servants quite as much as on that of the children—any suspicion of a secret flurry or of a discussion of mysteries” (41, 43). She hovers over Miles and Flora “like a gaoler with an eye to possible surprises and escapes” until they become quite weary of her (53): “You know, my dear, that for a fellow to be with a lady *always*--!” declares an exasperated Miles in direct contradiction to the governess’s observance that “they never resent my inexorable, my perpetual society” (52). In fact, the children appear to become downright afraid of her. “We must do nothing but what she likes,” Miles has told Mrs. Grose, explaining how the children have learned to adapt to the governess’s alarmingly strange behavior. His avowal is read by the governess as an expression of loyal obedience, but it also indicates Miles’s fear that any rebellion
against the governess may only exacerbate her fragile mental state and place them in danger not with any ghosts but with the governess herself. Flora’s anxiety causes her to become psychosomatically feverish from “fears that had for their subject not in the least her former but wholly her present governess” (71). Indeed, Mrs. Grose takes Flora away from Bly at the end of the novella, but not before she insinuates that the governess has been having inappropriate relations with Flora in a way that is reminiscent of Peter Quint. Speaking in oblique fragments, she declares that Flora has been telling her “really shocking” things about the governess: “It’s beyond everything for a young lady; and I can’t think wherever she must have picked it up-- … Well, perhaps I ought to … since I’ve heard some of it before!” (74)

The frightened cooperation of the children, however, only encourages the governess that her distorted perception is corroborated by reality, though she has become wildly speculative in contrast to the sensory-based perception she seems to have exhibited when first arriving at Bly. In the perpetual feedback loop between misreading and misreporting that this novella sets up, the governess begins to report about things to which she cannot possibly have access. She intuits, for instance, that “whatever I had seen, Miles and Flora saw more—things terrible and unguessable and that sprang from dreadful passages of intercourse in the past” (51). Convinced that the children are communicating with the ghosts in secret, she hazards to Mrs. Grose, “They say things that, if we heard them, would simply appal [sic] us” (emphasis mine, 66). When Mrs. Grose does not see the apparitions that she sees, the governess considers this a “hard blow of the proof that her eyes were hopelessly sealed” (69). Whatever the governess encounters becomes confirmation that Miles and Flora are colluding with evil spirits, and what she lacks in evidence she makes up for in speculative justification—and, in turn, whatever she speculates, she narrates as a part of the novella’s fictional world.
So far, I have highlighted those factual and perceptual inconsistencies that point to the governess’s unreliability. This reading, however, is by no means definitive; in fact, it is complicated by passages in which the governess’s perceptions are corroborated by other characters or facts within the fictional world she is narrating. It is Mrs. Grose, after all, who identifies the first apparition as Peter Quint based on the governess’s description. What’s more, the governess’s instincts about the children can be quite accurate. When the governess intuitions that Flora has taken the boat across the lake to visit with Miss Jessel, she indeed finds Flora exactly there. When she suspects that Miles has stolen the letter she has written to his guardian, Miles confesses that he has done exactly that. The governess’s intuitions, unfounded as they may seem, do have undeniable predictive power.

Further complicating our reading of events are the ambiguities that abound in the novella’s plot, even outside of the governess’s psyche. From what have Peter Quint and Miss Jessel died prematurely? What, precisely, was their relationship with the children, and with one another? Why has Miles been expelled from school? Why won’t the governess’s employer allow his employees to contact him? Muddling these points further is the equally ambiguous dialogue between the governess and Mrs. Grose that raises more questions than it answers. Take, for example, the dialogue that further blurs, rather than elucidates, the mystery surrounding Peter Quint and Miss Jessel:

Mrs. Grose considered as if it were perhaps a little case for a sense of shades.

“I’ve never seen one like him. He did what he wished.”

“With her?”

“With them all.”
What does Mrs. Grose mean here? The governess never presses her to define her terms. Instead, the conversation becomes even more abstract:

“Then you do know what she died of?” I asked.

“No—I know nothing. I wanted not to know; I was glad enough I did n’t; and I thanked heaven she was well out of this!”

“Yet you had then your idea—“

“Of her real reason for leaving? Oh yes—as to that. She could n’t have stayed. Fancy it here—for a governess! And afterwards I imagined—and I still imagine. And what I imagine is dreadful.” (32)

Their dialogue is filled with half-formulated fragments that leave much unspoken. Whatever Mrs. Grose “imagines” about Miss Jessel and whatever it means for Peter Quint to be “too free” with everyone at Bly remains something of a mystery.

James has created a novella that frustrates the reader’s epistemological drive in any number of ways. Ambiguities of plot are introduced and dramatized, and it becomes impossible to determine which events are a part of the fabric of this fictional world and which are a product of the governess’s psyche. The novella’s dramatic final scene brings this confusion to a climax. Convinced that she sees Peter Quint in Miles’s bedroom window, the governess clutches the child to her as she points to the window:

But he had already jerked straight round, stared, glared again, and seen but the quiet day.

With the stroke of the loss I was so proud of he uttered the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss, and the gasp with which I recovered him might have been that of catching him in his fall. I caught him, yes, I held him—it may be imagined with what a passion; but at
the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped. (85)

Has Miles died of shock because he too sees the apparition, or because the governess has suggested the return of his molester? Has she suffocated him to death as she presses him to her “with what a passion”? Those who read the novella “straight” will tend to believe one of the former options; those who read the governess as radically unstable will believe the latter. No reading is definitive, and as Phelan and Martin have argued, readers will resolve the ambiguities and contradictions within an unreliably-narrated text in any number of ways. Whichever reading one chooses, however, *The Turn of the Screw* deliberately blurs the line between misreading and misreporting, foregrounding the ways in which the ontological status of a novel’s events may be tied inextricably to the psychology of an unreliable narrator. “’The story won’t tell,’ said Douglas; ‘not in any literal vulgar way’” (3). Indeed, it won’t; readers of traditional fiction who are searching for a definitive, concrete plot will be sorely disappointed.

Contrary to criticism, which has appealed to discussions of the novella’s “events,” James does not simply present a story in which one of two plots may be constructed (the ghosts are real and the governess is reliable, the ghosts aren’t real and the governess is mad). *The Turn of the Screw* supplies details supporting both readings and defies readers to choose one over the other. It teases readerly expectations about coherence and stability at the level of plot, minimizing these narrative conventions to devote itself instead to the elaboration of a lyric persona. After all, while we may have a very fuzzy handle on the novella’s events, we have a very clear picture of the governess and her psychological distress: her youth and inexperience, her sense of responsibility toward the children, her mounting suspicion that something is amiss in the manor, and her paranoid fixation on Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, which becomes redirected toward the very
children she has been hired to protect. Events are bracketed, even suspended, so that we might focus our attention instead on the governess and her evolving mental states, regardless of whichever plot we choose to construct around them.

Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* is frequently cited as an exemplar of unreliable narration, but critical discussions tend to center, for obvious reasons, on Humbert’s distorted sense of morality and, consequently, the ethical position of the reader who is beguiled by Humbert’s aesthetic genius but repulsed by his behavior.\(^4^9\) *Lolita* also experiments with other forms of unreliability, however, including the boundary between misreading and misreporting that, as the previous section has shown, is deliberately obscured within James’s *Turn of the Screw*. If pressed for a plot summary, after all, readers will construct radically different narratives based on their divergent readings of Nabokov’s controversial novel. Lionel Trilling famously called *Lolita* a book “not about sex, but about love” and suggested that the romance between Humbert and Lolita is as mutual and heartfelt as it is illicit (15). Stanley Kubrick’s 1962 film adaptation takes Humbert’s perspective seriously, depicting—with much black humor—the story of a young, sexually-advanced coquette who seduces a vulnerable older man. *Lolita*’s detractors regard the novel as a sordid story of kidnapping, captivity, and routine sexual child abuse; for this reason, *Lolita* was turned down by a number of American publishers before finally being published—and quickly banned—in France. Still another strain of criticism, pioneered by Wayne Booth, argues for a more nuanced position in which the novel begins as a story of seduction but concludes as a story of rape based on Humbert’s gradual realization and “recantation” of his crimes (*Rhetoric* 391). Thus, fundamentally different plot summaries emerge from the same

\(^{4^9}\) See Phelan’s extended treatment of this problem in “Estranging Unreliability” and *Living to Tell About It*. For an evaluation of Nabokov’s careful balance between “human warmth” and a gritty rendering of sexual obsession within Humbert’s first-person narrative, see Toker, 207-211.
novel, and still other ambiguities remain unresolved as well, including the identity of Clare Quilty, his relationship to Humbert, and the ontological status he occupies in the novel. A deeper exploration of the dimensions of Humbert’s unreliable narration can better parse these ambiguities that prevent readers from readily accessing the events that undergird Lolita’s plot.

Humbert Humbert is one of Western literature’s most manipulative narrators, though critics have only just begun to address the depths and contours of his unreliability, which have a profound bearing on which plot we construct from the events of Lolita’s deliberately obscured fabula. Humbert is eloquent, refined, well-educated, witty, and charming (and, as he reminds us several times, dashing good-looking); he is also a master wordsmith, a beautiful and lyrical writer whose frequent apostrophes and alliterative wordplays pepper the novel from its very opening lines: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Tah” (Nabokov 9). As James Phelan has convincingly argued, the difficulty of navigating Lolita lies in the way that it catapults readers in-between two extremes of unreliable narration, what Phelan terms “estranging unreliability,” or “unreliable narration that underlines or increases the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience,” and “bonding unreliability,” or “unreliable narration that reduces the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience” (“Estranging” 223-4). While Phelan uses these terms with regard to the narrator’s ethical position, they have other important applications, as well. In particular, Lolita throws its readers in the middle of a tug-of-war between Humbert’s avowals that he is a trustworthy narrator and the frame narrative that pathologizes Humbert and undermines his credibility.

50 For a rhetorical account of Humbert’s silencing of Lolita and the novel’s other characters, see Peter J. Rabinowitz’s “Lolita: Solipsized or Sodomized?” For a cognitive account of Humbert’s manipulations of the reader, see Lisa Zunshine’s discussion of Lolita in Why We Read Fiction. Among other things, Humbert manages to “distribute” his own version of events to the minds of the novel’s other characters and to impute pedophilic states of mind to the reader in order to deflect the reader’s attention from his own sexual perversion (Zunshine 103, 106).
Many readers forget that *Lolita* is positioned as a prison memoir (entitled “Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male”) ostensibly penned by Humbert while he awaits his trial. The foreword to the novel is written by a fictional academic expert, presumably in psychology, named John Ray, Jr. Humbert has died of heart disease days before the trial was to begin, he informs us, and Humbert’s lawyer has asked him to edit the manuscript of *Lolita* for print as per Humbert’s request in his will. Thus, here we have another narrative cloaked in the authoritativeness built around a “found manuscript” that is “presented intact” (Nabokov 3), though this frame works to discredit, rather than validate, Humbert’s perspective by positioning Humbert as a manic case study for psychology experts. The ensuing narrative, Ray cautions, is “shocking,” and the “desperate honesty that throbs through [Humbert’s] confession does not absolve him from sins of diabolical cunning” (5). He even surmises that, “as a case history, ‘Lolita’ will become, no doubt, a classic in psychiatric circles.” This paratextual framing material is often read as a tongue-in-cheek effort on Nabokov’s part to soften the shock of the novel’s content, but it also—rightly—warns readers that *Lolita* is the work of a criminal mastermind who is as “cunning” as he is psychologically unstable.

For his part, Humbert appears to lay his cards on the table immediately, remarking in the early pages of the novel that “you can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” (9). After divulging his crime through a flippant remark that contrasts ethics with aesthetics—a tension that will course through the rest of the novel—he posits his narratee, the jury for his trial: “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” he declares in a dramatic introduction to his defense, “exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns” (9). Gradually, we learn that Humbert’s lawyer has provided some counsel in the preparation of the manuscript, which Humbert presumed, at least as he began to
write the sprawling memoir, would be used “in toto” at his trial (308). Humbert is quite explicit, then, about his motive for writing *Lolita*, which serves as a criminal defense that will explain, if not justify, his wrongdoings to a real or hypothetical jury of his peers.

Humbert may risk alienating the reader through these bald disclosures, but he spends the following two hundred or so pages presenting a masterful defense of his behavior cloaked as a mea culpa that is wittily embedded in the lyric tradition. “Exhibit number one” depicts Humbert’s lost love, Annabel Leigh, whose name—and story—is suspiciously close to that of the titular figure in Edgar Allan Poe’s lyric, “Annabel Lee.” Humbert’s Annabel, like Poe’s, dies before the two child-lovers can consummate their romance, and in fact, Humbert lifts entire lines and phrases from the poem in articulating his own narrative of thwarted love. His assertion that the seraphs envy the purity of the love between himself and Annabel echoes a very similar line from Poe’s verse: “With a love that the winged seraphs in heaven/ coveted her and me” (Poe 738). He also uses the poem’s opening line as he develops his theory of “nymphets,” those dangerous girl-children who cast a sexual “spell” over older men (Nabokov 17): “When I was a child and she was a child, my little Annabel was no nymphet to me,” he plagiarizes, insisting that his lust for girls began quite innocently as a love between two peers. In fact, Humbert proves to be his own best psychoanalyst. “I am convinced … that in a certain magic and fateful way *Lolita* began with Annabel,” he writes (13-14). “Twenty-four years later, I broke her spell by incarnating her in another” (15). Humbert attributes his pedophilia to a tragically foiled childhood romance that has frozen him, emotionally, within an irretrievable past. Though Humbert continues to age and to advance physically, sexually, and intellectually, the Annabels he continues to seek out are, like their prototype, prepubescent children. Here, he mobilizes the lyric tradition in an appeal to stasis that justifies, and even romanticizes, his otherwise sordid
sexual preferences. In fact, one begins to wonder, given the deliberate and extensive inter-textuality of his narrative, whether Humbert’s Annabel Leigh ever existed at all. “All I want to stress is that my discovery of [Dolores] was a fatal consequence of that ‘princedom by the sea’ in my tortured past,” he insists again, (mis)quoting from Poe’s lyric once more (40); but the more material he pilfers from Poe, and the more he insists on Annabel Leigh as an alibi, the more implausible—or, at the very least, insincere—this backstory becomes.

In case the reader remains unmoved by Annabel Leigh, Humbert has developed a number of other defenses to explain his perversions. One of these is his bizarre and elaborate theory of “nymphets,” which he introduces with some caution and which he carefully cloaks within the discourse of academic inquiry. “Now I wish to introduce the following idea,” he begins rather gently. “Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as ‘nymphets’” (16). Having de-humanized “nymphets,” whose “true nature” is essentially “not human,” he then moves to the language of enchantment in order to romanticize his sexual attraction to children: a nymphet inhabits some “intangible island of entranced time”; she is “the little deadly demon among the wholesome children; she stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power” (italics original, 17). The demonic nymphet is the perpetrator who activates desire under Humbert’s theory. What’s more, nymphets do not reveal themselves to just anyone, but appeal exclusively to the tortured genius. “You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine,” he insists. Only the truly
sensitive soul can detect a nymphet when he sees one. Pedophilia, Humbert insists, is an artist’s affliction.

Humbert develops so many rationalizations for his pedophilia that they begin to conflict with one another. While placing himself in the company of great artists who were also lusty for young girls—Virgil, Dante, Petrarch, Catullus—he also contextualizes pedophilia within non-Western cultures, complaining of those repressive social mores that forbid sexual relations between adults and children in the West. No longer the singular burden of the artist and madman, pedophilia is transformed into a socially-contingent stigma that is disregarded by other cultures: “Marriage and cohabitation before the age of puberty are still not uncommon in certain East Indian provinces. Lepcha old men of eighty copulate with girls of eight, and nobody minds” (19). Even within the West, Humbert points, out, the legal age at which a child is deemed a woman is an arbitrary, slippery slope. “I found myself maturing amid a civilization,” he gripes, “which allows a man of twenty-five to court a girl of sixteen but not a girl of twelve” (18). “The stipulation of Roman law, according to which a girl can marry at twelve, was adopted by the Church,” he continues nearly a hundred pages later, “and is still preserved, rather tacitly, in some of the United States. And fifteen is lawful everywhere. There is nothing wrong, say both hemispheres, when a brute of forty, blessed by the local priest and bloated with drink, sheds his sweat-drenched finery and thrusts himself up to the hilt into his youthful bride” (135). (How vulgar this sweaty alcoholic brute seems in comparison to the refined Humbert!) After all, he continues, the age at which a girl enters puberty is too wildly variant for the state to define the age of consensual sex so rigidly: “The median age of pubescence for girls has been found to be thirteen years and nine months in New York and Chicago. The age varies for individuals from ten, or earlier, to seventeen. Virginia was not quite fourteen when Harry Edgar [Edgar Allan Poe]
possessed her” (43). What is more, he argues, this age may be contingent on climate: “In such stimulating temperature climates [says an old magazine in this prison library] as St. Louis, Chicago and Cincinnati, girls mature about the end of their twelfth year.’ Dolores Haze was born less than three hundred miles from stimulating Cincinnati. I have but followed nature. I am nature’s faithful hound” (135). In making his case in these passage, Humbert relies on logic—statistics, nature, and the relationship between climate and physiology—that does not quite cohere with his theory of “nymphets,” in which these girl-children are not only uncountable, unnatural, and magical, they are not even human.

Dolores, the object of Humbert’s lusty affection, is twelve (nearly thirteen) when the novel begins and fifteen by the time she escapes his clutches. To most readers, she is an average pre-teen who quarrels with her mother, though both Humbert and her mother, Charlotte, depict her as an incorrigible brat in a way that is designed to deflect our sympathy away from her. “Of course,” Charlotte explains to Humbert, “moodiness is a common concomitant of growing up, but Lo exaggerates. Sullen and evasive. Rude and defiant. Stuck Viola, an Italian schoolmate, in the seat with a fountain pen” (46). Following one of Dolores’s tantrums, Charlotte reiterates her exasperation. “It is intolerable … that a child should be so ill-mannered,” she sighs. Humbert even suggests that Charlotte views Dolores as a competitor for Humbert’s affections: “as the reader will mark, [she] was more afraid of Lo’s deriving some pleasure from me than of my enjoying Lo” (56). In this ambivalent portrayal, Dolores is positioned at once as an insolent child and a rival for Humbert’s heart.

Nor is Dolores entirely sexually innocent, as Humbert eagerly reminds his readers. He carefully depicts Dolores as the initiator of their earliest romantic encounters. Before departing for summer camp, she plants a kiss on his lips (66). While away at camp, she is “debauched” by
Charlie Holmes, to whom she loses her virginity in order “to try what it was like” (135, 137). When she and Humbert consummate their relationship, it is ostensibly she who initiates sexual intercourse: “Frigid gentlewomen of the jury!” Humbert cries in an insulting apostrophic address, “I had thought that months, perhaps years, would elapse before I dared to reveal myself to Dolores Haze; but by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me” (132). Humbert affixes Dolores with a magnetic sexual energy that appeals to other grown men, as well. She is an impossible temptress who attracts adult male attention wherever she goes—or so he imagines:

At inspection stations on highways entering Arizona or California, a policeman’s cousin would peer with such intensity at us that my poor heart wobbled. “Any honey?” he would inquire, and every time my sweet fool giggled. I still have, vibrating all along my optic nerve, visions of Lo on horseback, a link in the chain of a guided trip along a trail: Lo bobbing at a walking pace, with an old woman rider in front and a lecherous red-necked dude-rancher behind; and I behind him, hating his fat flowery-shirted back even more fervently than a motorist does a slow truck on a mountain road. Or else, at a ski lodge, I would see her floating away from me, celestial and solitary, in an ethereal chairlift, up and up, to a glittering summit where laughing athletes stripped to the waist were waiting for her, for her. (160)

Whether or not this perpetual male gaze is corroborated by reality remains unknown, since we are never able to escape Humbert’s jealous perspective in which Dolores becomes desirable to all men at all times.

Having established Dolores as a decidedly precociously sexual child who is a willing romantic partner, Humbert paradoxically assures us that he has gone to great lengths to preserve
her innocence. The exemplar case is the infamous “davenport scene” in which Humbert manages to bring himself to climax without arousing Dolores’s suspicion while the two play together on the sofa. Here, Humbert flags the reader’s attention so that his artifice and magnanimity might be duly noted before recounting this otherwise sordid scene: “I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay; I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is if viewed with what my lawyer has called, in a private talk we have had, ‘impartial sympathy.’ So let us get started. I have a difficult job before me” (57). Dolores, he insists, is oblivious to his ecstasy, “safely solipsized” in innocent play as she writhes around in his lap (60). “I felt proud of myself,” he ventures. “I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor. Absolutely no harm done” (62). Many pages later, when he whisks Dolores away from summer camp following her mother’s accidental death, he checks them in to a hotel and plots his rape with the utmost regard for her well-being. He will drug her, he decides, so that she will be unconscious during his violation: “I was still firmly resolved to pursue my policy of sparing her purity by operating only in the stealth of night, only upon a completely anesthetized little nude” (124).

In his desperation to appear credible to his jury of readers, Humbert frequently vacillates between treating Dolores as an adolescent charge and an adult lover, though he does not seem to be aware of the contradiction between these competing representations. At times, he depicts her as the child she is. “Lolita, when she chose, could be a most exasperating brat,” he complains (148). “I warned her she would dwell with me in exile for months and years if need be, studying under me French and Latin, unless her ‘present attitude’ changed,” he adds with paternal admonition (149). In fact, he assumes his new role as sole legal guardian with some earnestness,

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51 For an examination of this scene in relation to Humbert’s purported ethical and aesthetic control, see Phelan, *Living to Tell* 104-107.
forbidding her to date the boys at school as if he is an overprotective father instead of a jealous lover; he showers her with candy; he teaches her to play tennis so that they “might have more amusements in common” (162); and he looks on with paternal pride “to see her, a child herself, showing another child some of her few accomplishments, such as for example a special way of jumping rope” (163). He even reads, and rereads, “a book with the unintentionally biblical title *Know Your Daughter*” (174). Humbert is desperate to prove that he has not totally deprived Dolores of her childhood. “I itemize these sunny nothings to prove to my judges,” he writes with self-consciousness, “that I did everything in my power to give Lolita a really good time” (163).

In some of his more disturbing digressions, Humbert wavers back and forth between his two roles as parent and lover quite rapidly. Faced with the prospect of disposing of Dolores once puberty causes her magic to wear off, he fantasizes about manufacturing a new supply of nymphets through generations of incest: “with patience and luck I might have her produce eventually a nymphet with my blood in her exquisite veins, a Lolita the Second,” and, still more disturbing, pictures himself in his old age “practicing on supremely lovely Lolita the Third the art of being a granddad” (174).

Like Browning’s Duke, Humbert is a micromanager who constantly anticipates and tries to mitigate a hostile response from his audience. In his less guarded moments, however, he betrays tendencies that are deeply violent and manipulative. When he discovers that his first wife, Valeria—for whom he never really cared, anyway—has been unfaithful, his first reaction is “to beat her up in the street” out of humiliation, but “years of secret sufferings had taught me superhuman control” (27). As she packs her belongings, he fantasizes about “taking a running kick at her rump” and giving her a “backhand slap … across the cheekbone according to the rules of the movies,” but she is guarded by her lover (29-30); after she leaves, he “dashe[s] out of
the house with the heroic decision of attacking [her lover] barefisted” (30). Faced with yet another “bout with insanity” that lands him in a psychiatric ward, Humbert plays with his doctors, creating fabricated dreams and “primal scenes” that send them to their notebooks, scribbling furiously (34). Of course, he is equally brutal and manipulative toward Dolores, despite his protestations to the contrary. His relationship with her is based on sexual extortion as he wields threats and rewards in exchange for sex. “It would take hours of blandishments, threats and promises,” he complains, “to make her lend me for a few seconds her brown limbs in the seclusion of the five-dollar room before undertaking anything she might prefer to my poor joy” (147). Humbert essentially turns Dolores into a prostitute: he takes cruel pleasure in bringing her morning coffee “and then deny[ing] it until she had done her morning duty” (164-5); her weekly allowance is dispensed “under condition she fulfill her basic obligations” (183). The savvy child quickly adapts, negotiating her price up to “three, and even four bucks,” though Humbert also admits that he often pried his money from her small fist once the act was over (184). Knowing that “must secure her complete co-operation in keeping our relations secret,” he would brandish the “reformatory threat” or, worse, threaten to turn her over to the state if she were ever to rebel (149):

Finally, let us see what happens if you, a minor, accused of having impaired the morals of an adult in a respectable inn, what happens if you complain to the police of my having kidnapped and raped you? Let us suppose they believe you. A minor female, who allows a person over twenty-one to know her carnally, involves her victim in statutory rape, or second-degree sodomy, depending on the technique; and the maximum penalty is ten years. So I go to jail. Okay. I go to jail. But what happens to you, my orphan? Well, you are luckier. You become a ward of the Department of Public Welfare—which I am afraid
sounds a little bleak. … While I stand gripping the bars, you, happy neglected child, will be given a choice of various dwelling places, all more or less the same, the correctional school, the reformatory, the juvenile detention home, or one of those admirable girls’ protectories where you knit things, and sing hymns, and have rancid pancakes on Sundays. … You will dwell, my Lolita will dwell (come here, my brown flower) with thirty-nine other dopes in a dirty dormitory (no, allow me, please) under the supervision of hideous matrons. This is the situation, this is the choice. Don’t you think that under the circumstances Dolores Haze had better stick to her old man? (151)

As his parenthetical asides indicate, Humbert can scarcely finish uttering his threat before exacting still more sexual favors from the girl. These cautionary measures are perhaps unnecessary, since the orphaned Dolores—a mere child—is entirely dependent on Humbert for her welfare. “You see,” he admits at the end of Part I, “she had absolutely nowhere else to go” (142). Nevertheless, Humbert takes extra, material provisions to keep Dolores captive, searching her belongings and taking the money she has earned before “she might accumulate sufficient cash to run away” (185). When she appears uncooperative, Humbert becomes violent. Convinced that she has managed to sneak off with another man while he is away at the grocery store, he ravages her like an animal pursuing a scent: “I said nothing. I pushed her softness back into the room and went in after her. I ripped her shirt off. I unzipped the rest of her. I tore off her sandals. Wildly, I pursued the shadow of her infidelity; but,” he admits, “the scent I travelled upon was so slight as to be practically indistinguishable from a madman’s fancy” (215). On at least one occasion, he even strikes Dolores: convinced that they are being pursued by another vehicle, Humbert records its license plate number and becomes irate when he suspects that Dolores has changed the letters and numbers he has written down: “Lo looked up with a semi-smile of
surprise and without a word I delivered a tremendous backhand cut that caught her smack on her hot hard little cheekbone” (227). These incidents are hardly cited in scholarship on *Lolita*, though—like the arrogance and paranoia that Browning’s Duke inadvertently displays—they betray important contours of Humbert’s personality that are not a part of his self-conscious self-presentation. In other words, they are important indicators of Humbert’s unreliability.

Apart from her sparse dialogue, Dolores does not have a significant voice in *Lolita*, an ethical—and narratological—problem that a number of critics have addressed (Phelan, *Living* 130; Rabinowitz, “Lolita” 335). As a corrective, readers must remain especially attentive to her body language, which too often escapes Humbert’s notice and which allows readers to catch important, albeit brief, glimpses of her unhappiness. On a number of occasions, she recoils under Humbert’s touch. When he kisses her on the shoulder, she rubs the spot with distaste. “Don’t drool on me. You dirty man,” she snaps (115). When he nuzzles her shoulder after their first night of intercourse (or rape, depending on whether the reader adopts Humbert’s or Dolores’s perspective), she withdraws again: “‘Lay off, will you,’ she said with a twangy whine, hastily removing her brown shoulder from my lips” (133). Humbert dismisses these moments as Dolores’s unromantic distaste for “all caresses except kisses on the mouth or the stark act of love,” but they are more plausibly read as genuine manifestations of Dolores’s trauma in the wake of her exploitation and forced captivity. As their time together drags on, these responses become more frequent. “It seemed to me now that she was ready to turn away from [me] with something akin to plain repulsion. Never did she vibrate under my touch, and a strident ‘what d’you think you are doing?’ was all I got for my pains,” Humbert complains, shirking the role of child rapist in order to play the hurt, rejected lover instead (166).
Dolores also appears to be in considerable physical and emotional pain. As she climbs into the car, “an expression of pain flitted across Lolita’s face. It flitted again, more meaningfully, as she settled down beside me. No doubt, she reproduced it that second time for my benefit” (140). Humbert is incredulous because he is the source of her discomfort, but readers have no cause to doubt Dolores’s pain. “Making a sizzling sound with her lips, she started complaining of pains, said she could not sit, said I had torn something inside her,” Humbert complains with some skepticism (141). Yet even the selfishly cynical Humbert marks a significant change in her attitude following their intercourse, which he predictably chalks up to teenage moodiness. “A queer dullness had replaced her usual cheerfulness,” he notes as they breakfast together in a café (139); afterward, in the car, “Loquacious Lo was silent” (140). Increasingly, Humbert finds her in a daily depression from which she is only able to emerge when Humbert devises some benign distraction. “Every morning during our yearlong travels I had to devise some expectation, some special point in space and time for her to look forward to, for her to survive until bedtime,” he reveals. “Otherwise, deprived of a shaping and sustaining purpose, the skeleton of her day sagged and collapsed” (151). These “fits of moodiness … had become … frequent with her in the course of that otherwise admirable year,” Humbert maintains (169); yet for whom was this year so “admirable”? Humbert the narrator, looking back on his time with Dolores from a different perspective than the Humbert who had experienced it, admits that he could hear “her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep” (176).

Toward the end of his narrative, Humbert does begin to come to terms with the damage he has inflicted on Dolores. In chapters 31 and 32, he tries—for the first time—to adopt her

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52 Phelan is, in my view, far too generous toward Humbert the retrospective narrator in his discussion of dual focalization in *Lolita* when he argues that Humbert the narrator “ends up far more concerned about Dolores than
perspective in two surprising, sustained meditations on her suffering. “Nothing could make my 
Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted on her,” he laments. “Dolores Haze had been deprived 
of her childhood by a maniac” (283). Predictably, Humbert hardly delays in shifting his focus 
from Dolores’s anguish to his own. Only the “melancholy and very local palliative of articulate 
art” can begin to relieve his misery, he writes. Still, his reflections reveal other dimensions of 
Dolores’s character that were erstwhile hidden not only to readers but to Humbert himself. 
Humbert finds himself overwhelmed by a flood of “smothered memories”: the pained look that 
Humbert glimpses on Dolores’s face when the door was ajar and she thought she was 
unobserved, “an expression of helplessness so perfect … because this was the very limit of 
injustice and frustration” (283); Dolores’s profound meditations on life and death, which reveal a 
depth to her character previously acknowledged or else willfully suppressed by her captor, who 
only now admits that “I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind” (284); her “soot-
black eyelashes,” matted with tears following intercourse so vigorous it left Humbert “limp”; her 
desperate shudder—“‘oh no,’ Lolita would say with a sigh to heaven”—when he immediately 
returns for a second round (285). These realizations are far too little and too late to redeem 
Humbert’s character, but they do indicate a wide disparity between Humbert’s perspective and 
that of Dolores. Though Humbert only provides his jury of readers with several examples here, it 
is the reader’s imperative to reconstruct the events of Lolita with this disparity in mind, re-
imagining how this plot might have been re-constructed from Dolores’s point of view.

In fact, Humbert is so enamored with his own word play, the “palliative of articulate art,” 
that one is hard-pressed to imagine what the plot of this novel would look like apart from 
Humbert’s narration (283). Which events are a part of the story’s fabula, and which are refracted

about himself” in Part II of the novel (“Estranging” 129). Humbert, I hope to show—while improved from Part I—is 
as self-centered as ever. This is, after all, the effect of the dramatic persona, whose solipsistic perspective blots out 
others.
through Humbert’s distorted perception? At times, it is impossible to tell. Take, for instance, the character of Clare Quilty, whom Humbert has ostensibly murdered. Humbert is convinced that Quilty has been following him as he treks across the country with Dolores in tow. This may be partly true; Quilty appears to be on some sort of writer’s circuit promoting his plays. When Humbert finally appears to lose Quilty’s car, however, Humbert is convinced that Quilty has traded it in for a series of rentals. When even the driver appears to change, he tells himself that Quilty has hired accomplices to pursue them, instead. Humbert has become quite paranoid, which in turn seems to animate his mental illness: “I had hallucinations,” he admits (217).

Exacerbated by his heavy drinking, Humbert’s frazzled condition causes him to become still more unreliable. His paranoia, however, is not totally unfounded. When Dolores finally disappears from Humbert’s life, it is Clare Quilty who takes her away, signing her out from the hospital under the guise of her uncle. But when Humbert obsessively retraces his steps across the country and checks the ledgers of the inns he had stayed at with Dolores, he not only imagines that he finds Quilty’s signature—or that of an accomplice—in every ledger, but that Quilty has, as Humbert puts it, “planted insulting pseudonyms for my special benefit” (248). The pseudonyms range from esoteric literary references to deeply personal information that only Humbert could recognize, tailored precisely, as it were, to his “mind and manner”: “[Quilty’s] genre, his type of humor—at its best at least—the tone of his brain, had affinities with my own. He mimed and mocked me. His allusions were definitely highbrow. He was well-read. He knew French. He was versed in logodaedaly and logomancy. He was an amateur of sex lore” (249-50). So remarkable are their similarities, so strong their psychic connection, one wonders how they can fail to be the same person. When Humbert arrives to murder Quilty, the latter is wearing a purple robe identical to Humbert’s; when the two wrestle one another to the ground for control of
Humbert’s gun, their identities are confused, then conflated as Nabokov deliberately plays with pronouns: “He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us” (299).

For these reasons, critics tend to read Quilty as Humbert’s doppelganger, a reading that yields problematic ontological consequences for the novel’s plot. Quilty is, admittedly, a still more unscrupulous version of Humbert: like his double, he is a pedophile, but without any of Humbert’s moral qualms, however slight and belated these qualms may be. He films child pornography, even trying to coerce Dolores to take part. Though she is crazy for Quilty, he does not appear to reciprocate, and he certainly does not care for her well-being in the way that Humbert says he does. “It was all drink and drugs [with him]. And, of course, he was a complete freak in sex matters,” Dolores explains (276). This information simply floors Humbert. Holding Quilty at gunpoint, he relishes the feeling. “To have him trapped, after those years of repentance and rage … to know that this semi-animated, subhuman trickster who had sodomized my darling—oh, my darling, this was intolerable bliss!” he cries in a most hypocritical judgment. Humbert seems to have channeled all of his self-loathing onto Quilty, who, as a selfish, sex-crazed child molester, embodies all of Humbert’s own worst qualities.

If Quilty, however, doesn’t exist per se—if he is yet another extension of Humbert’s warped psyche—then how are we to understand the frame narrative, in which Humbert has landed himself in jail for Quilty’s murder? Clare Quilty, after all, has an entry in the *Who’s Who in the Limelight* that Humbert finds in the prison library (31). Is the entire frame, too, an elaborate figment of Humbert’s imagination? One critic speculates that Humbert never committed murder and is serving time instead for statutory rape and transporting a minor across state lines (Tekiner 468). The question of how far can we extend Humbert’s unreliability
becomes a slippery slope that quickly threatens to undermine the entire narrative. If Quilty doesn’t exist, after all, then the record of Quilty in the prison library is also a projection of Humbert’s mind, and so the same might be said of prison itself, and of Humbert’s crimes, his identity, and so on.\footnote{These same issues arise with a vengeance in Nabokov’s experimental \textit{Pale Fire}, which hovers somewhere between novel, poem, and secondary criticism. For a discussion of critical debates surrounding its so-called plot, see Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction” 121-2.}

Humbert’s perpetual word play only further obfuscates the boundary between real and imagined—and between lyric and narrative. While he himself takes a pseudonym and admits to using pseudonyms to protect the innocent—Dolores Haze is not Lolita’s true name but a close approximation—some of his name games seem too clever to be true: in addition to Annabel Leigh, Humbert presents “The Enchanted Hunters,” the inn where Humbert first violates Dolores, and \textit{The Hunted Enchanters}, the play written by Quilty in which Dolores takes part while she is at school. “Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!” he soliloquizes in the novel’s opening pages (34). If so, then there is no end to Humbert’s manipulation; his wordplay, his rationalizations, and his mental instability all work to undermine the ontological foundations of his memoir, bringing it closer to the aesthetic playfulness of lyric poetry.

James Phelan argues that, by the end of the novel, “Humbert has ceased seeking exoneration and moved toward condemning himself” and hence becomes considerably more reliable (“Estranging” 125). Humbert does condemn himself, but only lightly, and certainly not in proportion to his transgressions against Dolores. Reflecting on his crimes, Humbert—who is, ostensibly anyway, in jail for murder rather than child abuse—meditates that, were he the sentencing judge, “I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges” (308). While this is the first time Humbert has used the term “rape” to describe his sexual relationship with Dolores, the sentence he levies on himself is quite lenient:
not only does he “dismiss” the murder charge altogether, he neglects that he is also guilty of kidnapping and what lawyers today would call aggravated rape—forcible sex with a minor, every day, for two years. In a final, desperate validation of his behavior, Humbert claims that he still loves Dolores, now seventeen and pregnant, and far beyond her prime as a “nymphet.” “I insist the world know,” he declares on record, “how much I loved my Lolita, this Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another’s child, but still gray-eyed, sooty-lashed, still Auburn and almond, still Carmencita, still mine” (278). In the end, even Humbert cannot divorce his own perception from his rationalizations, demonstrating that misreporting and misreading are hopelessly entangled for this character-narrator.

Much like *Turn of the Screw*, *Lolita* presents textual evidence for multiple, incompatible ontologies that shift over the course of the novel (the affair between Humbert and Dolores is mutual, or Humbert forces himself on Dolores; Humbert kills Clare Quilty, or Clare Quilty never existed). Unlike James’s narrative, however, the novel’s ontological contradictions are built into its very framing, since readers must develop alternate explanations for Humbert’s detention if they elect to read Quilty as another persona rather than a separate character. James Phelan has argued that *Lolita* is a “deeply layered book” that polarizes readers and critics because of its complicated ethical-rhetorical dimensions: its racy content, its “complex representation” of Humbert, and its implications for the “purposes of literature” more broadly (Living 102-3). The novel is also “deeply layered” in an ontological sense, as well. *Lolita* defies readers to wade through Humbert’s unreliable narration to parse what is happening within the novel’s fictional world from what is happening within Humbert’s psyche, which is precisely why this novel continues to generate such widely divergent, and divisive, readings.
Not unlike *Lolita*, the publication history behind Bret Easton Ellis’s equally controversial *American Psycho* is an interesting narrative unto itself. After agreeing to publish the novel, Simon and Schuster changed its mind: female employees of the publishing house caught wind of its content and objected to its graphic depiction of violence against women, and passages from the manuscript were leaked to *Time* and *Spy* magazines and published alongside “reviews decrying the decision to publish the book” (O’Brien; Freccero 48). Within days, the novel was picked up by Vintage, a division of Random House; but Simon and Schuster’s reaction to the novel had already generated a good deal of press regarding the controversial content that led to the aborted deal. Soon, both Ellis and his novel were receiving coverage from major venues such as *New York Magazine* and even CNN. The controversy raged on, most famously on account of the National Organization of Women, who issued an impassioned public response to what they, too, considered the extreme misogyny of *American Psycho*. Tammy Bruce, the head of the organization’s L.A. chapter and Ellis’s most outspoken opponent, called for a nationwide boycott of Random House, summarizing the novel as “a how-to manual on the torture and dismemberment of women” (quoted in Freccero 50 and O’Brien). To emphasize her point, Bruce chose an illustrative passage from the novel that was excerpted, recorded, and played on her NOW chapter’s phone line.

NOW’s objection to *American Psycho* is precisely the kind of naively literal reading against which the novel is pushing. Clearly, as its very title indicates, Ellis’s novel is filled with irony and parody; indeed, most critics have come to view the novel as a dark satire on the materialistic, heteromasculine culture of Manhattan’s Wall Street financiers in the 1980s, narrated by a disaffected psychopath. Bateman is no more a spokesperson for murder or courtship than he is for investment banking or popular music. Nor, however, does the novel
translate into any easy allegory about the metaphorical violence inflicted on the disenfranchised by free market capitalism, as current critics would have it. After all, the novel’s narration is firmly rooted in the concrete particulars of clothing, food, brand names, and, of course, human anatomy in both sexual and violent contexts. Reading this novel through the lens of the dramatic monologue, however, several things become clear: the brutal violence to which so many readers have objected may not have the ontological status they have assumed, and the catalogues of particulars that flood the novel are more indicative of Bateman’s fraught mental state than of the reality they are ostensibly describing. In what follows, I argue that Bateman’s self-presentation is wholly unreliable, and that his arrogance, bigotry, and sadism are an extension of a manic psyche plagued by his inability, as he puts it to Bethany, to “fit in” (237). As we uncover Bateman’s affinity to Porphyria’s Lover, the events that seem to underpin American Psycho begin to dissipate as they are incrementally reduced to the product of an unstable mind. As is the case with any dramatic monologue, Bateman’s narration reveals far more about his character than the fictional world he claims to inhabit.

Patrick Bateman presents himself as a raconteur who is in complete control of his narrative—and, by extension, of the life he narrates. Materialistic, vain, obsessive, and pedantic, he overwhelms readers with the tedious particulars of his beauty regimen, his gym routine, and his strategy for coordinating his suits with his shirts, ties, vests, and socks. Each time he

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54 Thomas Heise, for instance, describes the novel as “a terrifyingly intimate experience of violence by a psychotic subject who embodies neoliberal theory and performs it through his repeated acts of disembowelment” (135). Richard Godden reads the torturing of the homeless by Bateman and his fellow financiers, who offer money to beggars and then quickly withdraw it, as analogous to the “structural adjustment programs used by the International Monetary Fund and the world Bank during the 1980s and 1990s, in which loans and debt rescheduling were made dependent on market reorganization by the recipient nation” (“Labor” 420). Leigh Claire La Berge has argued that, in part, American Psycho is a literal rendering of the violent language—e.g., “the men who make the killings,” etc.—that was used in news media to depict financiers in the 1980s.

55 This reading is supported by Mary Harron’s 2000 film adaptation, though Harron amplifies the role of the detective in order to give the film more of a plot than the novel’s lyrical angle would permit. For an examination of the “double-construction” of Bateman as serial killer and Wall Street yuppie (both of which are ultimately illusory) with regard to both the film and the novel, see Jaap Kooijman and Tarja Laine, “American Psycho: A Double Portrait of Serial Yuppie Patrick Bateman.”
introduces others characters, he depicts their clothing, complete with name brands, in detail; each
time he eats with them at an exclusive restaurant, their meals are itemized, as well. His narrative
is peppered with authoritative and exhaustive music reviews of dated rock bands. He also never
fails to tell us who was featured on the Patty Winters Show each morning. In fact, this tic
becomes yet another marker of his mounting unreliability, since, as the novel progresses, the
guests become more and more unbelievable. (“On The Patty Winters Show this morning,” he
claims at the end of the novel, “a Cheerio sat in a very small chair and was interviewed for close
to an hour” [386].) As his tiresome catalogues suggest, however, Bateman’s self-presentation is
not altogether convincing. He cares deeply for things that seem irrelevant to most readers, and
not at all for those things that ought to be important. He has little regard for human relationships
that are not also business partnerships, refusing to explore in any depth his feelings—or lack
thereof—for each of his romantic partners (his fiancée Evelyn, his mistress Courtney, and finally
Jean, his loyal secretary) or those toward his mother, with whom he visits briefly in a sanatorium
in one of the novel’s more tender scenes. Even his job gets surprisingly short shrift in this novel
of careerist social climbing. We never, after all, really witness Bateman actually working in his
office—here he is, assigning trivial tasks to Jean; there he is, lifting weights; and there he is
again, completing crossword puzzles, listening to his walkman, and reading Sports Illustrated.

All of this is, of course, to say nothing of his disturbing amorality, rendered through the
remorselessness with which he maims, tortures, and kills his victims. Bateman, however, is
careful to mask his murderous tendencies early on, revealing them only gradually and piecemeal
to readers who have been lulled into complacency by his giant compendiums of name brand

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56 Ellis’s choice to set the novel in the 1980s has a deliberate distancing effect between narrator and reader. Many of
the styles, consumer products, technology, musical artists, etc. that Bateman mentions in order to gain stature in the
eyes of the reader already seem outdated to the novel’s post-1990 audience. More importantly, the crash of 1987
effectively ended the Yuppies lifestyle Bateman depicts here. This chronological gap will only continue to widen for
future generations of readers.
clothes and toiletries and his equally monotonous and mind-numbingly superficial conversations with his colleague-friends. His sado-sexual fantasies, initially buried in subordinate clauses, become increasingly prominent. His disclosure that he “rerent[s] Body Double because I want to watch it again tonight even though I know I won’t have enough time to masturbate over the scene where the woman is getting drilled to death by a power drill since I have a date with Courtney at seven-thirty at Café Luxembourg” is one early red flag. His wondering what the waitress would look like with “her head … on a stick” is another (92). His telling a “Eurotrash” cocaine dealer that he “would like to tit-fuck her and then maybe cut her arms off” is still another (79-80). These violent anticipations soon give way to confusing retroversions, such as when he returns his clothes to “the Chinese dry cleaners I usually send my bloody clothes to” (81). This casual statement, which opens the chapter “Dry Cleaners” without further elaboration, is an iterative one, an indication that Bateman has been repeatedly staining his clothes with the blood of undisclosed victims. Flashbacks like these become increasingly frequent as well as graphic, such as Bateman’s musing that “Anne Smiley and I share a mutual acquaintance, a waitress from Abetone’s in Aspen who I raped with a can of hairspray last Christmas” (94) and his triggered memory of a “poster I saw in the subway station the other night before I killed those two black kids” (121). In fact, these retroversions extend all the way back to Bateman’s days at Harvard: “A young girl, a freshman, I met in a bar in Cambridge my junior year at Harvard told me early one fall that ‘Life is full of endless possibilities.’ I tried valiantly not to choke on the beer nuts I was chewing … Needless to say, she did not live to see her sophomore year. That winter, her body was found floating in the Charles River, decapitated, her head hung from a tree on the bank” (241). His sexual perversities reach back further still. Retreating to his “own private maze” of thoughts while dining with Evelyn, he recalls “the Christmas Eve when I was fourteen and

57 For a fuller discussion of pacing and violence in both the novel and film version, see Abel 29-59.
had raped one of our maids” (342). The attentive reader, then, should not be altogether surprised when Bateman commits his first murder in the novel’s present tense narration, the senseless killing of a black homeless man with whom he becomes frustrated because they “don’t have anything in common” (131).

These murders become important markers of Bateman’s personality that betray the unreliability of his controlled narration. The first fatality is somewhat predictable: the homeless man is, after all, a symbolic victim of the same capitalist market of which Bateman and his cronies are beneficiaries. The latter have spent much of the novel taunting the homeless, offering bills only to withdraw them as they leave exclusive, five-star restaurants. Bateman shames his murder victim into believing his destitution is his own fault: “‘Get a goddamn job, Al,’ I say earnestly. ‘You’ve got a negative attitude. That’s what’s stopping you. You’ve got to get your act together’” (130). In order to complete the execution, Bateman must convince both himself and his victim that the life he is about to take is worthless, anyway. The homeless, as Bateman understands them, are naturally unfit “member[s] of the genetic underclass” (266). The same principle governs his execution of Christie, the prostitute who narrowly escapes death in her first encounter with Bateman and who is tortured and killed when she is hired for a second time. Christie is the anti-Bateman: uneducated and unrefined, she is totally uninterested in the materialistic accoutrements that Bateman typically uses to impress women. Torri and Tiffany, the vapid prostitutes Bateman hires and kills much later, are equally valueless within Bateman’s estimation, hence dispensable.

Bateman’s other executions, however, seem to be motivated by something quite different. He kills what he thinks to be a Japanese delivery boy after Charles Murphy’s invective against the growing threat of Japanese economic superiority. “He’s on a tirade about the Japanese—
‘They’ve bought the Empire State Building and Nell’s. Nell’s, can you believe it, Bateman?’ he exclaims over his second Absolut on the rocks—and it moves something in me, it sets something off,” Bateman recounts (180). The delivery boy, alas, turns out to be Chinese, but Bateman’s violent overreaction to a perceived threat begins a thread that ties together a number of subsequent killings. He beats a “blond hardbody” nearly to the point of decapitation because the only music she listens to is gangster rap, the antithesis of the yuppie lifestyle Bateman has cultivated for himself. (“Haunted” by her taste in music, he buys “ninety dollars’ worth of rap CDs but, as expected, I’m at a loss: niggerish voices uttering ugly words like digit, pudding, chunk” [256].) Consumed with envy, he murders a rival mergers and acquisitions financier named Paul Owen who has landed the coveted “Fisher account.” Any threat to his privileged status appears to “set something off” for Bateman (180). Those tertiary characters he encounters at parties and nightclubs who subscribe to alternative lifestyles particularly fluster him, unearthing insecurities that are not otherwise apparent in Bateman’s self-assured narration. “Fucking yuppie,” sneers one of Bateman’s conquests in a night club, much to his embarrassment (199). Bateman is also, however, unsettled by those who are flourishing within his own field. The success of Paul Owen indirectly points to Bateman’s own failings as a Wall Street yuppie. Though they are the same age, Owen has the personal driver, the nicer apartment, and the disposable income to buy his girlfriend a diamond necklace from Tiffany’s (and which Evelyn mistakenly takes to be Bateman’s gift to her). Bateman is fixated on Owen, even asking Jean to start a file on Owen’s Fisher account, whereas Owen, for his part, cannot even remember Bateman’s name. Each of his victims, then, illuminates something about Bateman’s most deep-seated insecurities.58

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58 Granted, the killings become more senseless toward the end of the novel, something which Bateman himself acknowledges. After killing a child, he waxes philosophical about his victim: “I’m suddenly jolted with a mournful
Arguably, the murder that reveals the most about Bateman’s true character—the Bateman who lurks beneath the suave exterior—is that of Bethany, the college sweetheart who knew him before he was a Wall Street big shot. His behavior around Bethany is markedly different from the persona he has crafted for himself and for readers. Admitting that he is “extremely nervous” to meet her again, he is suddenly self-conscious about his looks, obsessively worried over the new mousse he has decided to use in his hair: “Since I last saw my hair, seconds ago, it feels different, as if its shape was somehow altered on the walk from bar to table” (231). Seated across from Bethany, Bateman finds himself trembling and twitching uncontrollably. “Calm down,” she pleads, covering one of his hands with her own. “You look like a wild man” (232). He babbles uncontrollably, uttering disjointed thoughts in nervous fragments as Bethany listens in worried silence. His leg jerks uncontrollably, shaking the table. This is not the smooth-talking, smugly self-assured Bateman with whom readers have become familiar. Bethany’s ability to see through Bateman—a skill that ultimately assures her death sentence—makes him feel vulnerable. In a rare moment of honesty, Bateman confesses to Bethany that he hates his job, though he cannot bring himself to quit: “I … want … to … fit … in,” he admits.

In Bateman’s desperation to “fit in,” he completely assimilates to the Wall Street crowd. He and his colleagues dress exactly alike, donning similar double-breasted suits, silk ties, slicked-back hair, suspenders, and horn-rimmed glasses; they are all recreational coke users; they all seem to have the new Talking Heads album. Superficially, they are totally indistinguishable from one another, which is why Paul Owen mistakes Bateman for one of his colleagues, Marcus Halberstam. “It seems like a logical faux pas,” Bateman admits, “since Marcus works at P & P also, in fact does the same exact thing I do, and he also has a penchant for Valentino suits and despair at how useless, how extraordinarily painless, it is to take a child’s life,” he reflects with disappointment (298).
clear prescription glasses and we share the same barber at the same place, the Pierre Hotel” (89). Nor is this the only instance in which Bateman is mistaken for one of his many yuppie doubles. Harold Carnes misidentifies him as “Davis” and inadvertently reveals what he really thinks about Bateman. “Your joke was amusing,” he tells Bateman, referring to his confession, on Carnes’s voicemail, of the murders he has committed. “But come on, man, you had one fatal flaw: Bateman’s such a bloody ass-kisser, such a brown-nosing goody-goody, that I couldn’t fully appreciate it. … Why else would Evelyn Richards dump him? You know, really. He would barely pick up an escort girl, let alone … what was it you said he did to her? … Oh yes, ‘chop her up’” (387-8).

Carnes depicts a version of Bateman that runs counter to the self-image Bateman has been constructing with tedious care. A far cry from the suave Casanova who moonlights as a serial killer, Carnes’s Bateman is groveling, obsequious, and laughably clumsy around women. Carnes even asserts that Evelyn has discarded Bateman, although Bateman has assured us that he ended the relationship by sending “a small box of flies along with a note, typed by Jean, saying that I never, ever wanted to see her face again and, though she doesn’t really need one, to go on a fucking diet” (382-3). This startling discrepancy between Carnes’s perception of Bateman and Bateman’s perception of himself, reinforced by Bateman’s bizarrely self-conscious behavior during his lunch with Bethany, casts serious doubt over everything we thought we knew about Bateman’s character. In yet another turn of the screw, Carnes also maintains that Bateman couldn’t have killed Paul Owen because he “had … dinner … with Paul Owen … twice … in London … just ten days ago” (388, ellipses and italics original). Carnes’s testimony during this conversation patently calls into question not only Bateman’s character but the reality of the murders he claims to have committed.
Other, subtler incongruities between Bateman’s perception and the novel’s “reality” suggest that none of these murders may have ever occurred. When Bateman harasses the Chinese dry cleaner for failing to remove the blood splatters from his laundry, her husband takes the sheets that are ostensibly stained and “stares at them dumbly” as if he sees nothing there at all (82). When he visits Paul Owen’s apartment “one hundred and sixty-one days” after killing and mutilating two prostitutes there, he discovers that the apartment is now on the market, the previously blood-soaked furniture “spotless” and “intact” without any trace of foul play (366, 368). Mark Storey has pointed out that Bateman’s maid, mentioned more than once, never seems to find remnants of Bateman’s victims around the apartment (61). Bateman purports to share his murderous thoughts aloud with others, but conveniently, they never seem to hear him. “My life is a living hell,” Bateman confesses to a colleague, Christopher Armstrong, who is droning on about the Bahamas as if reciting an article from a travel magazine. “And there are many more people I, uh, want to … want to, well, I guess murder.’ I say this emphasizing the last word, staring straight into Armstrong’s face,” yet Armstrong simply drones on as if he were never interrupted (141). After provoking Daisy by telling her that he “beat the living shit” out of a homeless girl because “she was too ugly to rape,” he fails to elicit a reaction yet again (213). The unheard confession that is most often quoted is Bateman’s assertion that he works in “murders and executions”; hearing “mergers and acquisitions” instead, his interlocutor asks, “Do you like it?” (206).

Bateman admits that his grip on reality is becoming increasingly tenuous. He frequently complains of tension and becomes reliant on dangerous cocktails of liquor, pain relievers, and anti-anxiety pills. His experience verges on the surreal as he asserts variously that “I think I’m losing it” (214), “I’m really dreaming all this” (231), and “I was simply imitating reality, a
rough resemblance of a human being, with only a dim corner of my mind functioning” (282). His erratic behavior is no longer confined to the isolated murders he purports to commit. “There’s no use in denying it: this has been a bad week,” he reports near the end of the novel. “I’ve started drinking my own urine. I laugh spontaneously at nothing. Sometimes I sleep under my futon. I’m flossing my teeth constantly until my gums are aching and my mouth tastes like blood. … I was almost caught at a Federal Express in Times Square trying to send the mother of one of the girls I killed last week what might be a dried-up, brown heart” (382). In the closing pages, he ascribes inanimate objects with malicious intent: “My automated teller has started speaking to me, sometimes actually leaving weird messages on the screen, in green lettering, like ‘Cause a terrible scene at Sotheby’s’ or ‘Kill the President’ or ‘Feed Me a Stray Cat,’ and I was freaked out by the park bench that followed me for six blocks last Monday evening and it too spoke to me. Disintegration—I’m taking it in stride” (395-6). If Bateman’s self-consciousness as a mealy-mouthed sycophant threatens to undermine parts of his story, Bateman’s mounting insanity would seem to undermine all of it.

The plot of American Psycho may well be the projection of a warped mind, a fantasy of power and control crafted by a character who, in reality, feels as though he has none. What is more, the misogyny that has flustered so many of the novel’s feminist readers is animated by what appears to be Bateman’s repressed homosexuality, heavily stigmatized in the 1980s through the emergence and rapid spread of the AIDS virus. Bateman’s interactions with women and colleagues are haunted by the threat of AIDS. Erroneous rumors about its transmission circulate. Tim Price relays a popular “theory out there now” whereby “if you can catch the AIDS virus through having sex with someone who is infected then you can also catch anything, whether it’s a virus per se or not—Alzheimer’s, muscular dystrophy, hemophilia, leukemia, anorexia,
diabetes,” and even “dyslexia, for Christ sakes” (5). David Van Patten relays an article stating that men are essentially not at risk: “Our chances of catching [AIDS] are like zero zero zero zero point half a decimal percentage or something, and this no matter what kind of scumbag, slutbucket, horndog chick we end up boffing,” he reassures the other men (34). Though Bateman’s male circle feigns a smug sense of security, the women in the novel are openly anxious. McDermott complains that a “Vassar girl” refused to have intercourse at all for fear of AIDS: “She would only give me a hand-job, and get this … she kept her glove on” (34). In wondering why Tim Price has suddenly disappeared—“rehab,” Bateman speculates—Evelyn begins to panic: “‘You don’t think it’s’—and she looks around the restaurant before leaning in, whispering—‘AIDS?’” (120) Their fears are exasperated by the fact that none of these men use prophylactics. Courtney forces Bateman to wear protection during intercourse, but he demonstrates his unfamiliarity with condoms when Courtney scolds him for failing to leave a “receptacle tip,” or space enough for his ejaculation (103).

Bateman appears to distance himself from the stigmas of homosexuality by consistently referring to other gays as “faggots” and by singing the praises of reproductive sex: “‘Well, my theory’s always been,’ I start, ‘men are only here to procreate, to carry on the species, you know?’” (91) Not surprisingly, Bateman’s “theory” runs totally counter to his practice. As he drops a reluctant Jeanette off at an abortion clinic, he boasts, “This is, I think, the fifth child I’ve had aborted, the third I haven’t aborted myself” (381). Despite his many protestations of heterosexuality—and the narrator doth protest too much—he seems to attract the attention of nearly every gay man he encounters. At the gym, he rather revels in the idea that he is being studied: “Already some faggot is behind me, probably checking out my back, ass, leg muscles” (68). While checking his messages in a phone booth, “a couple of skinny faggots walk by … one
of them whistles at me, the other laughs: a high, fey, horrible sound” (128). Standing alongside a gay pride parade, he “began to receive fey catcalls from aging, overmuscled beachboys with walruslike mustaches” (139). A waiter at a restaurant playfully “bats his eyelashes” while taking down his order (215). A department store worker “flirts and asks if I’m a model” (179). He describes Evelyn’s masseur as “some scary faggot who lived down the road with a famous book publisher and who flirted openly with me” (281). For someone who avers to be staunchly heterosexual, Bateman, whether inadvertently or not, seems to regularly invite homosexual advances.

At times, he even flirts back. He stops and chats with a man who gives him “the once-over with a quizzical smile” as he walks his sharpei (164). Bateman “grin[s] boyishly” at the man, who playfully corrects his pronunciation of the dog’s breed. Predictably, Bateman ends this flirtatious episode by killing both the dog and its owner, but other encounters yield very different endings. Seated front and center at a U2 concert, Bateman becomes convinced that he and Bono have made some sort of singular connection, that “we share a bond”; the rest of the band and crowd seem to fade away as Bono conveys a message tailored exclusively for Bateman, whose response is intensely erotic: “I’m nodding back, everything getting clearer, my body alive and burning, on fire … I’m left tingling, my face flushed, an aching erection pulsing against my thigh” (147). Bateman’s most intense homosexual encounter occurs with his colleague Luis Carruthers in the men’s bathroom of a restaurant. As Bateman turns to strangle Carruthers to death, Carruthers misreads his body language as a sexual advance, and responds with tender eagerness. “‘God, Patrick,’ he whispers. ‘Why here?’” (159) Bateman is “paralyzed”—with shock, fear, or pleasure?—and finds that he can’t strangle Luis after all: “I can’t do it, my hands won’t tighten, and my arms, still stretched out, look ludicrous and useless in their fixed position”
Luis insists that his feeling is mutual. “I’ve seen you looking at me,” he tells Bateman in the bathroom; during a later encounter in a department store, he insists, “Just because you won’t admit … certain feelings you have doesn’t mean you don’t have them. … I know you feel the same way I do” (293). If Luis is wrong, then why is Bateman, a self-professed serial killer, suddenly incapable of murder?

The queerness of Bateman’s heterosexual practices also point to repressed homosexual desires. He is incapable of sustaining an erection during conventional intercourse, as Courtney appears to suggest: “‘I want to fuck you again,’ I tell her, ‘but I don’t want to wear a condom because I don’t feel anything,’ and she says calmly, taking her mouth off my limp shrunken dick, glaring at me, ‘If you don’t use one you’re not going to feel anything anyway’” (105). The only kind of sex without violence that appears to excite Bateman is that which is focused on the anus. One of his favorite pornos, “Inside Lydia’s Ass,” features a woman who is anally penetrated by a vibrator while a man with a “huge cock” ejaculates on her face (97-8). He becomes erect when Sabrina sniffs Christie’s asshole, upon his request (173); his orgasm with Christie is prolonged when Sabrina sticks her tongue in his rectum (176). There is even a strong homoerotic element in Bateman’s misogynistic torture scenes. Twice—once with Bethany, and again with Torri—he brings himself to climax by manipulating their bloody mouths around his penis (Bethany is tongueless, Torri decapitated) in a grisly parody of fellatio. In a similar parody of anal penetration, he nails a dildo that he’s “tied to a board” into Tiffany’s rectum using a nail gun (305). Read this way, Bateman’s violence toward women, horrific as it may be, becomes a dark caricature of his own closeted desires.

We may only speculate, however, on his sexuality, as with any other aspect of his personality; this unreliable narrator remains so deluded about his identity that it is impossible to
locate the “true” Bateman apart from the persona he has created. In contradistinction to the relatively controlled, albeit manipulative, narratives of James and Nabokov, *American Psycho* spotlights the insanity of its character-narrator. Bateman’s instability, like that of Porphyria’s lover, challenges readers to re-evaluate his account in light of his anxieties—and his psychosis. As James R. Giles has argued, “the essential ambiguity of Bateman’s murders leaves open at least three possible readings: all of the murders … actually occur[,] Bateman killed some limited number of people and has fantasized the rest … or all of the murders are sheer fantasy” (171). If none of these murders occurred at all, then the plot of *American Psycho* happens only in Bateman’s mind, and the novel itself is transformed into a lyricized character-drama, the events of which become figurative markers in which a dramatic persona slowly—and unwittingly—reveals himself to his readers.

If *American Psycho*’s unreliable character-narrator urges readers to remain as wary of Bateman’s self-presentation as of the plot he narrates, the bifurcated character-narrator of Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* takes this strategy one step further. *Fight Club* chronicles the development of an anarchic organization called Project Mayhem that is formed and implemented by the narrator and his fearless new friend, Tyler Durden. The project has its roots in Tyler’s small acts of rebellion against the various industries that he feels have exploited him for his minimum-wage labor: splicing children’s movies with frames of giant erections, urinating in the soup he delivers to a guest’s hotel room. Eventually, he and the narrator form “fight club,” where

59 Elizabeth Young has convincingly argued that we know only of Bateman’s “fictional existence. He is the big brother of Sean Bateman in *The Rules of Attraction* and has already made an appearance in that book. He works at Pierce and Pierce which was Sherman McCoy’s investment firm in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. He knows people from other ‘brat-pack’ novels. … It seems as though Ellis is re-infusing the fact that Patrick’s only ‘existence’ is within fiction” (108). Patrick Bateman, apart from his persona, is a “void. He is the abyss. He is a textual impossibility, written out, elided until there is no ‘Patrick’” (119). I argue that we can recover at least a partial or oblique picture of the true Bateman by reading him through the context of the dramatic monologue, in which a speaker inadvertently reveals more about himself than he would intend.
men meet in secret to exchange blows in a cathartic exercise of violence that offsets their otherwise unfulfilling lives. As Durden attracts followers (dubbed “space monkeys” by Tyler), their enterprise morphs again, escalating into an anarcho-terrorist group that bombs buildings, castrates city officials, and eventually commits murder. At around this time, the narrator discovers that he has a split personality and that “Tyler” is merely a persona he has created in order to cultivate a more aggressive and authoritative version of himself. One character has been parading as two; what appears to be a dialogic narrative is in fact monologic after all.

Palahniuk introduces more of a “twist” here than what we have seen in the novels of James, Nabokov, and Ellis, offering no discernible clues that Tyler and the narrator are the same character until the narrator is suddenly confronted with the news toward the end of the novel, first by a bartender, then by his girlfriend Marla, and finally by Tyler himself. The narrator’s self-diagnosed insomnia may cause readers to question his reliability—“three weeks without sleep, and everything becomes an out-of-body experience,” he confesses (19)—but only a retrospective reading will unearth those details that suggest his split personality. “I know this because Tyler knows this,” he is fond of saying after he rehearses a fact, but this phrase appears to suggest co-dependence more than co-identity (12). He issues a number of similarly cryptic statements with double-meanings. “Tyler had been around a long time before we met,” he writes at one point. “I had to know what Tyler was doing while I was asleep. If I could wake up in a different place, at a different time, could I wake up as a different person?” (32-3) “I did this to myself,” he insists with ironic truth when he appears at work with a swollen face, bruised and battered after a fistfight with “Tyler” (48). Such particulars, however, do not make much sense until one discovers the monologic trick that the novel has played on the reader.
The narrator’s revelation that Tyler is another version of himself comes as a shock to readers who are accustomed to the conventional practices of character and characterization in fiction. The concept of “character” with regard to the novel underwent a number of changes in twentieth-century criticism beginning with E. M. Forster’s distinction between “round” vs. “flat” characters. All serious fiction requires both, and each type has its virtue, he argues, but characters that are thoroughly fleshed out are more human-like and hence more relatable. While Forster does not offer any definitions, he maintains that “the test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way” (41). Round characters, then, have the ability to “surprise” whereas flat characters conform to predictable roles or stereotypes, or else they are flattened in order to perform specific thematic functions within a narrative.60

Contemporary narrative theorists have built on Forster’s understanding of character, emphasizing alternately the mimetically human characteristics on the one hand and the synthetic or fictional elements on the other. Gerald Prince’s often-cited Dictionary of Narratology defines character as “an existent endowed with anthropomorphic traits and engaged in anthropomorphic actions; an actor with anthropomorphic attributes” (1956). Likewise, Uri Margolin understands character as “designating a human or human-like individual, existing in some possible world … a Narrative Agent to whom inner states, mental properties (traits, features) or complexes of such properties (personality models) can be ascribed on the basis of textual data” (205). Current, cognitive-based approaches to character would concur. In Why We Read Fiction, Lisa Zunshine famously argues that characters are possible people upon whom we can exercise what cognitive scientists call our “theory of mind.” Other critics, however, caution against our tendency to automatically imbue characters with human traits. Mieke Bal argues that fictional characters walk a precarious line between artifice and reality: “The character is not a human being, but it

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60 For more on the “thematic” and “synthetic” dimensions of character, see Phelan, Reading People, Reading Plots.
resembles one. It has no real psyche, personality, ideology, or competence to act, but it does possess characteristics which make psychological and ideological descriptions possible” (*Narratology* 115). Therefore, she continues, “we must restrict our investigation to only those facts that are presented to us in the actual words of the text” (116). Details may be said to “create,” “map out,” or “build up” a fictional person, but to mistake a character for a human being is to be guilty of “anthropomorphism,” a narratological faux-pas in Bal’s view (116).

Whether they are “flat” or “round,” whether they fall into recognizable schematics or “surprise” us in some way, and regardless of the degree to which they may be “anthropomorphized” or “built up” by a work of fiction, characters require some degree of stability for their legibility as characters. Certainly, fictional characters may become so richly nuanced that they do indeed surprise us—indeed, readers of the novel have come to expect some measure of growth from its characters as a narrative progresses—but they must also, as Bal has stressed, demonstrate personalities and qualities that “make psychological and ideological descriptions possible” (*Narratology* 115). In other words, characters may well be dynamic, but they must also they must be individuated in a way that makes them identifiable.

How might we begin to define or understand *Fight Club*’s narrator apart from his mental disorder? As his self-presentation suggests, he would have us believe that he is divided into two personalities. By day, he is a drone who is a little too attached to his effeminately-adorned apartment and who works unhappily as a “recall campaign coordinator,” conducting cost-benefit analyses that consider whether the lawsuits that accompany a product malfunction would exceed the cost of a recall. By night, he is “Tyler,” assertive, aggressive, fearless, and masculine; Tyler gets what he wants, tells people what he really thinks, and even succeeds in bedding Marla. The narrator longs for the sweet release of death, silently wishing for a crash every time his airplane
lands; Tyler yearns for life. The narrator is the ego and Tyler is the id. The narrator, though weak, is a good, law-abiding citizen, whereas Tyler is a wild card anarchist who is not concerned with moral consequences.

This bifurcation, however, is not as neat as the narrator would have us believe. There are elements of Tyler in the narrator and vice versa (and why shouldn’t there be?). The narrator spends the early part of the novel skulking around support groups, benefitting from the ailments and tragedies of others so that he can have a safe space in which to exercise his otherwise repressed emotions. “We work so hard all the time. This is the only place I ever really relax and give up,” he narrates as he cries into the shoulder of a testicular cancer patient (18). Here, the narrator demonstrates his sadistic attraction to suffering; conversely, Tyler’s platform for Project Mayhem reveals his surprising soft spot for humanity. Both fight club and Project Mayhem are designed to empower the everyday “Joe on the street” (119): “‘What we have to do, people,’ Tyler told the committee, ‘is remind these guys what kind of power they still have’” (120). Both projects have democratizing aims that grant importance to those individuals—service industry drones, blue collar workers—who are lost and ignored in the current system. Project Mayhem’s goal may be “the complete and right-away destruction of civilization,” but toward an end that is actually utopian: “It’s Project Mayhem that’s going to save the world. … Like fight club does with clerks and box boys, Project Mayhem will break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world” (125).

The division between the “good” narrator and “evil” Tyler, however, serves a number of different purposes for this unreliable narrator. “Tyler” provides the narrator with a chance to reinvent himself. Somewhat ironically, the narrator confesses toward the end of the novel that the impetus behind this reinvention is his introduction to Marla, whom he initially appears to loathe.
“From the first night I met her, Tyler or some part of me had needed a way to be with Marla,” he eventually confesses. Inspired, he has created a better version of himself through Tyler: “I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free, and I am not” (174). Tyler also, however, serves another important function: he allows the narrator to avoid culpability for his actions. “Tyler does this,” the narrator insists after splicing the erection into a children’s film (30). “It wasn’t me. It was Tyler,” he maintains again when Marla discovers that he’s stolen her “collagen trust fund”—fat rendered and saved from her mother’s liposuction surgeries—and turned it into soap, the proceeds of which will fund Project Mayhem (93, 91). As the narrator finds himself blackmailing the manager of the Pressman Hotel, he is shocked by his own brazenness, which he once again attributes to Tyler: “Tyler’s words coming out of my mouth. And I used to be such a nice person” (114).

In fact, the narrator continues to play the blame game even after he is confronted with the truth about his split personality. He uses Tyler as a device for parsing his mixed feelings, for example, upon discovering that he has planted an explosive in his office computer, killing his boss. “The problem is, I sort of liked my boss. If you’re white and Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And sometimes you find your father in your career. Except Tyler didn’t like my boss,” he rationalizes (186). When Marla informs the narrator that he has embarked on another violent rampage while sleepwalking as “Tyler,” the narrator continues to evade responsibility. “You shot the mayor’s special envoy on recycling!” she yells, but the narrator silently corrects her: “Tyler shot the mayor’s special envoy on whatever” (196).
The narrator refuses to deal with the moral consequences of his discovery that he is actually Tyler Durden, but more importantly for our purposes here, he also fails to deal with its ontological consequences. He continues not only to inhabit Tyler but to hallucinate him, as well. The novel begins and ends with the climactic scene in which Tyler presses a gun to the narrator’s throat. Tyler disappears as Marla enters, and the narrator stands holding a gun in his own mouth. “I’m not killing myself,” he tries to reassure her before pulling the trigger. “I’m killing Tyler” (205). Because the narrator never really seems to accept the reality of his split personality—that he and Tyler are one person; that he (and not Tyler) loves Marla; that Marla loves him; and that he is responsible for the destruction, violence, and murder that has been wreaked in Tyler’s name—one can never really trust his story, even apart from his insanity. How far, after all, do these ontological consequences extend? “Everybody in Project Mayhem is part of Tyler Durden, and vice versa,” the narrator cryptically suggests (155). Some critics consider Tyler’s “space monkeys” to be part of the delusion, as well. Paul Kennett maintains that “the space monkeys also represent a split of the Narrator’s subjectivity—they encapsulate the part of the Narrator that is debased and abused by his boss, who is represented by Tyler … [the] characters involved in Project Mayhem may be considered as projections of the Narrator’s fragmented self” (57). Kathryn Hume extends the narrator’s unreliability further still. “Because of his mental problems,” she argues, “we cannot be sure about anything he says. Tyler’s many monk-like acolytes, for instance, may just be his hallucinations. Or they may be real, in which case the fictional world is in trouble, because these followers happily throw off previous obligations and rules and luxuriate in physically assaulting others who still live by those rules” (147). The “space monkeys” may seem improbable, though Marla would appear to confirm their existence at least once when she tells one to “get screwed” after he refuses to let her inside (Palahniuk 133). Does
Project Mayhem exist at all? Does Marla exist? Or, as Hume suggests, is the whole fictional world and its plausibility cast into doubt instead? The ontological contours of the narrator’s delusion become quite cloudy once we attempt to parse these and other contradictions. “Every once in a while,” he insists from a psychiatric ward on the novel’s final page, “somebody brings me my lunch tray and my meds and he has a black eye or his forehead is swollen with stitches, and he says: ‘We miss you Mr. Durden.’” (208). Whether the narrator is accurately reporting the truth or whether he remains delusional will depend on whether or not we believe that the narrator has finally realized the extent of his psychosis and its bearing on the reality he narrates.

Deprived of stability at the level of plot, we return to the question of character. The unreliable narrators of *Turn of the Screw*, *Lolita*, and *American Psycho* complicate or even prevent our access to plot, but they provide fascinating psychological studies of character: a frazzled governess who buckles under the pressures of isolation and heavy responsibility, a defensive pedophile who must justify his lifestyle, and an obsequious Wall Street banker who fantasizes about power, violence, and control. What does *Fight Club* divulge about its narrator? We are never provided with a very clear picture. Tyler Durden is described in far more detail than the narrator, which is why, as Palahiunk writes in his afterword, “young men around the world took legal action to change their names to ‘Tyler Durden’” and “the band Limp Bizkit bannered their website with ‘Dr. Tyler Durden recommends a healthy dose of Limp Bizkit’” (211). Because the narrator is only ever characterized in contradistinction to his alter ego, it is difficult to understand him except as a person who is very conflicted about his feelings. The narrator loathes Marla, but Tyler desires her; the narrator likes his boss, but Tyler hates him; the narrator works in middle-management, and Tyler works in the service industry. Both personas have either absent or disappointing fathers, and both seem discontented with their white collar
jobs, which causes them to feel powerless and emasculate—hence, the creation of fight club. Beyond this, however, we learn very little, especially since the narrator refuses to reconcile his dual personalities with one another. His anonymity is only reinforced by the fact that he, unlike Tyler, remains unnamed. Whereas the dramatic monologue exemplifies characterization, subordinating action to the psychological state of a carefully individuated speaker, *Fight Club* features an unreliable narrator whose identity remains fuzzy at best.

The fractured, elusive character-narrator of *Fight Club*, then, in addition to disrupting our idea of plot, also disrupts our idea of character. Like Patrick Bateman, he has created an elaborate persona behind which he may conceal himself, but with even greater ontological deceit. Led to believe that we are tracking two characters, we are in fact only tracking one; and because the narrator is unable to synthesize his dual personality even after discovering that Tyler is his own invention, readers are left to piece together the narrator’s true personality without much textual aid. The result is a peculiar character portrait of a man who, for all of his first-person narration, remains as much a mystery to readers as to himself.

Both *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* demand what David Richter calls “late reconfiguration” on the part of their readers. Timing matters, he argues: “The closer to the denouement one places the event which causes the alternative configuration to come into focus the greater the danger of driving the gentle reader beyond the bounds of patience.” The film version of “Fight Club” attempts to resolve this problem by replaying scenes in which the narrator has previously inflicted violence on others but, post-revelation, is now seen inflicting it on himself. Audiences are most forgiving of this trick, Richter maintains, when “plot isn’t the most important factor in the progression.” To be sure, the kinship these novels share with the dramatic monologue reveals that they instead hinge on the elaboration of their character-
narrators, and not on the events they purport to narrate, which seem to crumble in our fingers by the end of each novel. The residual frustration we may experience upon finishing *Fight Club*, then, stems not from its plot but from its dissatisfying portrait of our unnamed narrator, with whom we only become intimate through his alternate persona.

The novels treated in this section are frequently described as having a “surreal” quality.\(^6\) This impression is largely a function of the ontological instability that is introduced when a novel departs from the literal components of plot in order to develop the psychological complexity of an unreliable narrator. Readers must continually ask themselves whether the “reality” depicted by these narrators is the projection of an unstable mind. Because these quasi-surrealistic novels subordinate plot to character, we are urged toward readings that are more figural than literal. The ghosts of James’s *Turn of the Screw* are (arguably) figures for the governess’s fragile mental state and, perhaps, for her own abuse of Miles and Flora. Humbert’s theory of nymphets does not indicate the existence of child-seducers but points to his own struggle to rationalize his pedophilia. Patrick Bateman’s killing rampage may never occur, but it does indicate his disaffection with the yuppie, heteromasculine culture of Wall Street. Tyler Durden does not “exist” except as an indication of the narrator’s insecurities in *Fight Club*. These extremely unreliable narrators push us to filter characters, events, and other concrete staples of narrative through tropes of figuration.

As is the case with the novels in Chapter Two, these narrators also encourage us to read prose fiction, like lyric poetry, both forward and backward. Because we are not able to

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\(^6\) Cross writes that James’s sentences in *Turn of the Screw* are “qualifying to the point of seeming surreal” (3). James R. Giles writes that Ellis’s characters “live in a narrative mode that falls somewhere between literary naturalism and surrealism” (160). Peter Rabinowitz points to the “almost surrealistic shootout” that serves as *Lolita’s* climax (“Lolita” 325). Jesse Kavadlo highlights the “violent surrealism” that characterizes *Fight Club* (4).
apprehend their degree of unreliability until we finish their narratives, we are compelled, like detectives, to return to the text for retrospective evidence. These novels may not advance plots in any traditional sense, but they do feature rhetorical progressions of another sort. As James Phelan has argued in *Experiencing Fiction*, the relationship between readers and narrators is a dynamic one that changes over the course of each reading. As we find ourselves becoming increasingly suspicious of the fictional worlds presented in novels containing unreliable narrators, we are experiencing just such a progression. In the case of these dramatic personae, however, the progression paradoxically leads us backward, encouraged as we are to revisit and reconfigure the concrete elements of these narratives into figurative ones. Like the dramatic monologues that supply their structure, these novels also invite any number of readings that resolve their internal contradictions and ambiguities. With whom do our sympathies lie? Whom do we trust, why, and to what extent? How do we parse the ontological paradoxes that are presented? This chapter offers its own speculative readings, but the answers to these questions will naturally vary from one reader to another, which is why these novels remain so powerful, and also so controversial.
Chapter Six

Narrative Apostrophe

Narrative theory has largely occupied itself with the study of narrators at the expense of the narratee, the person to whom the narrator is directing her story. Many texts, after all, do not feature discernible narratees in the same way that texts with extradiegetic narrators do not necessarily feature discernible speakers. If the presence of a narrator is generally announced by the first-person pronoun “I,” the narratee is marked by the second-person pronoun “you”—a voice that is often used in self-help manuals and guide books, but rarely used within narrative fiction. As a result, the sudden postulation of a narratee within a work of fiction tends to startle its readers. (“Who, me?” they are liable to ask.) In some cases, the narratee is indeed aligned with the actual reader: Robyn Warhol has argued in *Gendered Interventions* that Victorian women writers used the device of the narratee in order to directly address an audience at a time when public speaking was prohibited or unavailable to women. When the narratee is sharply distinguished from the reader, however, the effect can be quite disorienting. To whom is the narrator speaking? At what time is the narrator relaying this story? To what extent does the narrator assume the narratee’s familiarity with the fictional world she is narrating? In this sense, the introduction of an unknown narratee can work in opposition to narrative, which typically roots itself in particularities of time, place, and character during its exposition.

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62 This problem was first pointed out by Gerald Prince in his essay, “Introduction to the Study of the Narratee” (1973), but the narratee is a concept that remains understudied. Exceptions include Robyn Warhol’s *Gendered Interventions* (1989) and several studies of the narratee that appeared in a 1994 special issue of *Style* on the topic of second-person narration: for example, Irene Kacandes’s “Narrative Apostrophe,” which uses communication theory (addressee, message, addressee) to understand the apostrophe’s emotional impact on audience; and James Phelan’s “Self-Help for Narratee and Narrative Audience,” which explores the distinction between “narratee” and “narrative audience.”
The peculiarity of the narratee, however, is largely a function of genre; unburdened by these narrative-oriented features of plot, the lyric tradition makes frequent use of the second-person pronoun by way of the direct address. The apostrophe has become one of the hallmarks of the lyric, invoking what Jonathan Culler has called an “I-Thou” drama that “works against narrative and its accompaniments: sequentiality, causality, time, teleological meaning … nothing need happen in an apostrophic poem, as the great Romantic odes amply demonstrate” (In Pursuit 140, 148-9). Often directed toward a personified object or an absent person, the apostrophe—which derives from the Greek “to turn away”—is a form of intimate address in which the speaker turns away from one audience to address another. As Culler suggests, the apostrophe foregrounds feeling and expression over the action and temporal sequence that is typically privileged in narrative fiction. Yet a number of American novelists have used the apostrophe as a framing device for confessional narratives that, much like the lyric apostrophe, are directed toward an intimate auditor rather than a general readership.

When Irene Kacandes coined the term “narrative apostrophe” in her 1994 article on the use of the direct address in narrative fiction, she was referring to the apostrophe within the rhetorical, rather than the lyrical, tradition. Consequently, Kacandes concludes that the narrative apostrophe, like the rhetorical apostrophe, invites its audience to share in its message: “flesh and blood readers often cannot help feeling that they themselves are addressed at the same time that they acknowledge the ‘you’ as a character in the fiction,” she writes. In what follows, I demonstrate that the position of the reader depends heavily on the content of the apostrophic address. The more intimate the address, the greater the reader’s estrangement from the text in keeping with the lyric tradition in which a speaker turns away from a general audience to address an absent auditor, instead.
This chapter examines contemporary American novels in which a character-bound narrator relays an extended private address to an unresponsive character-bound narratee. Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* is an intervening plea from Nanapush to the wayward Lulu, asking that she forgive her mother, from whom she has become estranged; Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* features a dual-apostrophic address between a husband and wife for whom sustained, mutual communication is impossible; Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* is a letter from an ailing father to his young son, who will grow up without him; and Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* is a candid confession of psycho-sexual neurosis from a patient to his analyst. These novels are arranged in terms of their increasingly sensitive subject matter, which ranges from the intimate to the shameful. In what follows, I argue that their readers are not only displaced by the narratee within these texts, they are transformed into eavesdroppers, progressively pushed to the margins of narratives that are ostensibly meant for someone else.

In his article “Romantic Aversions: Apostrophe Reconsidered,” J. Douglas Kneale makes an important distinction between apostrophe and prosopopoeia, two rhetorical tropes that, he argues, have been consistently conflated by critics and teachers of poetry. Kneale’s target in this study is Jonathan Culler, whose conception of apostrophe he deems too vague and expansive, but the article’s critique of Culler advances a crucial argument about the history of the term within classical rhetoric and its distinction from prosopopoeia, a more general term for a direct address to an auditor. The apostrophe is not just any form of direct address, Kneale insists; rather, as its etymology and its description within classical rhetorical handbooks suggests, apostrophe requires a deliberate “turning away” or “aversion” from one audience to another. A poem or speech may begin in the first or third-person and shift suddenly to second-person, or it may change its
audience while remaining in the second-person throughout. What counts is not voice per se but the “movement of voice” across changing contexts. The apostrophe, then, heralds a shift in the poem’s direction and a “turn or diversion from the original hearer”; it “always depends on a pretext” (144). Thus, the Romantic odes that Culler cites in his influential essay (“O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being!”) would not really qualify as apostrophe under this definition: in fact, since these addresses generally occur in the opening lines of their respective poems, they exhibit neither the “turn” nor the “pretextual basis from which to turn” that Kneale deems essential to this mode; they are merely exclamations framed by direct address.

One could make the case that the apostrophe signals a “turn” even in the first line of a poem. A reader always approaches a published work, after all, as an invited listener, and the immediate postulation of an alien addressee necessarily shifts our rhetorical assumptions about how we must proceed with the poem. Kneale’s distinction, however, makes a significant contribution to our understanding not only of apostrophe but of lyric poetry more broadly. First, it explains the sense articulated by John Stewart Mill and subsequent critics that lyric poems are not heard but “overheard,” since the actual reader is not the only, or even the primary, intended audience in an apostrophic address (Frye 249, Scholes and Kellogg 4, Culler 137). What is more, this reconception of apostrophe as a “turn” in voice and audience facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the reader’s position, which—following the speaker’s voice—also changes over the course of an apostrophic poem. For the purposes of this chapter, I am particularly interested in poems that begin by addressing a general audience before shifting suddenly to engage an intimate auditor, instead. When the subject matter is delicate and the auditor bears a special and personal relation to the speaker, the apostrophe relegates the reader to the position of an outsider looking in.
Such is the function of apostrophe within a poem like Anne Bradstreet’s “Before the Birth of One of Her Children” (1678). The poem begins with a somber meditation on life’s transience:

All things within this fading world hath end.
Adversity doth still our joys attend;
No ties so strong, no friends so dear and sweet,
But with death’s parting blow is sure to meet.
The sentence past is most irrevocable,
A common thing yet oh inevitable.
How soon, my dear, death may my steps attend… (269)

To whom is the speaker directing this meditation? The plural, second-person pronoun used in the poem’s second line certainly appears to include readers in its general address. The seventh line, however, contains an apostrophic turn. Who is “my dear”—the reader? a loved one? The grammatical ambiguity of the second-person allows for both readings, until we read on:

…How soon it may be thy lot to lose thy friend,

We both are ignorant; yet love bids me

These farewell lines to recommend to thee.

These lines flesh out the addressee a bit further. A friend as well as a lover, the addressee is someone who is deeply attached to the speaker, someone for whom she has gone to the trouble of creating written verse so that she can bid farewell. Finally, the mystery is dispelled:

That when that knot’s untied that made us one,

I may seem thine who in effect am none.
The speaker’s reference to the “knot” of marriage reveals that she is addressing her husband. The rest of the poem outlines her final request, that he forget her faults and look after their children should she die during childbirth:

And if I see not half my days that are due,
What nature would God grant to yours and you.
The many faults that well you know I have
Let be interred in my oblivion’s grave;
If any worth or virtue were in me,
Let that live freshly in thy memory,
And when you feelest no grief, as I no harms,
Yet love thy dead, who long lay in thine arms;
And when thy loss shall be repaid with gains
Look to my little babes, my dear remains,
And if thou love thyself, or lovedst me,
These oh protect from stepdam’s injury.
And if chance to thine eyes shall bring this verse,
With some sad sighs honor my absent hearse;
And kiss this paper for thy love’s dear sake,
Who with salt tears this last farewell did take. (269-70)

The poem is a wife’s farewell to her husband as she prepares for the possibility of death that accompanies childbirth, a fear that was all too realistic at the time of its composition. At once a love letter, a plea, and a requiem, this is a lyric of profound domestic intimacy. Readers are initially invited to participate in the poem’s maxims about life’s suffering, but the speaker
incrementally turns away from us in order to address her husband privately. The further he is delineated, the less we are invited to share in the second-person address. By the end of the poem, as the speaker instructs her husband that he might memorialize her by “kiss[ing]” her tear-stained verse, we are at its periphery, listening in.

The direct address can be grammatically and rhetorically confusing: because the second-person pronoun is used to invoke both the actual reader and a separate auditor, we can only determine the intended addressee through context. Irene Kacandes has argued that, as a consequence, the direct address “invites slippage between these two positions, thus eliciting the potential involvement of anyone who will take up this available pronoun, anyone who will consider her/himself addressed by the narrator’s ‘you.’” In cases like Bradstreet’s poem, however, the second-person address is somewhat deceptive. It appears to invite readers to assume the position of addressee, but the apostrophic turn prevents them from doing so. The more clearly the addressee is characterized—here, granted a special relationship to the speaker as her husband and the father of her children—the less universal it becomes.

The apostrophe may strike many as an “outdated” device—Culler’s examples are drawn from Romantic lyrics; Paul de Man draws his from Baudelaire—but Ann Keniston has convincingly argued for its centrality in the postmodern lyric in general and the confessional mode in particular (Overheard Voices). Consider, for example, a poem such as Sharon Olds’s “Miscarriage” (1984), a very different meditation on pregnancy and loss from her collection, The Dead and the Living:

When I was a month pregnant, the great
clots of blood appeared in the pale
green swaying water of the toilet.
Dark red like black in the salty
translucent brine, like forms of life
appearing, jelly-fish with the clear-cut
shapes of fungi.

That was the only appearance
made by that
child, the dark, scalloped shapes
falling slowly.

Olds is known for her gritty subject matter and its equally gritty treatment, but here she even displays her spontaneously aborted embryo using graphic imagery. The apostrophic turn that follows, however, reveals that the address is not meant for us, after all:

A month later

our son was conceived, and I never went back
to mourn the one who came as far as the
sill with its information: that we could
botch something, you and I. All wrapped in
purple it floated away, like a messenger
put to death for bearing bad news. (25)

Like Bradstreet’s lyric, this too is addressed to the speaker’s husband. One of the poems grouped as “private” under one of the collection’s subcategories, “Poems for the Dead,” it is the speaker’s elegy for their spontaneously aborted child and her attempt to make symbolic sense of their loss.

Because we had been seemingly invited to witness the miscarriage itself—an intensely private
event—we are in an awkward position by the time we reach the apostrophe. Should we really have heard and visualized all of that? It was meant, after all, for her husband. Such a reading may seem naïvely literal, but the figure of the apostrophe plays an important role in reader response here. What begins as a presumptively public address about a private event becomes deeply private indeed as the speaker deliberately turns away from readers to direct the elegy to her husband. Interposed between speaker and reader, the addressee does not simply mediate the message, he displaces, even eclipses, the reader.

Nineties lyric in particular saw a resurgence of the apostrophe, as Keniston has argued elsewhere, though with a different inflection from its traditional uses. Apostrophe within this decade, she argues, “downplays the optimism—or perhaps the delusion—of traditional apostrophe—the faith that the other is there and can hear—by foregrounding the absence of its addressee” (“Fluidity” 298). This is the case, I would argue, even within polyvocal lyrics like those that make up Louise Glück’s Meadowlands (1996), a collection that chronicles the dissolution of a marriage against the backdrop of Penelope’s separation from Odysseus. “Meadowlands 1,” part of a circuit of poems in which the couple tries—and utterly fails—to communicate their desires to one another, is set up as a dialogue in terms of its spacing; yet the quotation marks that would denote direct speech are absent, and there is no indication that the speaker’s husband is listening to her response at all. Instead, he apostrophizes to her about the children she apparently refuses to bear him. This poem contains many apostrophic turns following the voice of each speaker; it gives the semblance of dialogue, but only for the paradoxical purpose of displaying the inattentiveness and self-absorption of the speaker’s husband. The voice of the speaker’s husband appears first, an indication of her secondary role both in their marriage and in the lyric:
I wish we went on walks
like Steven and Kathy; then
we’d be happy. You can even see it
in the dog. (22)

Though he addresses his wife, he neglects her response. The speaker tries to convince her husband that they are different from their friends and that what they have is special enough: “We don’t have a dog./ We have a hostile cat./ … Why is it always family with you?/ Can’t we ever be two adults?” Her husband continues his apostrophe with a pointed criticism of their marriage: “You know why they’re happy?/ They take/ the children. .... Because/ they have children.”

Though his wife responds by again emphasizing difference—“They’re nothing like us; they don’t/ Travel. That’s why they have a dog”—he appears not to hear her. Instead, he expresses his admiration for the dog, Alissa, as if the dog makes meaningful domestic contributions to the household:

Have you noticed how Alissa always comes back from the walks
holding something, bringing nature
into the house? Flowers in the spring,
sticks in winter. (22-3)

The speaker belatedly corrects him in a follow-up lyric, “Meadowlands 2,” which simply reads,

Alissa isn’t bringing back
sticks for the house; the sticks
belong to the dog. (29)

The apostrophic turns in this lyric emphasize thwarted communication, a trait that is to some degree inherent in the figure of the apostrophe, in which “conventionally the addressee does not
reply. Rather, apostrophe is ‘short-circuited’ communication’ messages do not flow in both directions” (Kacandes). To be sure, the communication between husband and wife in Meadowlands is short-circuited; the collection culminates in their divorce, which unfolds before our very eyes. If the apostrophic utterances in this collection indicate the speaker’s separation and alienation from her husband and addressee, readers are doubly estranged from these lyrics, since they are not even the intended audience. What is more, we may sympathize with the speaker against her somewhat cruel husband—in another lyric, he asks her to make a wish on a butterfly, and then cruelly tells her that “it doesn’t count” (44)—but we are able to see from an external perspective where she falters, too. “If we don’t expect/ Sam to follow,” she attempts to compromise at the end of “Meadowlands 1,” “couldn’t we/ take him along?/ You could hold him” (23). The speaker is desperate for a resolution, but the reader can plainly see that a cat is a poor substitute for a child. Like anyone who overhears a domestic quarrel, we are at once in a privileged position as outside arbiters even as we are sidelined as eavesdroppers within a lyric that is not meant for us.

I have focused here on domestic lyrics in which a female speaker addresses her husband on the topic of children; they display the dialectic between intimacy and estrangement that accompanies a delicate bond like marriage in which children so often serve as the fulcrum or breaking point. Structurally, they also display the combination of intimacy and estrangement experienced by the reader, who is—however briefly—invited to share in a deeply private moment before being turned out by the speaker in an isolating apostrophic turn. The apostrophe, when coupled with confessional content, places the reader in a precarious position. As judges, we are objective observers with privileged information, but as ethical agents, we are unwelcome
voyeurs. In lyrics like these, the initial marriage of writer and reader—like the marriage depicted in *Meadowlands*—culminates in divorce.

Gérard Genette has argued in his brief analysis of narratees that “the existence of an intradiegetic narratee has the effect of keeping us at a distance, since he is always interposed between the narrator and us” (260). This extra layer adds an ethical dimension to the rhetorical triangle between narrator, text, and narratee, especially in narratives that, like the confessional lyrics discussed above, feature intimate content directed toward a private listener. In what follows, I explore four novels in which apostrophic turns occur at different places and in different contexts, and with mixed implications for readers. In so doing, I hope to bring together two competing strains of discourse within narrative theory, the concept of the “narratee” developed by Gerald Prince and the concept of “narrative audience” developed by Peter Rabinowitz in his 1977 article, “Truth in Fiction.” Rabinowitz defines his own rhetorical approach to narrative in contradistinction to Prince’s structural approach: the narratee “is someone perceived by the reader as ‘out there,’ a separate person who often serves as a mediator between narrator and reader. The ‘narrative audience,’ in contrast, is a role which the text forces the reader to take on. I think that my analysis, centering on an activity on the part of the reader, more successfully explains why certain texts evoke certain responses” (127, n14). James Phelan has argued that the two concepts are inseparable because “much of our emotional response to narrative derives from our participation in this role [of narratee]” (“Self-Help”). The authors in this chapter, however, have constructed narratives in which the audience either cannot or should not participate. To some degree, the reader is excluded from the address through the narratee’s individuated identity. As Phelan writes, “the more fully the narratee is characterized, the greater
the distance between narratee and narrative audience; similarly, the less the narratee is characterized, the greater the coincidence between the two.”

The reader is also excluded, however, by way of the rhetorical contexts that frame these narratives: Nanapush writes to Lulu about private matters of family and cultural history; George and Cocoa communicate from beyond the grave those sentiments that they were unable to express in life; an ailing John Ames scrambles to record his wisdom for his only child; and Alexander Portnoy reveals his deepest secrets and most shameful desires to his therapist. In all four cases, the reader threatens to destroy the compact of confidentiality and discretion that is assumed between narrator and narratee. The narrative audience is indeed inseparable from narratee, then, since the position of the former necessarily follows from the position of the latter; that is, the degree to which the reader feels alienated from rather than included in a private address varies not only in relation to the intimacy of the address itself but to the placement and use of the narrative apostrophe.

*Tracks* is the story of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa after the turn of the century as they struggle to hold onto their land in the face of government policies designed to take it away, especially the Burke Act of 1906 and its follow-up legislation, the “Declaration of Policy” of 1917, in which Indians deemed “competent” were granted fee patents for their land and thereby forced to pay property taxes. The novel contains dual narrators who depict and interpret these events from very different vantage points in alternating chapters. Nanapush, an aging patriarch who is deeply concerned with the future of the Anishinabe, is elegiac about the loss of land and

63 In keeping with Nanapush’s preferred appellation, I will henceforth refer to the Chippewa as the Anishinabe.

64 These policies are not referenced within the novel itself but, as Nancy J. Peterson convincingly argues in her excellent article on *Tracks* and history, they are certainly within the novel’s historical backdrop; the novel’s events begin in 1912 and end in 1924.
tradition these government policies have caused. Pauline is a shy, young, orphaned, mixed-blood Anishinabe who seeks relief for her marginalized status within her culture by renouncing her heritage and fleeing to the Catholic church. She sees the loss of land as not only inevitable and deserved but divinely ordained: “Surely that was the work of Christ’s hand,” she remarks as surveyors for the lumber company prepare to raze Fleur’s timber-filled plot to the ground at the end of the novel (Erdrich 204). Critics such as Nancy J. Peterson have noted the invocation of oral techniques within Nanapush’s narrative that appear to protest those written documents—treaties, maps, legislative acts, and commercial contracts with the logging industry—that are used to encroach on Anishinabe territory (985). Nanapush’s narrative, however, is also a pointedly private address to Lulu, the daughter of his adopted child, Fleur. “Granddaughter, you are the child of the invisible, the ones who disappeared,” he writes (1). Reading his chapters in contradistinction to Pauline’s through the framework of the apostrophe reveals the personal stakes of his narrative, which seeks not only to heal the rift between Lulu and her mother but to prevent her from making the same mistakes as Pauline.

The time and place from which Nanapush delivers his narration remains unclear. As the novel’s chapter titles indicate, the events he narrates span the winter of 1912 and the spring of 1924. When Nanapush is reunited with Lulu in the novel’s closing pages, however, she is still a child, whereas the Lulu who serves as the narratee is a young woman who is preparing herself for marriage. It appears that Lulu has since become estranged from him, as well. “Your mother both clung to and resisted me, like any daughter. Like you’re doing now,” he writes (33). At other times, however, he appears to address Lulu as if she is present; as Sheila Hassell Hughes has argued, Nanapush “occasionally notes Lulu’s physical appearance or her body-language in response to his narration” (90). Perhaps he is only imagining or anticipating details of her

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65 For more on the orality of Nanapush’s narrative, see also Hughes 96-7.
appearance and response. Either way, his narrative does not admit a reply from Lulu in keeping with the apostrophic tradition; it is a pointed, one-sided address in which Nanapush tries to communicate his perspective to a silent listener.

If the apostrophe, like the dramatic monologue, tends to blot out all others save for the addressee, Nanapush deviates from this structure by appealing to the communal story of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa and their triple-pronged plight: first plagued by smallpox and then by government exile, they are beleaguered in 1912 by an outbreak of tuberculosis that wipes out much of their tribe, including Fleur’s entire family (save for herself and a cousin). He launches his narrative using the first-personal plural as opposed to the first or second-person singular: “We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall” (Erdrich 1). When Nanapush invokes Lulu to build an “I/thou” drama that constricts his narration to the first and second-person singular, he does so by proxy as the sole survivor of a community ravaged not only by disease but by government encroachment:

My girl, I saw the passing of times you will never know.

I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years’ growth. I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake. I axed the last birch that was older than I, and I saved the last Pillager.

Fleur, the one you will not call mother. (2)

These apostrophic turns, nested in Nanapush’s pronoun shift from “we” to “I” and back again, place both Nanapush and Lulu in conversation with larger communities—first with the Anishinabe, and finally with the Pillager family, from which Lulu and her mother are the sole descendents. In stark contrast, Pauline’s narration seems only to exist for her own benefit. She
never names an addressee but uses her chapters as self-vindication for her departure from her Anishinabe heritage. Her chapters become increasingly “I”-centered as she alienates herself from her tribe, even after she finds a new community within the Catholic order of nuns. Here, she finds it necessary to distinguish herself through self-inflicted suffering that leads, paradoxically, to self-aggrandizement rather than the self-oblation that her order promotes: “I knew there never was a martyr like me,” she smugly declares after immersing her hands in a cauldron of boiling water (192). Her narration also enacts another important grammatical turn, however, as she begins to refer to her brethren in the third-person in a reversal of the pronoun shift that opens Nanapush’s narration. “‘The Indians,’ I said now, ‘them.’ Nevermind neenawind or us” (138).

Pauline must renounce her heritage and pass as Caucasian to become a nun, but she also internalizes this pronoun-shift, imagining that God visits her to explain that she “was not one speck of Indian but wholly white” (137). Eventually, Fleur and Nanapush respond to her behavior accordingly: “treated me as they would a white. I was ignored most of the time. When they did address me they usually spoke English” (145-6). Outwardly, Pauline has successfully shed her Indian heritage, though her penchant for punishment and self-flagellation suggests that she is not at peace with her decision.

The apostrophe, as opposed to the soliloquy showcased by Pauline, indicates outreach, even if Nanapush’s narrative does not expect or even admit a response from its addressee. There is urgency in Nanapush’s apostrophes to Lulu as he expresses his concern that she is following the wrong path, one that will inevitably lead to the kind of assimilation and self-loathing that Pauline represents. In particular, he is deeply apprehensive about her pending marriage to an unnamed member of the Morrissey family. “Take a lesson from what an old man knows and think about this Morrissey twice!” he warns her (180). The Morrisseys feel no sense of
obligation toward the tribe; they have no work ethic and no desire for autonomy from the U.S. government. Without their matriarch, Bernadette, to hold them together, they no longer even take pride in their land. Instead, they allow it to fall into a terrible state of disrepair:

Their windows were broken out with planks and dirty oiled paper hung in their place. Garbage, the snapped bones of muskrats, crushed cans and splinters of crates were littered in the crusted snow. Even the green paint Bernadette had set on the outside boards was scorched in places, scraped or marred. No smoke came from the chimney, but from inside could be heard the clank of pots and the shrieks and accusations of feeding children.

This picture was the start of what happened to the Morrisseys. They lost status as the years went on, as the bitterness between our families deepened. They ceased to keep their books and breed their stock in their rush to breed with each other. Granddaughter, if you join this clan, I predict the union will not last.

Listen to experience and marry wisely. I always did. (181-2)

The state of their property, Nanapush suggests, functions metonymically for their attitude toward the Anishinabe and their loss of land. The Morrisseys are careless and self-indulgent; they do not demonstrate any commitment to the tribe or its survival.

The Morrissey/Lazarre family represents the new generation of Anishinabe that have severed their ties to the past out of recklessness on the one hand and indolence on the other. In a cruel and senseless act of retribution against Eli Kashpaw, who has sexually defiled Clarence Morrissey’s younger sister, Morrissey defiles Margaret, Eli’s mother and Nanapush’s lover, by cutting her braids and shaving her head. In a final act of treachery, the family even elects to work for the lumber company that is encroaching on Fleur’s land, though they immediately lose their
jobs on account of their idleness: “Morrisseys and Lazarres … never lasted long. Hired in the morning, they were ready to quit by noon, and notorious for sneaking off to sleep beneath the wagons. One was killed that way when two oxen lurched eagerly in their traces, and the wood fell from the unsecured hatch” (217). Unfortunately, the Morrisseys and Lazarres vastly outnumber the traditionalists. Nanapush depicts them as pests who proliferate and infest the Anishinabe community: “It seemed they were everyplace now, multiplying and dividing, taking up the cracks and crevices between the clans … all of them grown stout and greasy from the meat supplies that they had pilfered from their neighbors and the lard from the Agent’s storehouse” (184). By the end of the novel, the Morrisseys and Lazarres even occupy the land that Nanapush has lost, inhabiting the cabin he has been forced to evacuate.

By marrying into the Morrissey clan, Lulu will be aligning herself with a family that, as Nanapush depicts it, has turned its back on Anishinabe culture. Nanapush is also concerned, however, that a Morrissey will turn his back on his own family. “You … will need a mother once the Morrissey fills you with child and whines in your ear and vanishes,” he warns her, alluding again to her rift with Fleur (211). Morrisseys are not just terrible Anishinabe, he stresses; they are also terrible fathers and husbands. In Tracks, ties of kinship run laterally as well as vertically; allegiance to culture is as important as allegiance to one’s immediate family, and vice versa. To sever ties with one is to sever ties with the other. Like the Morrisseys, Lulu is at risk of severing her ties with both.

At times, Nanapush’s apostrophe to Lulu shifts from admonition to outright reproach. Lulu’s westernized shoes in particular become a foreboding synecdoche for her loss of culture and her assimilation into mainstream American culture. Nanapush halts his narrative to chastise her for wearing “such shoes as you have on at this moment—those heels, like tiny knives, and
your toes sticking through!” (166) He does not have the language to describe Lulu’s peep-toed high heels, but he is clear about what he would prefer to see on her feet: “footwrappings made of rabbit fur for protection, and no fine stockings either” (166). His apostrophe here is embedded within a larger story from Lulu’s childhood. Her mother, Fleur, nearly dies while delivering a stillborn child at the hands of an incompetent Pauline. Desperate to get help, Lulu runs through the snow to Nanapush’s cabin for help, though her feet are so frozen once she arrives that her life, too, appears to be in danger. Her western shoes are once again the culprit in this episode:

Vain girl, you wore your fancy shoes once you did not have to answer to your mother.

“Damn Eli for buying them!” Margaret yelled when she plucked off the pretty shoes. She was so mad she threw open the stove door and stuffed them into the fire. But soon they began to melt and stink, so she snatched them from the flames with a meatfork and threw them smoking into the snow. (166)

Lulu’s vinyl shoes, which forgo utility for vanity, fail to protect her feet during a crucial trek. Their cheap, synthetic quality is also highlighted by their chemical reaction to the fire, which causes them to “melt and stink.”

Hughes has argued that this scene in which Nanapush revives the feeling in Lulu’s feet is a moment of “rebirth” for Lulu in which Nanapush becomes her surrogate mother in Fleur’s absence (96). The bond between Nanapush and Lulu is powerful: he has, in fact, named her after his own deceased daughter, born of his favorite deceased wife, White Beads. Wary of Eli’s commitment to Fleur, he has also named himself Lulu’s father on the birth certificate. His paternal care and compassion for Lulu always informs his apostrophe to her, even when he seems most disapproving. Nanapush’s fondness for Lulu stems from his fondness for Fleur, the orphaned young woman he has rescued from the tuberculosis outbreak at the beginning of his
narrative and taken in as a daughter. In fact, Fleur is the heroine of Tracks and the center of its dueling narratives, at once the object of Nanapush’s affection and of Pauline’s envy. Much more in line with Nanapush than with the Morrisseys or even with Eli, who has also joined the lumber crew, Fleur refuses to leave her land without a fight. Instead, she makes cuts in the bases all of the trees on her property so that they fall, perfectly timed, on the crew and their equipment: “With one thunderstroke the trees surrounding Fleur’s cabin cracked off and fell away from us in a circle, pinning beneath their branches the roaring men, the horses. The limbs snapped steel saws and rammed through wagon boxes” (223). In this scene, Fleur is juxtaposed to those characters—Eli, the Morrisseys—who have freely given up their culture to join the lumber company for wage labor. She refuses to give up hers, even when she is forced from her land. She leaves with only a few items of personal and cultural value: “weed-wrapped stones from the lake-bottom, bundles of roots, a coil of rags, and the umbrella that had shaded her baby” (224).

If Pauline’s sections exist to vindicate Pauline, Nanapush’s sections work to vindicate Fleur, whose decision to send Lulu away to a government boarding school has become a sticking point in Lulu’s resentment toward her. Nanapush sees much of Fleur’s strong, independent nature in Lulu when he finally manages to bring her home from school in the spring of 1924. Here, his apostrophe is motivated by an extended description of Lulu as he holds a mirror up to his addressee in a portrait of the Anishinabe as a young woman, hoping that she too will see the parallel between her own obstinacy and that of her mother: “Your grin was as bold as your mother’s, white with anger that vanished when you saw us waiting,” he remarks as he recalls their reunion. Lulu has been rebellious at school, and her body bears the markings of her disobedience: “Your knees were scabbed from the punishment of scrubbing long sidewalks, and knobbed from kneeling hours on broomsticks” (226). Her tenure there, however brief, has been
tough and miserable, but Nanapush tries his best to explain to adult Lulu that Fleur had sent her away because she believed it was in her best interest:

Because you think she gave you up willingly then, because she made you go … you turn your face and won’t listen. Don’t stop your ears! Lulu, it is time, now, before you marry your no-good Morrissey and toss your life away, for you to listen to the reason Fleur put you on the wagon … She sent you to the government school, it is true, but you must understand there were reasons: there would be no place for you, no safety on this reservation, no hiding from government papers, or from Morrisseys who shaved heads or the Turcot Company, leveler of a whole forest. There was no predicting what would happen to Fleur herself. (219)

At a time when things were so uncertain for the Anishinabe and when threats emerged both from within and without their community, Fleur chose to protect Lulu by sending her somewhere safe. Lulu does not appear to have spoken to her mother since their separation. Anticipating Lulu’s resistance—“Don’t stop your ears!”—Nanapush’s apostrophe becomes desperate, even accusatory. “You, heartless one, won’t even call Fleur mother or take off your pointy shoes, walk through the tough bush, and visit her. … She saved you from worse, as you’ll see. Perhaps when you finally understand, you’ll borrow my boots and go out there, forgive her, though it’s you who needs forgiveness” (210-11). Lulu’s commitment to kin and culture is once again called into question by way of her shoes, which are made for pavement and not for “tough bush.” They have become a symbol of vanity, a barrier not only to her heritage but to her reunion with her family. Lulu’s failure to mend the relationship with her mother and her foolhardy marriage plans suggest traces of the same obstinacy, alienation, and despair that Pauline exhibits within her narrative.
Tracks is Nanapush’s intervention into a critical juncture of Lulu’s young adult life in an attempt to steer her in the right direction.

The plural first-person pronoun that opens the novel—“We started dying before the snow” (1)—signals to readers that Nanapush’s narrative is a cultural history of a particular people. General readers may be invited to relate to the Anishinabe, but they will not be able to inhabit their subject-position. The apostrophic turn in which Nanapush turns away from readers to address Lulu, however—“Granddaughter, you are the child of the invisible”—renders his message still more exclusive. Nanapush divulges for Lulu an intimate cultural and ancestral saga that includes some very sensitive incidents, such as Fleur’s sexual abuse at the hands of the butchermen of Argus and Margaret’s humiliation as Clarence shaves her head. Nanapush even shares with Lulu a vivid sexual encounter with Margaret under the guise of preparing Lulu for her own conjugal duties: “You think I’m going to stop at this point, but I’ll go on,” he writes. “You have no one to prepare you for a husband, no sisters and aunts, and Margaret would never admit to any weakness. So I’m going to tell you something about married people” (183).

Tracks represents an experiment not only with apostrophe and cultural identity but also with apostrophe and the extended form it necessarily takes in a novel. Nanapush’s narrative is only occasionally punctured by the direct address—one of the reasons, no doubt, that the apostrophic element of this novel remains overlooked—but these moments are significant reminders to readers that we have been privy to more information than we should otherwise have access. As cultural outsiders, a general readership may not have been invited to listen to Nanapush’s intimately nostalgic depiction of the Anishinabe and their decline at the hands of government and industry in the early part of the century. As familial outsiders, we certainly would not have been exposed to the more sensitive incidents of rape, betrayal, and connubial
love that Nanapush relates. The rhetorical situation in which Lulu is placed—a wayward young woman who will not reconcile with her mother and who is about to make a disastrous marriage—becomes a device by which Nanapush is able to justify divulging these more personal details of his family history. Through the artifice of the narrative apostrophe, these details are delivered to readers as well, though we are not the novel’s primary audience.

The apostrophic turn in Tracks represents a new brand of ethnic narrative that simulates intimacy while keeping its general readership at arm’s length. Don’t become too comfortable, it warns: you are still an outsider to this culture in the same way that you are an outsider to the fictional world of this novel. Those of us who have taught ethnic fiction in the undergraduate classroom are well aware of the dangers that reading ethnic narrative as ethnography can yield: undergraduates often draw sweeping and often inaccurate generalizations about other cultures, especially when their only point of access to these cultures consists of an isolated novel. Tracks guards against this type of ethnographic reading by concentrating the decline of the Anishinabe within a particular family saga; it also, however, guards against this reading by building distance between the intradiegetic world of the novel—that is, its narrator, narrative, and narratee—and the flesh-and-blood reader into its very structure, framing this cultural narrative with an isolating apostrophic turn that leaves its readers at the outskirts, listening in.

Like Tracks, Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day shields itself against ethnographic readings through the figure of the apostrophe; and, like Tracks, it also contains multiple narrators who tell strikingly different versions of the same events. Critics typically focus on the novel’s setting in the small, fictitious Gullah island of Willow Springs and “the island inhabitant’s retention and transmission of African-derived traditions and values … in the face of cultural forces that would
efface them” (Lamothe 156). The novel also contains a complex narrative structure, however, that warrants further attention. Two of its alternating sections are each narrated by George and Cocoa (given name Ophelia), a couple who are experiencing their share of strife following a whirlwind courtship and marriage that has left them feeling like strangers. Their first-person narratives, which are addressed to one another, are tempered by a third, extradiegetic narrator that chiefly focalizes Miranda, or “Mama Day,” as Cocoa’s great aunt is affectionately called. The novel opens, however, with prefatory material featuring a fourth, intradiegetic narrator, an unnamed voice that identifies itself only as a resident of Willow Springs. This narrator introduces readers to “what we done had to deal with here in Willow Springs. Malaria. Union soldiers. Sandy soil. Two big depressions. Hurricanes. Not to mention these new real estate developers who think we gonna sell our shore land just because we ain’t fool enough to live there” (4). This narrator’s use of the plural first-person, much like Nanapush’s, identifies readers as outsiders to the culture of Willow Springs, but the prefatory material also ends with the sudden and explicit postulation of an extradiegetic narratee. Remarking disdainfully on a Willow Springs native who returned from college to perform an ethnographic study on its residents, the narrator mocks the boy’s overly-clinical approach to the organically rich history that is brought to life through narrative: “He coulda listened to them the way you been listening to us right now. Think about it: ain’t nobody really talking to you. We’re sitting here in Willow Springs, and you’re God-knows where. It’s August 1999—ain’t but a slim chance it’s the same season where you are. Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time” (10). Readers are called to “listen” in a way that diverges from the methods of the ethnography student—an admonition that calls to mind Erdrich’s use of the apostrophe within Tracks—but perhaps more importantly, we are called to
listen, period. This prefatory material, which acknowledges our alienation from the fictional world of Willow Springs, ends nonetheless with a provocation that invites us to the text.

Consequently, the opening chapter comes as something of a surprise insofar as it disorients, rather than orients, its readers. “You were picking your teeth with a plastic straw,” it begins abruptly (13). Who is speaking, and who is this tooth-picking narratee? He is named in the following line—“George, let’s be fair”—but we still lack any sense of George and his relationship to the narrator, who is observing him from afar in a diner, albeit quite carefully. The narrator notes that because George has already used his teaspoon for his split pea soup, he is left without a utensil for mixing his cream and sugar into his coffee: “And obviously you knew that our pleasant waitress’s ‘Catch ya in a men-it, Babe,’ doomed you to either your finger, a plastic stirrer, or coffee straight up. And you used plenty of milk and sugar” (14). In fact, the narrator is Cocoa, George’s future wife, depicting her thoughts during her very first encounter with George. She will meet him again in the same day when he interviews her for a job that she does not receive, though they will strike up a correspondence that burgeons into a friendship and finally a romantic relationship. In *Mama Day*, the apostrophe effects a chronological alteration, catapulting Cocoa and George backward in time to tell the story of their courtship and marriage and its gradual disintegration through alternating chapters that betray very different perspectives on the same events. To some extent, their divergent perspectives are a function of their personalities: George is an optimist and Cocoa is a pessimist; George is generally forthright whereas Cocoa is emotionally guarded. Their divergent narratives, however, also reveal the miscommunication that is inherent in their relationship. Much like the exchange between husband and wife in Glück’s *Meadowlands*, George and Cocoa’s sections may be addressed to
one another, but they are not in dialogue. Instead, they are one-sided apostrophic utterances in which each confesses their true feelings only in the absence of the other.

Their inability to communicate is not only a formal feature of this apostrophic novel, it is a problem highlighted by Cocoa in one of her sections. Though Cocoa is initially quite guarded—her early sections are steeped in sarcasm and cynical humor, and she hardly allows herself to admit her feelings for George—her later sections are more open and confessional, and she expresses frustration that George does not make himself vulnerable in return. “You wouldn’t talk to me,” she gripes. “I had told you about where I grew up. … I did open up fully to share my feelings about my father running off and my mother dying so young. I talked to you about loneliness—all kinds. About my day-to-day frustrations with the job, the plans I had for my future—going back to college and getting a history degree. … I talked and talked, but getting you to say anything about yourself was like pulling teeth. … I thought you didn’t trust me enough to share those feelings” (126-7). In the following section, George issues something of a response to Cocoa’s complaint. Raised in a group shelter with other orphans, he feels as though he has no history to share with her: “I was always in awe of the stories you told so easily about Willow Springs. To be born in a grandmother’s house, to be able to walk and see where a grandfather and even great-great-grandfather was born. You had more than a family, you had a history. And I didn’t even have a real last name” (129). George’s apostrophe to Cocoa in this section is gentle and honest, but when Cocoa narrates the time that he finally found the courage to tell her about his upbringing, he reveals his past in a very brutal way. After slapping her for sleeping with an old boyfriend while the couple has taken a break from one another, he chooses this, of all moments, to finally bear his soul to her. “My mother was a whore. And that’s why I
don’t like being called the son of a bitch,” he tells her gruffly. Cocoa recalls his violent body language as he takes her on a macabre tour of the city to narrate his troubled heritage to her:

Your fingers were like a vise when they gripped mine as you began dragging me up Riverside Drive to Harlem. We reaching the pier at 125th Street. Still crushing my hand, you pointed to a brownstone across the way.

“I found out that’s where I was born. She was fifteen years old. And she worked out of that house. My father was one of her customers.”

A deserted, crumbling restaurant stood near the pier. The side windows had been broken, but across the front in peeling letters I could read, Bailey’s Café. And I could hear the cars moving above us on the overpass, the muddy water hitting against the rocks, the sound of gulls.

“The man who owned this place found me one morning, lying on a stack of newspapers. He called the shelter and they picked me up. I was three months old.”

We went past Bailey’s Café to the edge of the pier. You finally let my hand go, put yours back into your pocket, and stared into the water.

“Later, her body washed up down there. I don’t have all the pieces. But there are enough of them to lead me to believe that she was not a bitch.” (130-1).

George is only able to express himself to Cocoa directly through violence, “slapping,” “gripp[ing],” “dragging” and “crushing” her all the while. His words are equally merciless as they bluntly depict the events that led to his abandonment. “And how do I feel about all of this?” he asks in a way that mocks Cocoa’s emphasis on the sharing of emotions. He responds to his own question, however, with surprising warmth:
I feel that men will often grow up thinking of women in the same way they think of their mothers. You see, when I was growing up, there was no reason for me to neglect her on the days that would have been important: her birthday, anniversary, or the second Sunday in May. I didn’t forget to call now and then to ask her how she was doing. I didn’t find her demands annoying, or her worries unnecessary. I was the kind of son who didn’t refuse to share my friends, my interests, or my hopes for the future with her. Yeah, that’s pretty close to the kind of son I was. (131)

This episode reveals that George is much more comfortable in the apostrophic mode than in direct communication with a loved one. The apostrophe, after all—despite its emotional intimacy—is also a reminder of the distance between the speaker and the absent addressee. Here, George is able to confess his hopes and feelings to his dead mother with easy tenderness, but he cannot confide in his lover when she is present. The episode ends suddenly with Cocoa’s marriage proposal, and the two agree to marry the following week in New Orleans so that George can follow his football team to the AFC Championship game. George’s privileging of football above Cocoa has been a point of contention between them; it even led to their temporary separation preceding this episode. Their hasty wedding and their agreement to honeymoon in New Orleans—mere band-aids over a gaping wound—confirm their inability to successfully negotiate their problems with one another.

As readers, we bear witness to other ugly, violent episodes between the couple, including what they both confirm to be their “worst fight ever” (230). The argument begins, innocently enough, over Cocoa’s make-up as she prepares for a party. Their exchange that follows reveals their difficulty in communicating honestly and directly with one another through dialogue, which is why they each rely so heavily on apostrophe, instead:
“Is my make-up all right?”

“It’s fine.”

“No, really.”

“Really, it’s fine. I like that eyeshadow on you.”

“But you hate the foundation?”

“No, I don’t hate the foundation.”

“So why didn’t you mention the foundation?”

“You didn’t ask me about it.”

“I asked you about my make-up—that’s eyeshadow, lipstick, foundation, blush—all of it.”

“Ophelia, that is great eyeshadow, great lipstick, great blush. There will be a hundred women here tonight who would kill for your eyelashes, since you never need mascara. And I don’t hate your foundation.”

“I guess you think I’m stupid—or deaf. Not hating something isn’t the same as liking it. You purposely did not say that you liked this foundation.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“And?”

“Well, sweetheart, why do you always buy make-up that’s too dark for you?”

“This is not too dark for me.”

“Okay.”

“But you think it is, don’t you?”

“To be honest, yes.”

“Who asked you?” (231)
George and Cocoa each depict this fight within their respective apostrophic sections. “Our worse fight ever. And it was all your fault,” they both begin, though their agreement ends here (230, 232). George protests that he was only being frank after Cocoa pressed him to be honest: “I had told you a thousand times—not once, not a dozen—a thousand: if you don’t really want my honest opinion (about your hair, clothes, shade of eyeshadow, or the latest fashions for Pygmy women) don’t ask me for it. And you kept pushing, didn’t you?” (230) For her part, Cocoa complains that George deliberately failed to give her the simple affirmation she craved: “You refused to tell me when you knew I needed so desperately to hear. Of course that foundation wasn’t the right shade, but couldn’t you lie? I had to be perfect that evening and I was shattered” (233). In this way, the dual-apostrophic structure of *Mama Day* enhances character focalization, since we are able to directly access the conflicting perspectives of George and Cocoa. The argument quickly escalates, however, and branches out into dangerous territory: George’s white, red-headed ex-girlfriend, to whom Cocoa refers as “Howdy Doody in drag” (234; George’s caramel-colored fantasy woman; Cocoa’s insecurities regarding the hue of her own skin, exacerbated by George’s criticisms: “And you’re the one painting yourself with tar? Don’t you preach to me about values until you learn to accept what you are and wipe that crap off your face,” he quips (235).

As sidelined observers, we are thrust into the same position as Abigail and Mama Day, who overhear the fight in one of the sections narrated by an extradiegetic narrator. “The voices behind the closed bedroom door been rising and falling, rising and falling, for a good twenty minutes,” it begins. The two women are only able to catch selects words and phrases, but we as readers are privy to the conversation in its entirety. They pretend not to listen as they go about their party preparations: “Miranda realizes there’s a whole world in there that she ain’t got
nothing to do with. Abigail spreads the lace tablecloth and wrings her hands, sets out the punch
bowl and wrings her hands, while Miranda keeps slicing up peach pie as calmly as if she was at a
church supper” (232). Finally, they hear several crashes followed by running water in the
bathroom: Cocoa has thrown a vase at George, resulting in a sizeable laceration in his forehead.
(232). It appears that Cocoa cannot communicate directly save through violence, as well.

What is the role of the reader during exchanges such as these? Much like Abigail, whose
obsessive hand-writing betrays her anxiety over her role as eavesdropper, the device of the
apostrophe makes us painfully aware that we are overhearing private utterances of domestic
discord and that are not directed toward us. What, then, do we make of the intradiegetic narrator
of the novel’s preface who invites us to “listen, really listen this time”? The novel alternates
evenly between George’s and Cocoa’s sections in a way that makes it impossible for us to side
with one character over the other. Their first-person narratives invite us to share in their
perspectives even as their apostrophes simultaneously maintain their distance from us. Neither
character is wholly at fault for the failing marriage that is put on display within Mama Day,
though both characters would have us believe that the other is culpable. As outside arbiters who
witness their direct dialogue as well as their private soliloquies, we are able to see how, when,
and why they routinely miscommunicate. Their private apostrophes are much more tender and
honest than their actual interactions with one another. When their “worst fight ever” results in a
cold war, Cocoa puts herself in the hands of a jealous local woman named Ruby who braids her
hair with nightshade. Though George refuses to comment out loud, his apostrophic section
reveals his abiding love and admiration for her: “Your hair looked gorgeous. The braids were
like the ones I’d seen on prints of African women with those colored beads draped over the
necks and crossed under high, tilted breasts. You should really wear it like that all the time. I
wanted to follow you in the house and tell you, but that’s sort of hard to do when you’re not talking to someone” (247).

Only when we finish Mama Day do we realize that George and Cocoa’s sections cannot be in dialogue with one another because George dies at the end of his narrative. He has sacrificed his life for Cocoa’s in a bizarre act of altruism after Ruby uses the nightshade in Cocoa’s braids to place a hex on her that Mama Day, a conjure woman, is unable to lift by herself. Desperate to save Cocoa’s life, Mama Day sends George into her chicken coop, where he is “figuratively crucified,” pecked nearly to death by the chickens until finally suffering a heart attack (Ivey 106). George’s death miraculously revives Cocoa, and the curse is broken. His death also explains the disembodiment of George and Cocoa’s voices and the ambiguity of their locations in time and space: they are addressing one another from opposite sides of the grave. George even narrates his own death in his final section: “I want to tell you something about my real death that day. I didn’t feel anything after my heart burst. As my bleeding hand slid gently down your arm, there was total peace” (302). Cocoa, for her part, is rooted more firmly in time and geography. She reveals in her final section that she is living near Charleston, South Carolina and she is just shy of 47—hence, she is narrating nearly 20 years after first meeting George in a New York City coffee shop. She is still devastated by his loss. “It sits permanently in your middle,” she writes of her grief, “but it gets less weighty as time goes on and becomes endurable” (308). Three years after his death, however, Cocoa meets another man and eventually bears him two sons, the youngest of whom she names after George. She seems to finally recognize her flaws in this section as she describes her children to George: “And I worry sometimes because the youngest one is just like me. A quick temper and so flip at the mouth—I’ve had to backhand him a few

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66 For a discussion of the meaning of George’s death with regard to Naylor’s use—and critique—of Christian motifs, see Ivey.
times. And stubborn. I guess you’d call it poetic justice that I’m getting from your namesake a
good measure of what you had to put up with” (309). Cocoa has finally come to terms, it seems,
with her own role in the tumult of her first marriage, and she also recognizes the disparity that
has always existed between her own perspective and that of George. “When I see you again,” she
signs off, “our versions will be different still. … What really happened to us, George? You see,
that’s what I mean—there are just too many sides to the whole story” (311).

Ultimately, the apostrophes that make up George and Cocoa’s alternating sections
highlight not only their alienation from one another in life but their regretful separation in death.
Though both narrators are removed in time and space from the events of the novel, they depict
their thoughts and feelings as if these events are still unfolding. “Each time I go back over what
happened, there’s some new development … I guess one of the reasons I’ve been here [to your
grave site] so much is that I felt if we kept retracing our steps, we’d find out exactly what
brought us to this slope near The Sound,” Cocoa writes (310). As George and Cocoa each
attempt to retrace and rediscover the contours of their relationship through narrative apostrophe,
readers are along for the ride at the invitation of the novel’s intradiegetic narrator, though we
remain invisible to its character-narrators. The form of the narrative apostrophe evokes
characters but resists readers, highlighting the sense of solitude and alienation already inherent in
this lyrical trope.

In contrast to both Tracks and Mama Day, which primes its readers with prefatory
material about the time, place, and culture of the fictional world they are entering, Marilyynne
Robinson’s Gilead takes a sudden, apostrophic turn in its very opening line: “I told you last night
that I may be gone sometime, and you said, Where, and I said, To be with the Good Lord, and
you said, Why, and I said, Because I’m old, and you said, I don’t think you’re old” (3). The narrator is John Ames, a 76-year-old preacher who is suffering from chest pains and heart failure. He has married a much younger woman who has born him a son, aged 7 at the time of narration, which is sometime in the 1950s. Because Ames does not know how much longer he might live, he addresses his narrative to his son in the form of a long letter (or series of letters, depending on how one reads the section breaks), though the narrative does not contain any of the formal signals of epistolary writing—no greetings, no closings, and no possibility for a response.

Ames anticipates the passage of at least ten years’ time between the composition and consumption of his letter, and so his narrative does not contain the rhetorical urgency of Nanapush’s apostrophe to Lulu. “If you’re a grown man when you read this—it is my intention for this letter that you will read it then—I’ll have been gone a long time,” he writes (3). Instead, much of Gilead is devoted to anticipations of loss—his anxiety over what his absence as husband, father, and provider will mean for his family, and his own regret that he will never see his son grow up. “I feel a kind of loving grief for you as you read this, because I do not know you, and because you have grown up fatherless, you poor child,” he writes with sadness (104). As a corrective, his letter serves as a deeply intimate proxy for his presence:

For me writing has always felt like praying, even when I wasn’t writing prayers, as I was often enough. You feel that you are with someone. I feel I am with you now, whatever that can mean, considering that you’re only a little fellow now and when you’re a man you might find these letters of no interest. Or they might never reach you, for any number of reasons. Well, but how deeply I regret any sadness you have suffered and how grateful

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67 Robinson does not provide many dates in this novel, but Ames’s grandfather was an acquaintance of John Brown’s, an “old issue” of Ladies’ Home Journal magazine article is dated 1948, and television is a new addition to the Ames household, which would place this novel somewhere in the 1950s.
I am in anticipation of any good you have enjoyed. That is to say, I pray for you. And there’s an intimacy in it. That’s the truth. (19)

In fact, the letter serves as something of a surrogate parent to the young boy; it is a compressed account of the fatherly counsel Ames might have given him in life: “I’m trying to make the best of our situation. That is, I’m trying to tell you things I might never have thought to tell you if I had brought you up myself, father and son, in the usual companionable way” (102).

The few critics who have written on *Gilead* have focused on the novel’s religious dimension without much attention to its unusual form. The novel is a fragmented assortment of family stories and anecdotes, personal meditations, and pieces of advice and admonition as Ames tries to parse his life’s lessons for the benefit of his son. These fragments, like Ames’s state of mind, are somewhat chaotic: stories are frequently halted and interrupted by a moral or a piece of information that seems more pressing, only to be picked up again much later. In this sense, they reflect Ames’s struggle to order and prioritize all of the messages he wishes to communicate.

The letter takes a very different turn, however, about midway through the novel as Ames becomes increasingly fixated on Jack Boughton, the prodigal son of his neighbor and closest friend who has returned home after a twenty-year absence. Jack was a troubled child and a wayward young adult; involved with theft and other criminal mischief at an early age, he abandoned a very young girl who had become pregnant with his child and disappeared for two decades. Ames has lost his first wife and child during childbirth and is envious of Jack’s family and outraged that he could desert them so readily. When Jack re-appears in his hometown of Gilead, Iowa, Ames is distrustful, especially when Jack begins to fraternize with Ames’s family. “My impulse is strong to warn you against Jack Boughton. Your mother and you,” he writes. “He is not a man of the highest character. Be wary of him” (125). What begins as litote,

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however, escalates into insult. “I know nothing about those years [he was away], and I believe I would know—if anything happened that redounded at all to his credit. He doesn’t have the look of a man who has made good use of himself, if I am any judge,” he writes with disapproval (160). His opinions become harsher still until he finally insinuates that Jack has somehow personally wronged him: “That one man should lose his child and the next man should just squander his fatherhood as if it were nothing—well, that does not mean that the second man has transgressed against the first,” he writes, though he adds in a non-sequitur, “I don’t forgive him. I wouldn’t know where to begin” (164).

Ames’s verdict, issued long before Jack’s return and unconfirmed by Jack’s present behavior, clash with the Christian principles that otherwise flood Ames’s narrative: forgiveness, humility, judge not lest ye be judged. In fact, Ames often tries to twist his rants about Jack into crude lessons for his son. “Avoid transgression. How’s that for advice,” he writes smugly after one such diatribe against Jack’s depravity (122). “I would advise you against defensiveness on principle,” he writes after being chastised by his wife for his prickly comments to Jack on another occasion (154). His discussions of Jack, however, become less and less for his son’s sake. Something about Jack provokes a strong and personal emotional response from the narrator, who is surprised to find himself in tears after the young man gently prods him about his religious principles. “There I was, wiping tears off my face with my sleeve, just the way you do it. It was embarrassing, believe me,” he writes (173).

In his more candid moments, Ames admits that his acrimony is partly fuelled by envy. After all, Jack is a generation younger than Ames—and so is Ames’s wife. On some level, Ames is anxious that Jack will take his place within his family unit. As he stands at his pulpit, looking down at his family seated next to Jack, he remarks, “You looked to me like a handsome young
family, and my evil old heart rose within me, the old covetise I have mentioned elsewhere came over me, and I felt the way I used to feel when the beauty of other lives was a misery and an offense to me” (141). Because they are peers in age, Jack and Ames’s wife seem quite at ease with one another. On one occasion, Ames—placing himself in the position of the reader—eavesdrops on their conversation while he pretends to be asleep. “Since I am trying to tell the truth, there is one other thing,” he reveals to his son. “The edginess went out of his voice while he was talking with your mother. I would almost say he seemed to relax. He sounded like someone speaking with a friend. And so did she” (201).

As the apostrophic turn that opens Gilead would indicate, Ames is quite self-conscious about his old age. “You read the dreams of an anxious, fuddled old man,” he writes dismissively of himself (53). The novel is littered with Ames’s derisive comments about old age. “How I wish you could have known me in my strength,” he tells his son (94). “The fact is,” he admits, “I don’t want to be old. And I certainly don’t want to be dead. I don’t want to be the tremulous coot you barely remember. I bitterly wish you could know me as a young man” (141). He frequently compares himself to Abraham. He even fantasizes about becoming young again in the afterlife, an indulgence not without its own vanity. “I believe the soul in Paradise must enjoy something nearer to a perpetual vigorous adulthood than to any other state we know. … I certainly shouldn’t mind the thought of your mother finding me a strong young man,” he declares with more than a hint of sexuality (166).

As he slips into this confessional mode, revealing jealousies, vanities, and other insecurities that, albeit human, are unbefitting a man of the cloth, Ames becomes more honest with his son than he had intended to be. He admits that he is losing sight of his original rhetorical aims: “I have been looking through these pages, and I realize that for some time I have mainly
been worrying to myself, when my intention from the beginning was to speak to you. I meant to leave you a reasonably candid testament to my better self, and it seems to me now that what you see here is just an old man struggling with the difficulty of understanding what it is he’s struggling with” (202). The dilemma is somewhat paradoxical, however. The narratee has become buried under the narrator’s quest for self-discovery, but Ames would never have explored these feelings so deeply without this apostrophic frame. Confessional writing without any audience would likely strike Ames as self-indulgent. “Here I was a pastor of souls, hundreds and hundreds of them over all those years, and I hope I was speaking to them, not only to myself,” he writes of his sermons (41). Nor would he feel comfortable, however, sharing details of his personal life with any of the members of his parish. “I want you to realize that I am not by any means a saint,” he tells his son. “I get much more respect than I deserve. This seems harmless enough in most cases. People want to respect the pastor and I’m not going to interfere with that. But … my reputation is largely the creature of the kindly imaginings of my flock, whom I chose not to disillusion” (39-40). The artistry of the apostrophe liberates Ames from the vocational constraints that would ordinarily limit this type of inward exploration. As a result, he is free to explore thoughts and emotions that would otherwise be precluded to him.

As readers, we approach Ames’s letter as reluctant eavesdroppers, but even Ames himself admits the thrill of listening to the private lives of others: “A great part of my work has been listening to people, in that particular intense privacy of confession, or at least unburdening, and it has been very interesting to me” (44). Ames’s narrative, however, has never been directed at us; it has consistently justified itself in terms of its orientation toward Ames’s son, even in its more uncomely moments. In defense of his self-professed “covetise” of Jack Boughton and his youth, Ames writes, “If I had lived, you’d have learned from my example, bad as well as good. So I
want to tell you where I have failed, if the failures were important enough to have real consequences” (134). Such a justification, however, does not extend to readers outside of the fictional world of *Gilead*.

The reader’s position becomes most precarious during the final section of the novel in which Ames reveals Jack Boughton’s secret history, something that Jack divulges to Ames, his confessor, in strict confidence. Jack has acquired another family, a “wife” and son for whom he cares very deeply. Because she is black and their son is mixed-race, however, anti-miscegenation laws have made it impossible for them to cohabit peacefully, let alone marry, in St. Louis. To make matters worse, her father deeply disapproves of their relationship, and Jack finds it difficult to keep a job once his employers discover that he is in a mixed-race relationship. He has returned to Gilead, he confesses to Ames, to see if he “might find some way to live with my family here, I mean my wife and son. I have even thought it might be a pleasure to introduce [my son] Robert to my father. I would like him to know that I finally have something I can be proud of” (229). He has not, however, told his father or any of his family about his wife and child, and considering his father’s poor health and old age, worries that the shocking news would “kill him” (229).

Jack has revealed his secret to Ames in order to seek his counsel. Should he tell his father, or should he continue to allow his wife and child to remain a secret? Do they have a future here in Gilead? “What about this town? If we came here and got married, could we live here? Would people leave us alone?” he asks (231). Unfortunately, Ames does not have any easy answers, and the town’s own unstable history with race relations—a mysterious fire erupted just outside of a black church, causing many of Gilead’s black residents to leave town—does not seem very promising for Jack.
Why does Ames repeat Jack’s intimate disclosure in his letter for his son—a secret that is, subsequently, also disclosed to readers? “You might wonder about my pastoral discretion, writing this all out,” he admits. “Well, on one hand it is the way I have of considering things. On the other hand, he is a man about whom you may never hear one good word, and I just don’t know another way to let you see the beauty there is in him” (232). The imperative to represent Jack Boughton fairly, Ames suggests, outweighs the imperative of confidentiality, but Ames’s defensive comments here also indicate some remorse regarding his own unforgiving depiction of young Boughton. Whatever his motives—and Ames acknowledges that “I conceal my motives from myself pretty effectively sometimes” (147)—readers are made privy to an aspect of Jack Boughton that would be otherwise inaccessible to us, save through Ames’s breach of confidentiality, justified in terms of the narrative apostrophe.

_Gilead_ is a dying man’s epistle to his son, but it is also a preacher’s disjointed narrative of self-discovery as he explores feelings, desires, and suspicions that he has heretofore suppressed on account of his ministry. Either way, Ames’s narrative displays an enormous amount of intimacy and trust in its narratee. In turning away from the reader to address his son, Ames casts readers into the awkward position of overhearing an intensely private narrative that is not meant for them. As a preacher, Ames is acutely aware of the ways in which a shift in audience can change the rhetorical framework of a text. “At times … I might not care particularly whether people are listening to what I have to say, because I know what their thoughts are,” he says of his Sunday sermons. “Then if some stranger comes in, that very same peace can seem like somnolence and like dull habit, because that is how you’re afraid it seems to her” (20). Strangers have a way of heightening our self-consciousness and magnifying our
insecurities. In a confessional narrative that Ames describes as an “experiment with candor” (7), the text of *Gilead* would be changed indeed if Ames were aware of our presence.

If the content of *Gilead* seems intimate, the confessions that are laid bare in *Portnoy’s Complaint* are downright uncomfortable. The novel is framed by what appears to be an entry from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the handbook used by psychiatrists to diagnose and treat mental illness. Here, readers are introduced to the novel’s character-narrator, Alexander Portnoy, through his psychiatrist’s pathology report:

*Portnoy’s Complaint* (pôr’t’-noiz kōm-plānt’) *n.* [after Alexander Portnoy (1933–)] A disorder in which strongly-felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature. Spielvogel says: ‘Acts of exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, auto-eroticism and oral coitus are plentiful; as a consequence of the patient’s “morality,” however, neither fantasy nor act issues in genuine sexual gratification, but rather in overriding feelings of shame and the dread of retribution, particularly in the form of castration.’ (Spielvogel, O. “The Puzzled Penis,” *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*, Vol. XXIV p. 909.) It is believed by Spielvogel that many of the symptoms can be traced to the bonds obtaining in the mother-child relationship.

What follows is a long, rambling monologue delivered by a thirty-three year old Portnoy to his silent psychoanalyst. The narrative is a one-sided apostrophe, and Doctor Spielvogel only asserts himself in the novel’s closing line (also flagged as the novel’s “punchline”): “So [said the doctor]. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?” (274) This framing material is the only evidence we have of Spielvogel’s reaction to Portnoy’s confessions. He depicts his patient as “perverse”
and sexually repressed; he casts doubt on Portnoy’s sense of ethics by placing “morality” in quotation marks. The doctor’s unsympathetic portrait necessarily conditions our own experience of the ensuing narrative: we are seemingly invited to share in his perspective by psychoanalyzing the narrator ourselves.

Portnoy delivers a candid and scattered memoir in which he chronicles his life according to his most vivid failures and embarrassments, beginning with the “mother-child relationship” to which Spielvogel refers. “She was so deeply imbedded in my consciousness,” he begins, “that for the first year of school I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise” (3). He does not direct this monologue, however, to just any audience. After giving brief accounts of his parents—his mother is encapsulated by her omnipresence, his father by his chronic constipation—he turns away from readers to address Spielvogel directly. “These, Doctor, are the earliest impressions I have of my parents, of their attributes and secrets” (5). Here, for the first time, the reader’s position is made evident: we are eavesdropping on a private therapy session between a patient and his psychiatrist. The rhetorical situations that underpin Tracks, Mama Day, and Gilead may render the reader’s presence ethically dubious, but Portnoy’s Complaint involves the reader in a breach of doctor-patient confidentiality.

Worse still, Portnoy shares material we might rather not hear. The early part of the novel covers his struggles with compulsive masturbation as a young teenager. He locks himself in the bathroom with such frequency that he is compelled to spin stories about diarrhea and indigestion to his concerned mother. He swallows his own semen so as not to stain his clothing and betray his habits to her. He masturbates to his own sister’s panties, into cored apples, and even into a piece of liver that was “rolled round my cock in the bathroom at three-thirty—and then had again at the end of my fork, at five-thirty, along with the other members of that poor innocent family of
mine” (134). Portnoy performs these acts with a conflicted mixture of shame and defiance. When he discovers a freckle on the underside of his penis in his freshman year of high school, he is convinced that he has acquired cancer as punishment for his perpetual masturbation. “All the pulling and tugging at my own flesh, all that friction, had given me an incurable disease. And not yet fourteen!” (19) When he accidentally catches semen in his eye after finishing a hand job that Bubbles has started, he is sure that he is blind—and even then, his only thought is of the shame he will endure under the scrutiny of his parents: “And oh God, as the cold water runs down my face, how am I going to explain my blindness to my parents!” (181) “Shame and shame and shame and shame—every place I turn something else to be ashamed of,” he cries at one point, though he also understands that his shame is largely cultural. “A Jewish man with parents alive is a fifteen-year-old boy, and will remain a fifteen-year-old boy till they die!” he cries. “Just leave us alone, God damn it, to pull our little dongs in peace and think our little selfish thoughts!” (122) Desperate for validation, he invokes Spielvogel. “Doctor, do you understand what I was up against?” he asks. “My wang was all I really had that I could call my own” (33).

Spielvogel’s response to these and other episodes, however, is hardly necessary: Portnoy is able to excavate his own desires in a brilliantly parodic imitation of Freudian psychoanalysis without any help from his therapist. His uncontrollable sexual urges stem, he claims, from his attraction to his mother when he was as young as four. He relishes memories of the days when his father was away at work and his sister at school, when he was alone with his mother and “how rich with passion the moment, how dense with possibility” (45). The young Oedipus wonders whether his father would act were he to discover their sexual chemistry: “If there in the living room their grown-up little boy were to tumble all at once onto the rug with his mommy, what would Daddy do?” (46) He even recalls his mother’s tickling the underside of his penis in
an effort to potty-train him. “I guess she thinks that’s how to get stuff to come out of the front of that thing, and let me tell you, the lady is right” (133). Portnoy’s bravado in these early episodes, however, is tempered by other episodes that result in shame and humiliation. When he asks for a bathing suit with a jock strap at age eleven, her response is less than pleasing to Portnoy: “‘For your little thing?’ she asks with an amused smile. Yes, Mother, imagine: for my little thing” (51).

In the wake of Coover, Ellis, Acker, and other postmodern writers who write openly about sex and sexual taboos, scenes like these—particularly the liver anecdote—may have lost some of their initial shock value; but to Roth’s original readers, this sort of candid talk about sex was liberating, if also embarrassing. “We laughed and mocked and blushed,” Bernard Avishai fondly recalls with mixed emotions (13). Part of the book’s art, he points out, is its emotional impact in spite of its plotlessness. “Few can remember the book’s architecture or identify any big ideas. Trying to remember the plot is like trying to remember the composition of a Jackson Pollock painting. … How could the experience of reading a book evoke such vivid appreciation and leave such a fuzzy imprint?” he asks (6). However forgettable and thin its plot, the combination of shock and comedy Roth achieves through Portnoy’s raunchy confessional monologue is what readers tend to remember.

The “complaint,” after all, is a lyrical mode, not a narrative one. Andrew Marvell’s “The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Fawn,” an apostrophic lyric in which the nymph laments her loss, swings from desperation to self-pity: “O help, O help! I see it faint/ And die as calmly as a saint,” the speaker cries as her fawn takes its final breaths, though she quickly sinks into despair following its death: “I in a golden vial will/ Keep these two crystal tears, and fill/ It till it do o’erflow with mine,/ Then place it in Diana’s shrine” (70). Consider, too, Philip Whalen’s “Complaint: To the Muse,” in which the speaker issues a desperate plea for his muse
to return to him: “Come Back!/ or at least answer your telephone/ I’m nowhere without you” (33). Such is the tenor of Portnoy’s Complaint, though Roth infuses the lyric mode of the “complaint” with humor and irreverence, much of which derives from the juxtaposition of Portnoy’s residual shame from his conservative Jewish upbringing against the backdrop of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. The principal case study here is his relationship with “Monkey,” the semi-affectionate, semi-derogatory moniker Portnoy has given to his girlfriend because she once confessed to him that she ate a banana while watching another couple copulate (at their behest, she insists). Portnoy oscillates between sexual freedom and repression in his relationship with Monkey, who lets on that she shares his kinky “perversions” only to make him feel morally culpable afterward. “Why is the smallest thing I do for pleasure immediately illicit—while the rest of the world rolls laughing in the mud!” he laments (272). One of their ongoing disputes involves Portnoy’s supposedly pressuring her into a threesome with a prostitute. Not to feel guiltless, however, Portnoy—who cannot believe that the prostitute has no education or access to birth control—sends her away with her payment and with a month’s supply of Monkey’s Enovoid. “Oh, you are some savior!” Monkey scolds him afterward (140).

Sex and identity, especially cultural identity, are bound up in one another for Portnoy, whose rebellion against sexual restraint is also a rebellion against the rigid laws and restrictions that are associated with orthodox Judaism: “Self control, sobriety, sanctions—this is key to a human life, saith all those endless dietary laws. Let the goyim sink their teeth into whatever lowly creature crawls and grunts across the face of the dirty earth, we will not contaminate our humanity thus” (80-1). Sex becomes an instrument of political and cultural mutiny. It is a weapon by which Portnoy can (physically) infiltrate the Christian upper class: “What I’m saying, Doctor, is that I don’t seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their
backgrounds—as though through fucking I will discover America. *Conquer America*” (235). Used to escape the inhibitions of Judaism, it is redirected against the *goyim* as a tool for class warfare. Portnoy prides himself on pressuring a wealthy debutante from Connecticut to perform oral sex on him, a victory he accepts on behalf of his father, who was unable to advance in his financial company on account of the affluent Christians in management. “Sally Maulsby was just something a nice son once did for his dad. A little vengeance on Mr. Lindabury … a bonus extracted from Boston & Northeastern, for all those years of service, and exploitation” (240-1).

Portnoy frequently apostrophizes Spielvogel while justifying his actions or otherwise seeking sympathy. Reflecting on his parents, he cries, “Doctor, these people are incredible! These people are unbelievable! These two are the outstanding producers and packagers of guilt in our time! They render it from me like fat from a chicken! … Doctor Spielvogel, this is my life, my only life, and I’m living it in the middle of a Jewish joke!” (36) Portnoy’s apostrophes to Spielvogel begin to sound increasingly agitated. At one point, he casts the therapist as judge opposite himself as defendant. “And Doctor, Your Honor, whatever your name is,” he apostrophizes, highly aware that he is being assessed unsympathetically (102). At another point, he mockingly calls on Spielvogel to liberate his repressed libido. “Doctor, my doctor, what do you say, LET’S PUT THE ID BACK IN YID! Liberate this nice Jewish boy’s libido, will you please? Raise the prices if you have to—I’ll pay anything!” (124) He cynically holds himself up to the therapist as a specimen for Freudian analysis. “In language plain and simple, are Alexander Portnoy’s sensual feelings fixated to his incestuous fantasies? What do you think, Doc? Has a restriction so pathetic been laid upon my object choice?” (186)

The rhetoric of *Portnoy’s Complaint* is hyperbolic, even hysterical; like the lyric complaint, it is filled with lamentations, exclamation marks, and even capital letters that denote
shouting; Portnoy’s last remark is a scream that spans five lines of text. It also contains frantic apostrophes to characters other than Spielvogel. Portnoy briefly shifts his address toward his mother when expressing his aggravation for her: “YOU FUCKING JEWISH MOTHERS ARE JUST TOO FUCKING MUCH TO BEAR!” he screams. “Stop already *hocking* us to be *good!* *hocking* us to be *nice!* Just leave us alone, God damn it, to pull our little dongs in peace and think our little selfish thoughts—stop already with the respectabilizing of our hands and our tushies and our mouths!” (121-2) He addresses the sons of Jewish mothers everywhere to the same effect: “Oh, my Jewish men friends! My dirty-mouthed guilt-ridden brethren! My sweethearts! My mates! Will the fucking ship ever stop pitching? When? *When*, so that we can leave off complaining how sick we are—and go out into the air, and live!” (119) The apostrophe within *Portnoy’s Complaint* is not only an intimate expression of trust—Portnoy is, after all, trusting his therapist with the most intimate and sordid details of his life—it is an expression of outrage directed at those who have failed him.

Such is the substance, after all, of Portnoy’s rambling autobiography, transformed here from personal history to one long “complaint” lodged against his parents and his austere upbringing:

Whew! Have I got grievances! Do I harbor hatreds I didn’t even know were there! Is it the process, Doctor, is it what we call “the material”? All I do is complain, the repugnance seems bottomless, and I’m beginning to wonder if maybe enough isn’t enough, I hear myself indulging in the kind of ritualized bellyaching that is just what gives psychoanalytic patients such a bad name with the general public. Could I really have detested this childhood and resented these poor parents of mine to the same degree then as I seem to now, looking backward from the vantage point of what I am—and am
not? Is this truth I’m delivering up, or is it just plain kvetching? Or is kvetching for people like me a form of truth? (94)

Portnoy has finally hit on the source of his complaint, however briefly or obliquely: he is also frustrated by what he has “not” become as an adult. In one of his less sarcastic moments, he expresses his disappointment in terms of time:

What use to skip those two grades in grammar school and get such a jump on everybody else, when the result is to wind up so far behind? My early promise is legend: starring in all those grade-school plays! taking on at the age of twelve the entire DAR! Why then do I live by myself and have no children of my own? It’s no non sequitur, that question! Professionally I’m going somewhere, granted, but privately—what have I got to show for myself? (228-9)

Portnoy has spent so much energy ranting about his parents and their expectations for him that he has not paused to ask himself what kind of a life he wants for himself. What is more, his self-deprecating humor—which functions, to some degree, as a coping mechanism against life’s disappointments—has become a handicap beyond which he is unable to move. Naomi, the American-Israeli woman that Portnoy meets in Israel, delivers a brutal assessment of Portnoy that rivals Spielvogel’s: “The way you disapprove of your life! Why do you do that? It is of no value for a man to disapprove of his life the way that you do. You seem to take some special pleasure, some pride, in making yourself the butt of your own peculiar sense of humor. I don’t believe you actually want to improve your life. … You are nothing but a self-hating Jew” (264-5). Naomi is totally unsympathetic, even cruel, but she makes an important point that extends to Portnoy’s narrative as a whole: not only does he divulge embarrassing details about his personal life through the apostrophe, he seems to relish them.
How are we, as readers, expected to react to Portnoy’s confessions—with the sympathy Portnoy is seeking from Doctor Spielvogel, or with the contempt expressed by Naomi? Roth’s own comments on the composition of the novel provide a very big clue:

What I was looking for when I wrote *Portnoy’s Complaint* was a stratagem that would permit me to bring into my fiction the sort of intimate, shameful sexual detail, and coarse, abusive sexual language, that had largely been beside the point of my first three books. One would just as soon not—if one has a sense of propriety, that is—serve vodka out of a milk carton: what I wanted was the appropriate vessel for the unpalatable stuff that I was ready to dispense. And I found it, I thought, in the idea of the psychoanalytic session, wherein pile driving right on through the barrier of good taste and discretion is considered central to the task at hand. In *Portnoy’s Complaint* I did not set out to write a book “about” an analysis, but utilized the permissive conventions of the patient-analyst situation to get at material that had previously been inaccessible to me, and that in another fictional environment would have struck me as pornographic, exhibitionist, and obscene. (Saxton 78)

The same goes for readers, who are asked to suspend their ideas of propriety for the sake of Portnoy’s therapy session—a session upon which we are, after all, illicitly eavesdropping. The device of the apostrophe is used to justify Roth’s foray into lewd material; it also urges us to forgive Portnoy’s hedonism and self-pity. The distancing effect created by the interposition of Doctor Spielvogel is what produces so many conflicting affective responses from *Portnoy’s* readers: shock, laughter, embarrassment, outrage, sympathy, even identification. As readers and eavesdroppers, we are never in a secure ethical position to experience any one response without the others.
Because it pushes the bounds of the direct address to a violation of doctor-patient confidentiality, *Portnoy’s Complaint* represents a daring experiment with the concept of the intradiegetic narratee. Though early critics reacted to the novel with moral cant—the *New Yorker* famously called it “one of the dirtiest books ever published”—readers are precluded from occupying any sort of moral high ground over the novel by virtue of our marginalized, and ethically dubious, position. Instead, we read through half-covered eyes, we listen with reluctantly strained ears, as Portnoy unloads his most intimate secrets to a trusted therapist, and to complete strangers.

Frequently used in lyric poetry, the apostrophe is relatively rare within fiction, though contemporary writers have begun to exploit its potential for readerly sympathy. When the recipient of the address is a character-bound narratee who bears a personal relationship to the narrator, we are willing to “excuse” or overlook the unsavory aspects of the narrator, since we are not the intended audience for this confessional material. Compare, for instance, our fondness for Portnoy with our moral repugnance toward Humbert Humbert, who directly addresses his readers with the aim of actively manipulating their responses to his pedophilia. Portnoy is not concerned with manipulating his readers because, as far as he is concerned, Spielvogel is his only audience.

The apostrophic addressee differs from narrative theory’s concept of the narratee precisely because of this aversion and its implications for the position of the reader with regard to these intimately-framed texts. While the direct address appears to include readers in its message, the apostrophe deliberately turns away from them; and when the content of the address is intimate and the addressee is a trusted, character-bound friend, family member, or professional
acquaintance, readers are alienated further still. The narrative apostrophe, unlike the invocation of the narratee, summons characters at the exclusion of the reader, who remains invisible to and, presumably, unwanted by these character-narrators.

As extradiegetic listeners, we may occupy an uncomfortable moral position with regard to these narratives, but we are also at an advantage, since we have access to an external perspective that is unavailable to the novel’s characters. In *Tracks*, we are witness to the cultural history and demise of the Turtle Mountain Anishinabe, but as objective observers, we are also unburdened by the personal animosities that its members bear toward one another—Lulu for Fleur, Nanapush for Pauline, and Pauline for her tribe. As outsiders looking in on domestic scenes within *Mama Day*, we are able to see precisely where George and Cocoa miscommunicate, though they cannot see it themselves. In *Gilead*, we observe Ames as he displaces his own insecurities onto Jack Boughton; in *Portnoy’s Complaint*, we have access to Portnoy’s most embarrassing disclosures as well as his therapists’s assessment of them. What is more, the distance that the apostrophe interposes between the reader and the intradiegetic world of the narrative serves different functions within each novel. In *Tracks*, it serves as an ancestral and cultural barrier that prevents non-Native readers from drawing ethnographic conclusions about the Chippewa; in *Mama Day*, it mirrors the distance and alienation that exists between George and Cocoa; in *Gilead*, it becomes an occasion for John Ames’s trivial indulgence in vanity and petty jealousy; and in *Portnoy’s Complaint*, it is an occasion for Alex Portnoy’s outright depravity.

In all four cases, however, these narratives are substantiated in terms of the apostrophe rather than vice versa. That is, these narratives exist only for the benefit of the character-bound narratees to whom they are addressed—or so they are framed. This rhetorical justification also
distinguishes the narrative apostrophe from other forms of narrative that are directed toward a more general readership. Without the presence of the apostrophic addressee, these novels fall apart; yet they are also altered by the added presence of the reader-eavesdropper, who necessarily compromises the privacy so carefully cultivated by their narrators.

In her work on the direct address within Victorian fiction, Robyn Warhol distinguishes between “distancing” and “engaging” strategies of narrators who directly invoke their audiences. When the narratee aligns with the actual reader, she argues, the author seeks to engage with her audience; when it does not align, the result is an ironic rift between author and reader: “The distancing narrator may evoke laughter, or even annoyance, from an actual reader who cannot identify with the narratee. The task of the engaging narrator, in contrast, is to evoke sympathy and identification from an actual reader who is unknown to the author and therefore infinitely variable and predictable” (32). The four novels treated here, however, demonstrate that distancing and sympathy may actually go hand-in-hand. The apostrophic turns exhibited in these narratives explicitly discourage readers from identifying with their narratees, but they ultimately ask that we listen to their narrators with a compassionate suspension of judgment. As Genette suggests, the postulation of a foreign narratee is a mechanism through which the author keeps the reader at arm’s length, but this ethical-narratological distance also fosters our sympathy and understanding for character-narrators who mean for their confessions to be heard, and not overheard.
This study has largely occupied itself with turning a lyrical lens on narrative fiction, focusing on ways in which the traditional conventions of narrative become altered by, or refracted through, lyrical techniques. Yet a surprisingly large number of the works treated here have delineated their generic alliance with the novel through subtitles that appear on their covers or title pages: Aker’s *Blood and Guts in High School*, DeLillo’s *Underworld*, Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ellis’s *American Psycho*, Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, Erdrich’s *Tracks*, and Robinson’s *Gilead* all feature the same subtitle, “A Novel.” What are the implications of this study for the form of the novel, which is ultimately reaffirmed by these subtitles, however it might be challenged and tested within these individual works?

As the twentieth century has proven, the novel is an elastic form capable of absorbing elements from other genres. The multi-narrator novel made popular by Faulkner and his literary descendants, after all, relies on elements of drama for its effect, since a single narrator gives way to a more fractured type of narration in which characters speak for themselves like actors on a stage. The novella, a favorite form of Henry James, achieves the compactness and conciseness that was previously the territory of the short story. The nonfiction novel developed by Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, and other postwar writer-journalists fuses reportage with the dramatic artistry of fictional narrative. Howard Weinbrot has argued that Menippean satire is “the genre that ate the world,” but outside the realm of satire, one would more accurately claim this title for the novel. If the novel can accommodate aspects of the lyric, the genre consistently treated as its opposite, there seems to be no limit to its ability to co-opt elements of other forms.
This is no cause for alarm, however, for scholars and teachers of lyric poetry. In fact, it may be a boon, since the lyrical novel provides a point of access through which we might begin to recuperate the lyric tradition, which currently occupies a benighted position in both commercial and academic industries. This project points to the indebtedness of some of our most celebrated American novels to strategies that traditionally belong to the realm of the lyric. Few would imagine, for example, that we might benefit from reading Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* in light of the dramatic monologue, but by constructing a genealogy of the dramatic persona from the unreliable speakers of Robert Browning to the notoriously unreliable narrators of the twentieth century, we uncover something important about the tenuous nature of plot in these works. The literary lineages constructed in these chapters are more heuristic than historical, but they yield powerful explanatory frameworks for understanding the non-narrative structure of modern and contemporary novels, which, in certain respects at least, have more in common with lyric poems than with their novelistic predecessors.

Why do novelists like Palahniuk turn to the lyric in the twentieth century? The novel may reign supreme in the literary marketplace, but as Sylvie Thorel-Cailleteau reminds us, it has only recently become recognized as a legitimate art form; in the Romantic era, “it is a product for consumption, often pernicious and implicated in corrupting moral purity—Rousseau recalls on the threshold of *La nouvelle Héloïse* that a proper young lady never reads novels, and the observation is commonplace” (64). The lyric lends artistic credibility to a form that began with salacious tales of love and adventure. Under the influence of the lyric, the novel becomes more formally sophisticated and, subsequently, more challenging to its readers. We can no longer rely on “reading for the plot”—many of the novels treated here have minimal plots, disappearing plots that unravel under heavy scrutiny, plots that serve larger aesthetic agendas. Instead, we
must make our way through repetitions that urge us to read both forward and backward; syntax structures that erase hierarchical arrangement; metaphors that swell and overwhelm the text; slippery narrators whose depiction of events cannot be trusted; narratees that displace and disorient us, pushing us to the margins of texts meant for someone else. This study demonstrates ways in which we might navigate works that forgo narrative conventions for lyrical strategies, works that actively solicit our engagement in the reading process and in the construction of textual interpretation.

Literature involves a dynamic interaction between author, text, and, perhaps most importantly, the reader. In keeping with the aims of rhetorical narrative theory, I have focused heavily on the reader who, after all, approaches literary texts with certain generic expectations that are frustrated, but also productively challenged, when those expectations are not met. The novels treated in this study have frustrated as many readers as they have won over. By urging readers to apply a different set of generic expectations to these narrative texts, one with more explanatory power than a traditional narrative framework would yield, I hope to have allayed some of these frustrations so that readers might better appreciate the lyrical artistry of these works. The syntax that drives B.R. Myers to pan contemporary American writers, for instance, aims not for pretension but to deliberately erase those hierarchical distinctions we normally expect from narrative fiction, all the while cultivating a rhythm that turns prose into prosody.

I have opted not to make any distinction between modernist and postmodernist novels, nor have I arranged these novels in order of their composition or publication dates. For the purposes of this study, which centers on form rather than history or periodization, novels in the twentieth century exist on a continuum ordered not by chronology but by genre, ranging from the

69 For an analysis of the expectations readers typically bring to narrative fiction and the ways in which these expectations shape the act of interpretation, see Rabinowitz, Before Reading.
traditional (narrative) to the experimental (lyric). While all of the novels I treat are experimental in their use of lyrical strategies, I have arranged them within each chapter according to this continuum. Thus, the repetition I chart in Chapter Two advances from the scale of the phrase in Dos Passos to the scale of the paragraph in Kathy Acker; the flattening of hierarchy that begins in Faulkner is carried to an amoral extreme in the economy of the scalp exchange in McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*; and so on. This focus on genre enables me to construct groupings of texts that run counter to conventional literary histories in which one would hardly find, for instance, Toni Morrison aligned with Henry Miller, or either writer aligned with the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets. It also highlights the innovation of writers who do not fall neatly into categories such as modernism or postmodernism and, hence, are not typically considered “experimental”: Zora Neale Hurston, Louise Erdrich, Philip Roth, Russell Banks, and Gloria Naylor, for instance.

Naturally, there are a number of other U.S. writers I might have used in these chapters who deserve further attention for their reliance on lyric tropes. The phrases that recur in Kurt Vonnegut’s work (“so it goes”) are a darkly humorous deployment of repetition that suggest a number of different philosophical attitudes depending on their respective contexts: defeatism, determinism, irony, tragedy, and the like. Other prominent writers have also exploited polysyndeton’s unique syntax: Robert Penn Warren reserves this mode for moments of dramatic climax in the *All the King’s Men* while Jack Kerouac uses it with greater frequency to convey Dean Moriarty’s fervor for life in *On the Road*. Thomas Pynchon makes use of what Eliot called the “telescoped” conceit in *The Crying of Lot 49*, including a memorable passage in which Oedipa Maas’s relation to Rapunzel becomes increasingly elaborate and diffuse, culminating in a bleakly open-ended rhetorical question: “If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance
no proof against its magic, what else?” (12) And, if we were to extend the concept of the
narrative apostrophe to epistolary fiction, we might include Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*,
which is made up of Celie’s private letters to God.

We might also look outside the U.S. to find further examples of fiction’s indebtedness to
the tradition of lyric poetry. Nothing about the categories I have created in my chapters confines
this approach to boundaries of nationality. Because the American novel so frequently receives
the race/class/sex/gender treatment at the expense of receiving the formal treatment, however, I
have decided to concentrate my claims on American fiction so that we might begin to explore
more deeply the relationship between these issues of political identity and their aesthetic
representations—which, as we have seen, are aided by lyrical strategies such as repetition,
polysyndeton, and metaphor. To be sure, novelists outside the U.S. are also working in the lyric
tradition. To take one prominent example, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day* would have fit
nicely into Chapter Five’s emphasis on the relationship between unreliable narration and the
fragility of plot; alternatively, his *Never Let Me Go*, which addresses an intimate—if unnamed—
narratee would have been well-situated with Chapter Six’s discussion of the narrative
apostrophe.

The relationship between lyric and narrative, I hope to have shown, has more dimensions
than the agonistic struggle for cultural dominance depicted by twentieth-century genre critics.
This project demonstrates a cooperative and productive relationship through which narrative
fiction from the previous century has adapted the tropes of lyric poetry to the form of the novel.
Distended to this larger scale, these tropes may not be immediately apparent, but they facilitate
the non-linear, non-hierarchical, figurative, dramatic, and apostrophic reading practices that
make lyric poetry so aesthetically rewarding.
We would never have arrived at these terms, categories, and readings, however, by way of narrative theory; instead, they require a trans-generic lens that acknowledges the permeability of literary kinds, especially with regard to those twentieth- and twenty-first century writers who continue the modernist imperative to “make it new” by creating hybrid works that participate in several genres at once. The new millennium promises even greater experimentation with genre, especially as the line between fiction and scholarly non-fiction becomes deliberately blurred within novels such as William Vollman’s *Europe Central* and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, each of which contains a dizzying number of informational endnotes and footnotes, respectively. Similarly, the recent works of J. M. Coetzee, including *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, contain essays and lectures embedded in narrative—or is narrative embedded in the essays and lectures? These novels defy readers to decide which mode takes precedence over the other.

The model of genre under which we have been operating, consciously or not, is in desperate need of an update. By focusing too narrowly on the differences that separate literary kinds, we have neglected areas of overlap that explain some of the important formal developments in literary works from the last century: plotless novels that read like poems; long, eventful poems that read like novels; prose poems that seem to resist both lyric and narrative conventions. Our writers have already begun to exploit the flexibility of genre; it is time that we, as critics, caught up to them.
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